

Doxastic Voluntarism, Pt. 2

I. Recap: Williams' Argument against Believing at Will

The text of Williams' conceptual argument against doxastic voluntarism:

“Belief cannot be like that; it is not a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I believe something, as it is a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I'm blushing. Why is this? One reason is connected with the characteristic of beliefs that they aim at truth. If I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire I whether it was true or not; moreover I would know that I could acquire it whether it was true or not. If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a 'belief' irrespective of its truth, it is unclear that before the event I could seriously think of it as a belief, i.e. as something purporting to represent reality. At the very least, there must be a restriction on what is the case after the event; since I could not then, in full consciousness, regard this as a belief of mine, i.e. something I take to be true, and also know that I acquired it at will. With regard to no belief could I know—or, if all this is to be done in full consciousness, even suspect—that I had acquired it at will. But if I can acquire beliefs at will, I must know that I am able to do this; and could I know that I was capable of this feat, if with regard to every feat of this kind which I had performed I necessarily had to believe it had not taken place?” (p. 148).

Here is my best attempt at glossing the after-the-fact argument (the bit following “At the very least”):

- p1. If I can believe at will, then I must be able to know that I can believe at will. [*premise*]
- p2. If I am able to know that I can believe at will, then it must be possible for me to know, on a specific occasion, that [I believe that p and originally acquired that belief at will (and still hold it on the same basis)]. [*premise*]
- p3. If I originally acquired the belief that p at will, then I originally acquired that belief irrespective of whether $\langle p \rangle$ is true. [*premise*]
- c1. If I know that [I believe that p and originally acquired that belief at will (and still hold it on the same basis)], then I can know that [I believe that p and originally acquired that belief irrespective of whether $\langle p \rangle$ is true (and still hold it on the same basis)]. [*follows from p3*]
- p4. It is not possible for me to know that [I believe that p and originally acquired that belief irrespective of whether $\langle p \rangle$ is true (and still hold it on the same basis)]. [*premise*]
- c2. I cannot believe at will. [*follows from p1, p2, c1, p4*]

Potential problems with this argument:

- c1 only follows from p3 given the following *closure principle for knowledge* (which one might doubt): Necessarily, if one knows that p , and if $\langle p \rangle$ entails $\langle q \rangle$, then one can know that q .
- p3 seems overly strong. (For example, p3 is stronger than P1 in the before-the-fact argument.)
- p2 could be doubted; for example, I am able to know that I can *forget things*, despite the fact that it is not possible for me to know, on a specific occasion, that [I forgot that p in the past and still forget it].
reply: But forgetting is not an action, and p2 presumably gains its plausibility from a general principle to the effect that our knowledge of what we can do is ultimately grounded in individuals' practical knowledge of what they are doing (and have done?).
- p1 is open to debate; why must we be able to know everything that we're able to do?

One virtue of my way of glossing Williams' argument: it avoids Bennett's Credamites counterexample and his claim that Williams' argument is also an argument against the possibility of hypnotism.

II. Alston on the “Deontological” Conception of Epistemic Justification

What distinguishes *epistemic justification* from the other sorts of justification that beliefs can have (*moral*, *prudential*, etc.)? According to Alston, epistemic justification is justification from the “epistemic point of view,” where this is defined by the twin goals of *believing what is true* and *not believing what is false*.

These claims on Alston’s part are not as innocuous as he makes them seem. Not everyone agrees that beliefs can be morally or prudentially justified. And not everyone agrees that epistemic justification is fundamentally a matter of fulfilling James’ twin goals of believing the true and not believing the false.

The main purpose of Alston’s article is to argue against a view he dubs

the deontological conception of epistemic justification: Epistemic justification can be cashed out in terms of permissions, obligations, duties, responsibility, blameworthiness, praiseworthiness, etc. of a distinctively epistemic sort.

This is a terrible 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 whether that notion is fundamental.

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. It is a mistake on Alston’s part to treat deontic notions like *permission*, *obligation*, *duty*, etc. as on a par with notions like *responsibility*, *blameworthiness*, *praiseworthiness*, etc. The former set of concepts are inter-definable, but the exact connection between the former set of concepts and the latter is controversial.

Alston relies on the following account of blameworthiness:

Subject S is *blameworthy* for having ϕ -ed iff *either* [S ϕ -ed, and this was *forbidden* (i.e. *impermissible*)],
or [S is *blameworthy* for having ψ -ed, and *if* S had not ψ -ed, *then* S would not have ϕ -ed].

Call blameworthiness that satisfies the first disjunct *non-derivative blameworthiness*, and blameworthiness that satisfies only the second disjunct *derivative blameworthiness*.

This account of blameworthiness is extremely problematic:

- Alston recognizes that the subjunctive conditional in his account of *derivative blameworthiness* 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.)
- The real problem, though, is with his account of *non-derivative blameworthiness*: many theorists hold that one can be (*non-derivatively*) *blameworthy* for doing things that are not *impermissible*, and most theorists hold that one can do something *impermissible* without being *blameworthy* for it.

Alston’s basic argumentative strategy is to consider two possibilities:

First (§§II-V), he tries to analyze *epistemic justification* in terms of *epistemic permissibility* (which he takes to be equivalent to analyzing it in terms of *non-derivative epistemic blameworthiness*) and argues that applying this notion to beliefs is in violation of the following two principles (since doxastic voluntarism is false):

“ought” implies “can”: S’s ϕ -ing is *obligatory*, *permitted*, or *forbidden* only if S has voluntary control over whether she ϕ ’s.

“responsible” implies “can”: S is (*non-derivatively*) *blameworthy*, *praiseworthy*, or *responsible* for having ϕ -ed only if S had voluntary control over whether she ϕ -ed.

Second (§§VI-VII), he tries to analyze *epistemic justification* in terms of *derivative epistemic blameworthiness* and argues that the resulting notion does not deserve to be called *epistemic justification*, since it does not track how well one does with regards to the twin goals of *believing the true* and *not believing the false*.

III. Alston's Argument against Non-Derivative Epistemic Blameworthiness

According to Alston, the “most natural” way of interpreting epistemic justification deontically is as follows:

the deontic conception of epistemic justification (first pass):

S is *epistemically justified* in believing that p iff S is *epistemically permitted* to believe that p .

S is *epistemically unjustified* in believing that p iff S is not *epistemically permitted* to believe that p
(i.e. iff S is *non-derivatively epistemically blameworthy* for believing that p).

Given the principles “*ought*” implies “*can*” and “*responsible*” implies “*can*,” it follows that this sort of epistemic justification is only applicable to our beliefs if we have voluntary control over our beliefs. But, Alston argues, we do not have voluntary control over our beliefs.

More precisely, Alston argues that we do not have *enough* voluntary control over our beliefs to make the deontic conception applicable to the full range of cases in which it is meant to be applied.

Alston distinguishes between the following varieties of voluntary control:

- i. *basic control*: The kind of 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). (*Ex.*: raising one’s arm.)
- ii. *(non-basic) immediate control*: The kind of control we have over things that we can do “right away” by doing something else. (*Ex.*: opening a door.)
- iii. *long-range control*: The kind of control we have over 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) (*Ex.*: lowering one’s weight.)

In his division between (ii) and (iii), Alston is mixing together two separate distinctions:

causal control: One can do things that merely *cause* X to occur.

constitutive control: One can do things that together *constitute* X’s occurring.

immediate control: One can bring X about “right away.”

long-range control: One can bring X about only over an extended period of time interrupted by other activities.

All four combinations of these two distinctions are possible. (For example, *writing a dissertation* is something over which one has *long-range constitutive control*.)

Alston argues that for each type of control, either we do not have that sort of control with regards 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.

implicit assumption: For one to have voluntary control (of a given type) over one’s ϕ -ing, one must be able to voluntarily ϕ and to voluntarily not- ϕ .

However, Alston’s point doesn’t follow from this assumption. Applying it to the case at hand:

To have voluntary control over one’s believing that p , where $\langle p \rangle$ is obviously true, one must be able to voluntarily believe $\langle p \rangle$ and to voluntarily not believe $\langle p \rangle$.

But the ability to voluntarily not believe $\langle p \rangle \neq$ that ability to voluntarily believe not- $\langle p \rangle$.

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 we can't apply deontic notions to the full range of cases in which deonticists want them to apply.

Moreover, Alston insists, most cases in which people appear to *believe at will a proposition $\langle p \rangle$ that seems to them neither obviously true nor obviously false* can be explained away:

*Either these are cases in which the person takes herself to have more reason believe $\langle p \rangle$ than to believe $\langle \text{not-}p \rangle$, or they are cases in which we confuse some action (such as *resolving to act as if $\langle p \rangle$ is true*, or *adopting $\langle p \rangle$ 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. (We'll see next week that Kelly disagrees.)

- *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.

implicit assumption: Voluntary control (rather than mere influence) must be *effective*: it must be the case that, when one tries to exert that sort of control, one usually succeeds.

IV. Alston's Argument against Derivative Epistemic Blameworthiness

Alston's second attempt at analyzing epistemic justification in deontic terms:

the deontic conception of epistemic justification (second pass):

S is *epistemically unjustified* in believing that p (i.e. is *derivatively epistemically blameworthy* for believing that p) iff, for some action type $\langle \psi \text{-ing} \rangle$:

- 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 .

Again, I want to ignore complications that arise from the conditional in (c).

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

activities that directly influence belief formation: Keep looking for evidence or reasons, spend more time deliberating, seek input from others, search one's memory for analogous cases, etc.

activities that indirectly influence belief formation: Train oneself to be more critical of gossip, instill in oneself a stronger disposition to reflect carefully before making a judgment on highly controversial matters, talk 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 this version of the deontic conception of epistemic justification:

Recall that, for Alston, 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 construed according to the second version of the deontic conception* and *epistemic justification construed in this truth-conducive way* 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 major 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.

(George Boolos: "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 James' 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* conduce toward the promotion of pleasure over pain; indeed, they rarely do.

V. In What Sense Does "Ought" Imply "Can"?

I put forward that something has already gone wrong once we've hit Alston's *second version of deontic conception*: no advocate of the deontic conception should be content with that account.

I also put forward that we should be suspicious of the "ought"-implies-"can" principles that Alston appeals to when he argues against *the first version of the deontic conception*.

The same considerations that motivate the idea that "ought" implies "can" also seem to motivate the following principle:

"reason" implies "can": S has a reason to ϕ only if S can ϕ .

But if we interpret "can ϕ " here to mean "can voluntarily ϕ ," then it looks like this principle (plus the falsity of doxastic voluntarism) yields the conclusion that there are no reasons for belief!

What this suggests: we need to take a closer look at the "ought"-implies-"can" principles to which Alston appeals. (We'll do that next week.)