Meeting 12: Epistemic Justification as Epistemic Permission: Against

I. Beddor’s Taxonomy of Deontic Expressions

Last week we considered two arguments in favor of epistemic justification being a form of permission; this week we consider two arguments against that view.

A standard way of dividing up deontic expressions in the linguistics literature:

expressions of permission: ‘permitted’, ‘allowed’, ‘may’, ‘can’

expressions of obligation:
weak necessity modals: ‘should’, ‘ought to’
strong necessity modals: ‘must’, ‘have to’, need to’

Why ‘strong’ and ‘weak’? Because the strong nec. modals supposedly entail the weak ones, but not vice versa. Beddor offers the following as evidence for this (note: ‘#’ signifies that a sentence is infelicitous):

1a. Johnny should do the dishes, but he doesn’t have to.
1b. # Johnny must do the dishes, but he doesn’t have to.
2a. # Johnny ought to do the dishes; in fact, he should do the dishes.
2b. Johnny ought to do the dishes; in fact, he must do the dishes.

But although (1a) is evidence that ‘should’ doesn’t entail ‘have to’, (2b) is evidence that ‘ought’ doesn’t entail ‘must’, and the pairs (1a)+(1b) and (2a)+(2b) are both evidence that ‘should’ and ‘must’ aren’t equivalent, I don’t see any evidence here that strong necessity modals entail weak ones.

Also, I worry that (1a) only sounds okay because we hear ‘should’ as an all-things-considered assessment and ‘have to’ as a moral assessment. Similarly, there are contexts where the following sounds fine to me (suppose this is one of those rare occasions where non-moral considerations outweigh moral ones):

1c. Johnny must do the dishes, but it’s not the case that he should.

Here, roughly, is the standard way of accounting for deontic modals in linguistics, due to Kratzer:

the Optimality Interpretation:

Let the modal base be a contextually-determined set of possible worlds.
Let us (evaluatively) rank these worlds according to some normative standard or ideal, N.

“Agent A should [ought to] φ” is true iff all the very best worlds in the modal base are ones in which A φ’s.

“A must [has to, needs to] φ” is true iff all the acceptable (i.e. good enough) worlds in the modal base are ones in which A φ’s.

“Agent A is permitted to [is allowed to, may, can] φ” is true iff at least one acceptable (i.e. good enough) world in the modal base is one in which A φ’s.

Some virtues of the Optimality Interpretation, according to Beddor:

• It can explain why strong necessity modals entail weak necessity modals, but not vice versa.

(Note that this only follows if we interpret ‘good enough’ to mean ‘better than enough of the other options available’, rather than ‘better than such-and-such absolute threshold’, or else it might be the case that all the very best worlds in the modal base are not good enough.)
• It provides a natural gloss on discourse like the following:

3. You must give at least 5% of your income to charity. But you really should give upwards of 10%.

• It is compatible with the following appealing way of understanding supererogation:

A’s \( \phi \)-ing is supererogatory iff (A should \( \phi \), but A doesn’t have to \( \phi \))

iff (A \( \phi \)'s in all the very best worlds, and A doesn’t \( \phi \) in some acceptable worlds).

(But then must we deny that one act can be more supererogatory than another? And must we deny that supererogation is connected to praiseworthiness?)

Some vices of the Optimality Interpretation:

• It bakes into the semantics of ‘ought’, ‘must’, and ‘permitted’ a commitment to deontic assessments being grounded in the value of the worlds in which the thing being assessed happens.

• It bakes into the semantics of ‘ought’, ‘must’, and ‘permitted’ a commitment to deontic categories being operators on propositions (rather than, say, relations to actions and attitudes).

On the Optimality Interpretation, expressions of permission and strong necessity modals are duals:

\textit{Permission–Strong Necessity Duality}: Agent A is permitted to \( \phi \) iff \( \neg (A \text{ must } \neg \phi) \).

Beddor proposes that we introduce a new expression, ‘faultless’, which is the dual of weak necessity modals:

\textit{Faultlessness–Weak Necessity Duality}: Agent A’s \( \phi \)-ing is faultless iff \( \neg (A \text{ should } \neg \phi) \).

“Agent A’s \( \phi \)-ing is faultless” is true iff at least one very best world in the modal base is one in which A \( \phi \)'s.

Note that faultlessness, so construed, entails permittedness.

(Side comment: I don’t love the label ‘faultlessness’. It suggests that whenever one acts in a way that is not faultless, one is at fault for so acting. Why not instead call this ‘strong permission’ and rebrand the dual of strong necessity modals ‘weak permission’?)

**II. Beddor’s Proposal: Epistemic Justification as Epistemic Faultlessness**

Beddor understands the deontic conception of epistemic justification to be a semantic proposal about the meaning of the expression ‘epistemic justification’. (Silva, by contrast, understands it to be a metaphysical proposal about the nature of epistemic justification itself.)

In light of his taxonymy of deontic expressions, Beddor distinguishes four versions of the deontic conception:

\textit{the Permissive View}: “S is epistemically justified in believing P” means “S is epistemically permitted to believe P,” which in turn means “At least one (epistemically) good enough world in the modal base is one in which S believes P.”

\textit{the Strong Obligatory View}: “S is epistemically justified in believing P” means “S (epistemically) must believe P,” which in turn means “All the (epistemically) good enough worlds in the modal base are ones in which S believes P.”

\textit{the Weak Obligatory View}: “S is epistemically justified in believing P” means “S (epistemically) should believe P,” which in turn means “All the (epistemically) very best worlds in the modal base are ones in which S believes P.”

\textit{the Faultlessness View}: “S is epistemically justified in believing P” means “It’s not the case that S (epistemically) should not believe P,” which in turn means “At least one (epistemically) very best world in the modal base is one in which S believes P.”
Beddor has three objections to both versions of the Obligatory View:

- **first objection:** Both Obligatory Views falsely predict that the following inference isn’t valid:
  
  4a. S is not (epistemically) justified in believing P. ⇒
  4b. S (epistemically) should not believe P.

  If S believes P in some but not all of the (epistemically) good enough worlds, then (4a) is true on the Strong Obligatory View (because it’s not the case that S believes P in all the good enough worlds) while (4b) is false (because S believes P in some of the good enough worlds).

  And if S believes P in some but not all of the (epistemically) very best worlds, then (4a) is true on the Weak Obligatory View (because it’s not the case that S believes P in all the very best worlds) while (4b) is false (because S believes P in some very best, and hence good enough, worlds).

  (But epistemologists who deny that there is a category of the merely permitted in the epistemic realm [a thesis sometimes known as ‘epistemic permissivism’, though not in Nelson’s sense] will deny that there can be two [epistemically] optimal worlds, in one of which S believes P and in the other of which S doesn’t believe P. So in the end this objection to the Strong Obligatory View reduces to Beddor’s next objection, it seems to me.)

- **second objection:** Some epistemologists hold that there are situations in which two or more mutually incompatible attitudes toward a proposition, P, are each epistemically justified for a given subject, S. It follows on either Obligatory View that, in all good enough worlds, S has each incompatible attitude toward P. But that’s impossible. So such situations are impossible.

  (Note: here ‘incompatible’ means ‘metaphysically incompatible’.)

  But, insists Beddor, a position that allows such situations to be possible is a coherent position that should not be ruled out by the meaning of the phrase ‘epistemically justified’.

  (Could we avoid this objection by saying that, in such situations, there are no epistemically good enough worlds or no epistemically optimal worlds? Not if we want to allow that there are also some doxastic attitudes toward P that are not epistemically justified for S.)

- **third objection:** Endorsing either Obligatory View prevents one from accepting Kroedel’s permissibility solution to the lottery paradox (or a natural variant of it for faultlessness).

  So advocates of the deontic conception should accept either the Permissive or the Faultlessness View, Beddor concludes. In order to decide between these two, he proposes the following diagnostic:

  **the Faultlessness Diagnostic:** Let <p> and <q> be two inconsistent propositions, and let ‘E’ be some expression of either faultlessness or permission. If sentences of the form

  “E(p), but it should be the case that q”

  are judged incoherent, this is evidence that ‘E’ expresses faultlessness rather than permission.

  But, Beddor insists, the following is infelicitous:

  5. # Kwame is justified in believing it will rain, but Kwame should suspend judgment on whether it will rain.

  So we have some defeasible evidence in favor of the Faultlessness View.

  (But is it really true that believing P is metaphysically incompatible with suspending judgment on P? We might have shifted to using ‘incompatible’ to mean ‘rationally incompatible’.)

  (Also, this argument relies on there being epistemically good enough worlds in which Kwame believes it will rain, though in all epistemically optimal worlds he suspends judgment on the matter, since Beddor is committed to (5) being felicitous when ‘justified’ is replaced with ‘permitted’.)

III. Silva’s Proposal: Epistemic Justification as a Composite State

Silva is also interested in what epistemic justification amounts to, but for him this question is fundamentally about the nature of the property *being epistemically justified* itself, not about the words ‘is epistemically justified’ or the concept IS EPistemically JUSTIFIED. He seeks a way of filling out the following schema:

\[ \text{the } J = \text{ Schema: For } S \text{ to be epistemically justified in believing } P \text{ is for } \_\_. \]

In other words, Silva is seeking a *metaphysical analysis* (or real definition) of epistemic justification.

He assumes that \(<\text{For } X \text{ to be } F \text{ is for } X \text{ to be } G>\) entails that there is “no difference” between the properties *being* F and *being* G (p. 27). But not everyone takes real definition to be identity.

He also assumes that \(<\text{For } X \text{ to be } F \text{ is for } X \text{ to be } G>\) and \(<X = F \text{ iff, and because, } X = G>\) are distinct claims. But according to one potential real definition of real definition (one I myself like),

For it to be the case that \((\text{for } X \text{ to be } F \text{ is for } X \text{ to be } G)\) is for it to be the case that, (necessarily, \(X = F \text{ iff, and because, } X = G\)).

Silva also says that “\(p \text{ iff, and because, } q\)” is shorthand for “\((p \text{ iff } q) \text{ and } (p \text{ because } q)\)” (p. 44, n. 5). But that’s wrong: it’s shorthand for “\(\text{If } p, \text{ then } (q, \text{ and } p \text{ because } q); \text{ and if } q, \text{ then } (p, \text{ and } p \text{ because } q).\)”

Silva insists that any way of filling in the \(J = \text{ Schema}\) should satisfy the following four desiderata:

- **Doxasticism**: Epistemic justification can apply to beliefs.
- **Comparativism**: Epistemic justification is gradable (and comes in degrees).
  
  Why believe this? Because (a) it’s intuitive that in many cases one person has more epistemic justification to believe some proposition than another person does, and because (b) lots of epistemologists accept Comparativism. (That last reason isn’t the best: they might be wrong.)

- **Goodness Entailment**: \(<S \text{ is epistemically justified in believing } P>\) entails \(<S\text{’s believing } P \text{ would be an epistemically good thing to do}>\).
  
  Why believe this? Because just as authors in the Meno problem literature commonly assume that knowledge is more epistemically valuable than mere true belief, so too do they commonly assume that epistemically justified belief is more epistemically valuable than mere true belief (pp. 31–32).

- **Permission Entailment**: \(<S \text{ is epistemically justified in believing } P>\) entails \(<S \text{ is epistemically permitted to believe } P>\).
  
  Why believe this? Because it’s plausible, and lots of epistemologists assume it (p. 32).

Silva then argues against three instances of the \(J = \text{ Schema}\) that appeal to just a single normative category:

\(J = P\) For S to be epistemically justified in believing P is for S to be epistemically permitted to believe P.

Silva’s main objection: \(J = P\) fails to satisfy Comparativism, because permissibility is not gradable.

reply: For S to be more epistemically justified than \(S^*\) in believing P is for S to be epistemically permitted to have a greater degree of belief in P than S is epistemically permitted to have.

Silva’s counter-replies: First, it’s not clear that belief reduces to degree of belief above some threshold.

Second, actions and assertions can be more or less justified, but we can’t make a parallel move, since action and assertion “are not degreed states” (p. 31).

Third, it can be the case that S is more epistemically justified than \(S^*\) in having the same degree of belief in P (when, for example, I have much more evidence than you do that a certain coin is unbiased toward either heads or tails).
For S to be epistemically justified in believing P is for it to be an epistemically good thing for S to believe P.

Silva’s first objection: (J = G) fails to satisfy Permission Entailment, because goodness does not in general entail permissibility.

Silva’s second objection: The best explanation of Permission Entailment is that justification (in general) is constitutively tied to permissibility; so if (J = G) is also true, it follows that epistemically good belief is the same as epistemically permissible belief, despite the many differences between deontic and evaluative categories.

(Can we fend off this objection by assuming a fitting-attitudes account of value on which <Believing P is good> is analyzed as <We are required to favor believing P>? No, because this doesn’t give us Permission Entailment, since we want believing P to be permitted, not favoring believing P.)

For S to be epistemically justified in believing P is for S to be epistemically blameless in believing P.

Silva’s first objection: Because of the sorts of cases Alston cites in §VII of “The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification,” a belief can be epistemically unjustified despite the subject being epistemically blameless in forming it. So (J = NoBlame) is extensionally inadequate.

Silva’s second objection: (J = NoBlame) does not satisfy Goodness Entailment or Permission Entailment.

Silva’s third objection: (J = NoBlame) is in tension with Doxasticism, because “blamelessness doesn’t seem to apply to beliefs, but to the persons who have them. In general, we blame agents for what they do, but we do not blame what they do” (p. 34).

(This is not the best objection: the proposal is that a belief is epistemically unjustified when its agent merits blame for having that belief. So even if the blame is directed at the agent, what the blame directed at that agent is for is what counts as epistemically justified, on this proposal.)

Silva’s fourth objection: (J = NoBlame) has a difficult time drawing the propositional vs. doxastic justification distinction, for one cannot be blameless for φ-ing unless one φ-s. So at best we can understand propositional justification as would-be doxastic justification (a hard proposal to make extensionally adequate).

Silva’s own proposal is as follows:

(J = P&G) For S to be epistemically justified in believing P is for S to be epistemically permitted to believe P and for it to be an epistemically good thing for S to believe P.

Silva’s argument for (J = P&G): it satisfies his four desiderata (Doxasticism, Comparativism, Goodness Entailment, Permission Entailment) while avoiding all the objections to the other proposals.

my first worry: (J = P&G) does not, in fact, satisfy Comparativism. Silva is assuming that if being F is gradable and being G is not, then being F and G is also gradable. But this assumption is false. (If being male is not gradable, then being short and male is not gradable, either. Conjunction is not addition.)

my second worry: Conjunctive analyses always raise the question: why should we care about the conjunction of these two particular things? We can conjoin many different normative statuses together, but why these two?

In an appendix, Silva briefly considers

(J = F) For S to be epistemically justified in believing P is for it to be (epistemically?) fitting or appropriate for S to believe P.

Silva’s objection: Although this proposal can accommodate Comparativism, it only does so because talk of one response being more fitting than another is just a way of saying the first response is better than the other. (Really? The wrong-kind-of-reason literature seems built up on an assumption otherwise.) So in the end this proposal is quite close to (J = P&G), since it makes justification have both a deontic and an evaluative element.