Meeting 10: The Deontic Assessment of Beliefs

I. Alston and the “Deontological” Conception of Epistemic Justification

Recall that in the readings for our first session, Smith and Tappolet claimed that one distinguishing mark of the deontic categories is their connection to agency or volition: they only apply to things that (in some sense) are subject to an agent’s will, or for which that agent can be responsible.

Recall, also, that many readings we have been doing have freely applied deontic terms such as ‘ought’, ‘permitted’, and ‘required’ to beliefs, emotions, and other attitudes.

But there is an obvious tension here, for we do not seem to be able to form our beliefs, emotions, etc. “at will” or via choice. So must we either (i) give up on Smith and Tappolet’s thought or (ii) stop deontically assessing beliefs, emotions, etc.?

Probably the most famous development of this tension occurs in the Alston article assigned for this week. Alston’s goal is to argue against a position he dubs

*the deontological conception of epistemic justification (DJ)*: Claims about the epistemic justification of beliefs are to be understood in terms of permissions, obligations, duties, responsibility, blameworthiness, praiseworthiness, etc. of a distinctively epistemic sort.

This is an unfortunate name, for two reasons:

1. Alston’s use of the term ‘deontological’ suggests that this is the epistemic analogue of deontological positions in ethics, but that is not the case: both ethical deontologists and ethical consequentialists appeal to a notion of duty, they just disagree over how it is explained or analyzed.

   A less misleading name for the position Alston is criticizing would be ‘the deontic conception of epistemic justification’. (That’s what I’ll call it from now on.)

2. Alston shouldn’t be assimilating deontic notions like permission, obligation, duty, etc. and fittingness notions like responsibility, blameworthiness, praiseworthiness, etc. as if there is no difference between them.

Chuard & Southwood write that if the DJ is false, then “the very idea of doxastic normativity is radically misconceived” (p. 600). However, this overstates things, since there are non-deontic normative categories.

Alston’s argumentative strategy is to insist that, due to “the time-honored principle that ‘Ought implies can’” (p. 118), the DJ entails a thesis known as

*doxastic voluntarism (DV)*: We have voluntary control over our beliefs (and other doxastic attitudes, such as disbelief and suspension of judgment).

Alston’s initial argument against the DJ can then be glossed as follows:

P1. If the DJ is true, and some of our beliefs are epistemically justified or unjustified, then those beliefs are subject to epistemic permissions, duties, etc.

P2. If those beliefs are subject to epistemic permissions, duties, etc., then DV is true.

P3. DV is false.

C. So, either none of our beliefs are epistemically justified or unjustified, or the DJ is false.

A number of philosophers have responded to Alston by denying P3. But Chuard & Southwood think P2 is where the argument goes wrong.

Note that Alston’s argumentative strategy can also be used to argue that beliefs are not subject to permissions, requirements, etc. of *any sort* (rational, moral, prudential, all-things-considered, etc.).
II. Alston against Voluntary Control over Beliefs

Here is how Alston appears to understand the notion of voluntary control (see Chuard & Southwood, p. 603):

To have voluntary control over one’s φ-ing, one must (at least) have the capacity (a) to intend to φ, (b) to φ because one intends to φ, and (c) to reliably succeed in φ-ing when one intends to φ.

In §§II–V of his article, Alston argues that we do not have this sort of control over our beliefs.

More precisely, he argues that we do not have enough voluntary control over our beliefs (and other doxastic attitudes) to make the DJ applicable to the full range of cases in which it is meant to apply.

Unlike Bernard Williams, who argues that it is necessarily the case that beliefs cannot be formed at will, Alston is only making a contingent claim about us humans and our capacities.

Alston distinguishes between the following varieties of voluntary control:

i. basic control: The kind of voluntary control we have over things that we can “just do” (i.e. do without having to perform any other actions in order to do them). (E.g. raising one’s arm.)

ii. (non-basic) immediate control: The kind of voluntary control we have over things that we can do “right away” by doing something else. (E.g. opening a door.)

iii. long-range control: The kind of voluntary control we have other things we can bring about by “doing something (usually a number of different things) repeatedly over a considerable period of time, interrupted by activity directed to other goals” (p. 134) (E.g. lowering one’s weight.)

(I must confess to finding the exact distinction between (ii) and (iii) a little murky.)

Alston argues that for each type of control, either we do not have that sort of control with regard to our beliefs, or we do not have enough of it to make the deontic conception of epistemic justification defensible.

- the argument against basic control:

Alston starts by baldly asserting that we don’t have basic control over beliefs that are obviously false.

He then argues that we don’t have basic control over beliefs that are obviously true, because in order for that to be possible we’d need basic control over beliefs that are obviously false, which we don’t have.

Here Alston relies on the following assumption (see p. 123):

(*) To have voluntary control (of a given type) over one’s φ-ing, one must also have voluntarily control (of that type) over one’s not-φ-ing.

However, Alston’s point doesn’t follow from (*) alone. He also needs to assume

(**) If one has basic voluntary control over one’s not believing that p, then one has basic voluntary control over one’s believing that not-p.

Finally, Alston argues that, even if we have basic voluntary control over beliefs that are neither obviously true nor obviously false, these sorts of cases are few and far between, so “the voluntarist has . . . abandoned vast stretches of the territory” (p. 124).

Moreover, Alston insists, most cases in which it appears that people believe at will a proposition, <p>, that seems to them neither obviously true nor obviously false can be explained away:

Either these are cases in which the person takes <p> to be more likely true than false (and hence the person isn’t exercising their will), or they are cases in which we confuse some action (such as resolving to act as if <p> is true, or adopting <p> as a working hypothesis, or seeking to bring oneself to believe that p, or . . .) for a case of believing that p at will.
• the argument against (non-basic) immediate control:

What sort of actions can one do “right away” in order to make it the case that one forms a belief via (non-basic) immediate control (if such a thing is possible)?

*Alston’s answer:* Keep looking for evidence or reasons, spend more time deliberating, etc.

For almost all normal perceptual, introspective, memorial, and inferential beliefs, Alston insists that such actions have no effect on what belief one comes to hold.

In the minority of cases in which it is not clear whether a proposition is true or false, Alston concedes that the above actions might have an impact on what one believes, but according to him this at most shows that we have (non-basic) immediate control over whether we take some propositional attitude toward some proposition in a given range, not (non-basic) immediate control over the belief that p.

In order to have the latter sort of control, the person would—according to Alston—have to look for more evidence, etc. with the intention of forming the belief that p. But, Alston insists, we almost never do this, and when we do, it seldom results in a belief forming “right away.”

Richard Feldman’s counterexample to Alston’s claim that we don’t (non-basic) immediate control over our beliefs: I can, without interruption, bring it about that I believe that the lights are off by turning off the lights. (But is this a case in which my belief is based on my intention to have that belief?)

Feldman’s objection (to his own counterexample): this at most secures voluntary control for a small portion of our beliefs.

• the argument against long-range control:

What sort of actions can one do over an extended period of time in order to make it the case that one forms a belief via long-range control (if such a thing is possible)?

*Alston’s answer:* Be selective in what evidence one exposes oneself to; be selective in what considerations one attends to; seek the company of believers and avoid nonbelievers; and, when in doubt, resort to hypnotism.

But, Alston insists, we don’t have long-range control over our beliefs, since the above actions very rarely succeed in producing the intended belief.

Note that here Alston is leaning heavily on condition (c) in his account of voluntary control.

Note, also, that Alston seems to be suggesting that if hypnotism were more effective or belief pills more common, then the deontic conception of epistemic justification would be in good standing. But that doesn’t seem right.

### III. Does ‘Ought’ Entail ‘Voluntary Control’?

At this stage of the dialectic, P2 of Alston’s argument in effect amounts to the following claim:

P2*. S’s believing that p is epistemically permitted (or required, or blameworthy, or . . . ) only if S has voluntary control over their believing that p.

Alston takes this to follow from the principle that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ (and a natural variant of it for other deontic categories):

OC. S ought (or is permitted, or is required, or . . . ) to φ only if S can φ.

But the following is presumably just as plausible as OC:

RC. S has a reason to φ only if S can φ.

So Alston’s argument is also an argument that there are no reasons for belief. That’s a strong conclusion!
Feldman argues that (i) we should reject OC for what he calls ‘role oughts’ (so “Teachers ought to explain things clearly” can be true even if some particular teacher is not able to explain things clearly), and (ii) claims about what we ought to believe are claims about our role as believers.

Chuard & Southwood's reply: (i*) OC is extremely plausible, so giving it up is a big cost, and (ii**) talk of ‘the role of believer’ is “surely . . . metaphorical at best” (p. 614).

Chuard & Southwood prefer to resist the case Alston makes for P2* while holding onto OC:

Chuard & Southwood's main objection to Alston: There is no sense of ‘can’ for which it is both the case that OC is plausible and that P2* follows from it.

Some possibilities:

- If we are working with the ‘can’ of possibility, then OC is plausible, but P2* doesn’t follow from it (because it is possible for me to feel guilty over something even if I don’t have voluntary control over whether I do so).

- If we are working with the ‘can’ of ability, then OC is also plausible, but P2* still doesn’t follow from it (because I can have the ability to understand what someone is going through even if I don’t have voluntary control over whether I do so).

Can Alston meet Chuard & Southwood’s challenge by taking P2* to follow from the following instead of OC?

OV. S ought (or is permitted, or is required, or . . . ) to φ only if S has voluntary control over their φ-ing.

Chuard & Southwood's two objections to this use of OV to motivate P2*:

First, there are counterexamples to OV, because we ought to have various emotions or motivations that are not under our voluntary control. (But maybe, Alston might retort, we shouldn’t be deontically assessing those emotions or motivations either.)

Second, since in order for OV to entail P2* we need OV to be true when ‘believe that p’ replaces ‘φ’, this appeal to OV isn’t an argument for P2* so much as just an assertion that P2* is true.

IV. Alston against Voluntary Influence over Beliefs

So far we have only covered half of Alston’s overall argument. Having taken himself to have successfully refuted (in §§II–V of his article) versions of the DJ that hold beliefs to be directly assessable as epistemically permitted, required, blameworthy, etc., he allows (§§VI–VII) that advocates of the DJ might hold that beliefs to be indirectly assessable in terms of responsibility and blameworthiness (if not permission and requirement).

There are two basic ideas at work here. First, Alston is assuming that responsibility/blameworthiness comes in two types, which can be understood as follows (in the case of blameworthiness):

S is directly blameworthy for having φ-ed iff S intentionally φ-ed, and this was impermissible.

S is indirectly blameworthy for having φ-ed iff there is some act type, ψ-ing, such that: (i) S is directly blameworthy for having ψ-ed, and (ii) if S had not ψ-ed, then S would not have φ-ed.

Second, Alston is assuming that derivative blameworthiness for having φ-ed requires something weaker than voluntary control over one’s φ-ing: all that is needed is that one’s voluntary actions influence whether one φ-s, in the way specified by (ii).

Alston’s account of indirect blameworthiness here is problematic: he recognizes that the subjunctive conditional (ii) leads to false positives, and he attempts to reformulate things to avoid these results. (We’ll ignore this complication, since it won’t matter for our purposes.)
Alston’s account of direct blameworthiness is also very problematic: some theorists hold that one can be directly blameworthy for doing things that are not impermissible, and most theorists hold that one can do something impermissible without being directly blameworthy for it.

Thus Alston’s target during this second stage of his argument is DJ*: S is epistemically unjustified in believing that p (i.e. is indirectly epistemically blameworthy for believing that p) iff there is some act type, ψ-ing, such that:

a. S ψ-ed,
b. S was epistemically obligated not to ψ, and
c. if S had not ψ-ed, then S would not have believed that p.

S is epistemically justified in believing that p iff S is not epistemically unjustified in believing that p.

What are relevant actions types over which our epistemic obligations range?

first type of activities that influence belief formation: Looking for further evidence or reasons, spending more time deliberating, seeking input from others, searching one’s memory for analogous cases, etc.

second type of activities that influence belief formation: Training oneself to be more critical of gossip, instilling in oneself a stronger disposition to reflect carefully before making a judgment on highly controversial matters, talking oneself into being less subservient to authority, etc.

Note: the idea that we have epistemic obligations to perform certain actions is quite controversial. (The existence of epistemic reasons for action is even more controversial than the existence of practical reasons for belief.)

Alston’s argument against DJ*:

Alston is an epistemic consequentialist who holds that epistemic justification is fundamentally a matter of fulfilling our twin goals of believing the true and not believing the false.

He takes it to follow from this that either epistemically justified beliefs must be formed in a truth-conducive way (if one is an externalist), or they must be formed in a way that one is justified in believing to be truth-conducive (if one is an internalist).

Alston then argues that there are a variety of cases in which epistemic justification according to DJ* and epistemic justification construed in this truth-conducive manner pull apart: one can have one without the other.

So, Alston concludes, the second version of the deontic conception does not capture a variety of epistemic justification.

Two problems with Alston’s argument:

- At most Alston’s argument shows that the deontic conception of epistemic justification and the truth-conducive conception of epistemic justification are incompatible. It is open to the advocate of the deontic conception to infer from this that Alston’s truth-conducive conception of epistemic justification is what has to go.

  As the saying goes: “One philosopher’s modus ponens is another philosopher’s modus tollens.”

- It’s not even clear that Alston’s argument shows this much. Even if Alston’s twin goals are all that ultimately matters in epistemology, we need not construe epistemic blameworthiness in terms of what directly conduces (either in fact, or from the subject’s perspective) toward the satisfaction of those goals.

  Compare: hedonistic act-utilitarians need not analyze blameworthy acts in terms of how well the acts directly conduct toward the promotion of pleasure over pain; indeed, they rarely do.

Chuard & Southwood (pp. 610–12) have their own very interesting argument against DJ* that tries to make it rely on DJ. But I must confess to not understanding why we can only, say, be required to gather more evidence if we are also required to see to it that (if we have some piece of evidence, we believe that we have that piece of evidence).