

Practical Reasons for Belief

I. 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 .

Let us ignore the problems that arise because (c) contains a subjunctive conditional, as well as Alston's attempt to reformulate (c) to avoid those problems.

What are the 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.

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.

II. Does “Ought” Imply “Can” in the Epistemic Realm?

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

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

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

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

A reason to be suspicious of these principles:

The same considerations that motivate the general idea that “ought” implies “can” also 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!

my proposal: The senses in which the following two principles are true are very different:

“ought” implies “can”: S’s ϕ -ing is *obligatory, permitted, or forbidden* only if S can ϕ .

“responsible” implies “can”: S is (*non-derivatively*) *blameworthy, praiseworthy, or responsible* for ϕ -ing only if can ϕ .

The motivation behind the first of these is something like: “Your duties can only extend to what you are able to do.” The motivation behind the second is something like: “It would be unfair to hold you accountable for something you didn’t voluntarily choose to do.” So only the second of these should be interpreted so that “can ϕ ” means “has voluntary control over whether one ϕ ’s.”

Feldman makes a similar proposal, but goes one step further: he denies that “ought” implies “can.”

Feldman catalogues a variety of different sorts of *oughts* or *obligations* for which it appears not to be true that “ought” implies “can”:

contractual obligations: “You are obligated to pay your mortgage, even though you don’t have the money and so can’t do so.”

paradigm oughts: “You ought to be walking by now, even though you can’t.”

role oughts: “Teachers ought to explain things clearly, even if they can’t.”

Because he refers to these as different “kinds of ought statements,” it is tempting to read Feldman as suggesting that “ought” is semantically ambiguous. However, this isn’t the best way of reading him: only the second of the above uses of “ought” (also known as *the “ought” of expectation*) plausibly picks out a different variety of “ought” from the standard one.

Feldman rejects the idea that *epistemic oughts* might be *contractual obligations* or *paradigm oughts* (not entirely on good grounds: he seems to assume that normalcy must be construed statistically).

He proposes instead that we understand *epistemic oughts* on the model of *role oughts*, where the relevant role is *believer*. Feldman channeling Korsgaard: “It is our plight to be believers” (p. 88).

It is controversial, though, whether occupying a role is enough, on its own, to ground a normative requirement, without our having to consider the reasons for and against being in that role.

The familiar challenge: “Assassins ought to kill their victims without getting blood everywhere.”

III. Are There Practical Reasons for Belief?

Alston's second attempt at formulating the deontic conception of epistemic justification appeals to the idea that we have *epistemic obligations to perform certain actions*.

If we assume that these *requirements* obtain in virtue of the balance of *reasons*, this idea implies that there exist *epistemic reasons for action*.

Whether there are *epistemic reasons for action* is the flipside of a more familiar debate: whether there are *pragmatic* (or, more generally, *practical*) *reasons for belief*.

a pragmatic reason for S to believe that p = a reason for S to believe that *p* grounded in the benefits to S of believing that *p*

a practical reason for S to believe that p = a reason for S to believe that *p* grounded in the benefits, either to S or to others, of believing that *p*

A common line taken by people who deny the existence of practical reasons for belief:

“What some philosophers take to be *practical reasons for belief* are really *practical reasons to try to get oneself to hold a given belief*. Practical considerations only have bearing on the normative status of actions, and epistemic considerations only have bearing on the normative status of beliefs.”

Though commonly held, this line is rarely defended by means of an explicit argument.

Kelly rises to that challenge.

What's intriguing about Kelly's argument is that, in *attacking* practical reasons for belief, he appeals to a psychological phenomenon that Foley also appeals to when *defending* practical reasons for belief against a prominent challenge.

So this gives rise to a puzzle: does this psychological phenomenon ultimately help or hurt the fan of practical reasons for belief?

IV. Kelly's Argument against Practical Reasons for Belief

Kelly's official conclusion:

Practical considerations (such as *the expected consequences of holding a belief*) never make a belief rational. With respect to beliefs, rationality just is epistemic rationality.

It is clear, though, that Kelly is assuming that *reasons* are what makes a belief *rational*, so it is not too much of a stretch to interpret him as also arguing for the following conclusion:

There are no practical reasons for belief.

Kelly's argument turns on *Williams' fourth characteristic of beliefs*: the fact that beliefs can be *based* on certain considerations, and in virtue of that count as rational.

Here is a natural way of glossing Kelly's argument (where “practical considerations” is short for “considerations concerning the benefits or costs to oneself or others of believing that *p*”):

- P1. A consideration contributes toward the rationality of one's belief that *p* only if:
 - i. that consideration is a reason for one to believe that *p*, and
 - ii. one believes that *p* (at least partially) for that reason.
- P2. One believes that *p* for a reason only if one's belief that *p* is based on that consideration.
- P3. One's belief that *p* can never be (even partially) based on practical considerations.
- C. So, practical considerations can never contribute toward the rationality of one's belief that *p*.

Two downsides to this argument (at least for our purposes):

- P1 makes some assumptions about the connection between rationality and reasons that many people in the practical reasons literature dispute.
- The argument does not explicitly address the issue of whether there exist practical reasons for belief.

Both these issues can be addressed by reformulating the argument as follows:

- P1'. A consideration is a reason for one to believe that p only if one can believe that p (at least partially) for that reason. [*premise*]
- P2. One believes that p for a reason only if one's belief that p is based on that consideration. [*premise*]
- P3. One's belief that p can never be (even partially) based on practical considerations. [*premise*]
- C'. So, practical considerations can never be a reason for one to believe that p . [*follows from P1', P2, P3*]
- C''. So, there are no practical reasons for belief. [*follows from C'*]

The central issue, when evaluating these arguments, is the plausibility of P3. Kelly takes the following psychological phenomenon to give us defeasible evidence that P3 is true:

the psychological impotence of practical considerations:

- a. During deliberation, the realization that believing that p has practical benefits does not ordinarily result in one's believing that p .
- b. During discussion, convincing one's interlocutor that believing that p has practical benefits does not ordinarily cause that person to believe that p .
- c. The realization that believing that p does not have the practical benefits one thought it has does not ordinarily cause one to abandon one's belief that p .

Some worries about Kelly's strategy for defending P3:

- The "can never" in P3 presumably expresses a metaphysical impossibility. But then contingent facts about the psychological mechanisms found in *homo sapiens* seem like very weak evidence for P3.
- It would be nice to have an explanation of *why* P3 is true. Kelly offers the hypothesis that (part of) what distinguishes beliefs from actions is precisely the fact that the latter but not the former can be based on practical considerations, but this doesn't really explain P3 (it merely *assumes* P3 and then uses this to provide a characterization of the nature of belief).

In a footnote, Kelly gestures at a deeper explanation that ties the truth of P3 to Williams' thesis that beliefs aim at truth, but he doesn't pursue the thought. (As we'll see in meeting 9, Nishi Shah can be read as filling in the details that Kelly here omits.)

- In defending P3 (especially in response to the wishful thinking objection), Kelly seems at times to be claiming that beliefs can *only* be based on (what one takes to be) epistemic considerations. But this is a very strong claim to make.

Rather puzzlingly, Foley in his article appeals to *the psychological impotence of practical considerations* in order to *defend* practical reasons for belief against a prominent objection.

the objection: In our discussions and deliberations about what to believe, we tend to regard the practical benefits of belief as irrelevant to the question of what it is rational to believe.

Foley's first solution: Because we recognize (a) and (b) above, we realize that it is pointless to cite practical considerations during discussion or deliberation about what to believe.

Foley's second solution: In almost all cases, what is it most practically beneficial to believe is the same as what we have most epistemic reason to believe.