

You ought to keep your ‘cans’ under control!

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ABSTRACT: William Alston’s argument against Deontological Theories of Epistemic Justification constitutes a classic—and much debated—piece of contemporary epistemology. At the heart of Alston’s argument, however, lies a very simple mistake which, surprisingly, appears to have gone unnoticed in the vast literature now devoted to the argument. After having shown why the standard response to Alston’s argument doesn’t work, we diagnose the mistake and offer a plausible hypothesis as to why it has remained concealed for so long.

I. Alston’s Argument

Deontological Theories of (Epistemic) Justification have it that “to be justified in believing that p at t is for one’s belief that p not to be in violation of any epistemic principles” (Alston, 1989: 117), where the epistemic principles (or norms) in question have the form of deontic requirements. They are principles which “*forbid* beliefs formed in such a way as to be likely to be false and either *permit* or *require* beliefs formed in such a way as to be likely to be true” (*ibid.*).¹ Whatever else they might be committed to,² Deontological Theories thus endorse at least the following bi-conditional:

(DTJ) a subject S is *justified* to believe that p at t if and only if S ’s belief that p at t does not violate any epistemic deontological requirement R .

¹ Commitment to such a view has been attributed, for instance, to Bonjour (1985), Chisholm (1977), Foley (1987, see also his 2002), Ginet (1975), Pollock (1986), Steup (1988): for additional references, see Alston (1989: 117, n. 4 & 5); Feldman (2004: 167, n. 5), Plantinga (1993: 25-9).

² Sometimes, the view is loosely expressed in terms of the slogan that ‘justification talk is normative talk’ (see Fumerton, 2001; and Pryor, 2001: §4, for discussion)—or as Alston puts it: “[t]he terms ‘justified’, ‘justification’, and their cognates are most naturally understood in what we may term a ‘deontological’ way, as having to do with obligation, permission, requirement, blame, and the like” (Alston, 1989: 115). More precisely, advocates of (DTJ) seem committed to the *supervenience* of epistemic justification upon epistemic norms (or rules, or principles). Another thread behind (DTJ) might be the idea that there is something epistemically primitive and foundational about deontological notions, in much the same way as some ethicists insist upon the primacy of ‘the right’ over ‘the good’. We shall ignore these subtleties in what follows.

In his classic article “The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification”, William Alston argued that (DTJ) falls prey to a straightforward objection. According to Alston, (DTJ) entails a particular psychological thesis about beliefs—call it ‘Doxastic Voluntarism’:

[DTJ] is viable only if beliefs are sufficiently under voluntary control to render such concepts as *requirement*, *permission*, *obligation*, *reproach*, and *blame* applicable to them. By the time-honored principle “Ought-implies-can”, one can be obliged to do A only if one has an effective choice as to whether to do A. [...] Therefore the most fundamental issue raised by [(DTJ)] is as to whether belief is under voluntary control (Alston, 1989: 118).

But, Alston continues, Doxastic Voluntarism is false:

There are strong reasons for doubting that belief is usually, or perhaps ever, under direct voluntary control. [...] When I see a car coming down the street, I am not capable of believing or disbelieving this at will. In such familiar situations the belief-acquisition mechanism is isolated from the direct influence of the will and under the control of more purely cognitive factors (Alston, 1989: 91-2).³

Alston’s argument can thus be reconstructed as follows:

- (1) If (DTJ) is true, deontological requirements apply to beliefs.
- (2) If deontological requirements apply to beliefs, normal subjects have voluntary control over their beliefs.
- (3) It is not the case that normal subjects have voluntary control over their beliefs.
- (4) Therefore, (DTJ) is false.

To resist Alston’s argument, only two plausible strategies seem to be available to proponents of (DTJ). The argument is valid and does not openly beg any questions. Premise (1), moreover, is uncontroversial: it simply teases out an obvious consequence of (DTJ). Thus, proponents of (DTJ) must either reject premise (2) or deny premise (3).

³ Note that Alston takes this to be an empirical claim, at most contingently true—and so weaker than Bernard Williams’ (1972) suggestion that it is logically or conceptually *impossible* to believe at will. For discussion of this point, see references in Alston (1989: 122, n.16) and Feldman (2004: 169, n.12).

Most proponents of (DTJ) have focused their attention upon (3), typically arguing that normal subjects *do* have voluntary control over their beliefs *in some sense*. This ‘Standard Response’ (as we shall call it) isn’t sufficient, however, to get friends of (DTJ) off the hook—or so we argue.

What’s more, though no great fans of (DTJ), we think that a simple, but fatal, mistake informs the way in which Alston motivates premise (2). Simply put, Alston’s appeal to the “ought-implies-can-principle”, we believe, in no way supports such a premise. This mistake, to the best of our knowledge, has escaped the attention of Alston and critics alike. After a brief discussion of the Standard Response and its shortcomings (§2), we show what’s really wrong with Alston’s argument (§3), and offer a tentative diagnosis as to why the mistake has escaped attention hitherto (§4).

2. Doxastic Voluntarism

Alston’s argument—and premises (2) and (3) in particular—raises an obvious question. What does it mean to have ‘voluntary control over one’s beliefs’, or to ‘believe at will’? The question has two parts.

The first concerns the notion of ‘voluntary control’ proper. One would be hard-pressed to extract any consensus on this notion from the literature devoted to Alston’s argument. Some paraphrase it in terms of ‘choice’, others in terms of ‘freedom’, still others in terms of ‘responsibility’. However, talk of ‘voluntary control’ most naturally suggests some connection with intentions and the way they lead to action.⁴ Indeed, following Alston’s (1989: 122-42) own elucidation of such a notion, we advance the following proposal:

A subject *S* has *voluntary control* over ϕ if and only if (i) *S* is *able* to have an *intention* to ϕ such that (ii) *S*’s intention *causes* her to ϕ , and (iii) does so in the *right way*.⁵

⁴ Some deontologists (see, e.g., Steup, 1988) advance other construals of this notion, but it’s unclear why such construals have anything to do with Alston’s argument. Talk of ‘voluntary control’ is clearly intended by Alston (1989: 115-6) to capture the rather commonsensical idea that our actions result from volitional states.

⁵ Comments. On this elucidation, it isn’t necessary to *actually* intend to believe in order to have voluntary control over one’s particular belief: the *ability* to do so suffices (see Alston, 1989: 121). On the other hand, having an intention to believe that *p* isn’t sufficient: to have control, such an intention must be more than epiphenomenal. Finally, despite its vagueness, clause (iii) ensures that no funny business is involved in the causal chain between intention and belief. In particular, such a clause is intended to rule out certain counter-examples to

More difficult is the second part of the question: what it is we are supposed to have voluntary control over, exactly—that is, what “ ϕ ” in “the intention to ϕ ” stands for, in the above specification? Is it control over our beliefs *simpliciter*, or control over something more complex—such as the ability to gather evidence, or the ability to believe only what we have evidence for, or the ability to believe responsibly, etc.?⁶

It is this issue which is at the heart of the dispute between Alston and most of his opponents. For the latter’s Standard Response to Alston’s argument is precisely to reject premise (3) on the ground that we *do* have voluntary control over our beliefs *in some sense*: at least in the sense that, for instance, we can intend to believe—and thus have voluntary control over—only that for which we have evidence (or intend to be responsible believers, say).⁷

But note, at the outset, that advocates of (DTJ) do seem to concede at least this much to Alston: that we lack voluntary control over our beliefs *simpliciter*. We cannot just believe at will in the sense of ‘voluntary control’ specified above. In other words, while they deny premise (3) on the ground that the following reading of (3) is, by their lights, false:

- (3*) It is not the case that normal subjects have voluntary control over believing only that for which they have evidence.

they agree with Alston that this other interpretation of (3) is true:

premise (3)—see Feldman (2004: 171). The idea is that intentions to believe ought to cause their effects in very much the same way as intentions usually cause actions and bodily movements. In this respect, the causal chain in question remains very much ‘within’ the subject, so to speak.

⁶ Alston (1989: 122-42) himself distinguishes four different kinds of voluntary control. Note, however, that Alston’s distinction, in fact, applies the very same notion of voluntary control to different things, and then considers the impact such control might have upon the formation of beliefs. He then attempts to defend premise (3) by showing that, for each such kind, either (i) we have no such control over our beliefs, or (ii) that if we do, the sort of control under consideration is unsuitable to support a tenable version of (DTJ). We shan’t need to go into the complexities of Alston’s defence of premise (3): two simple examples will suffice for our purposes.

⁷ We shall focus upon voluntary control over believing only that for which one has evidence, for the sake of illustration. See, e.g. Ginet (2001). Plantinga (1993: 24), though no friend of (DTJ), argues that something like the Standard Response is available to block Alston’s argument.

(3**) It is not the case that normal subjects have voluntary control over their beliefs *simpliciter*.

This Standard Response, however, doesn't suffice to bring any solace to the friends of (DTJ). The reason is simple: denying (3*) does nothing to block Alston's argument.

In order for (3*) to be at all relevant to Alston's argument, premise (2) must be similarly interpreted as:

(2*) If deontological requirements apply to beliefs, normal subjects have voluntary control over believing only that for which they have evidence.

And, perhaps, (2*) is true. But the important question is whether the following version of premise (2) is true:

(2**) If deontological requirements apply to beliefs, normal subjects have voluntary control over their beliefs *simpliciter*.

If it is, this is enough for Alston's argument to go through. The argument establishes that (DTJ) must be false, because it has a false consequence—namely, the consequent of (2**). And proponents of the Standard Response have said nothing to block *that* argument since, as we have seen, they accept that the consequent of (2**) is false—that is, they accept (3**).

Perhaps, though, the Standard Response could be supplemented with the claim that (2**) isn't in fact a consequence of (DTJ). After all, proponents of the Standard Response usually insist that the sorts of deontic requirements which, on their view, determine epistemic justification are ones which do not apply to beliefs *simpliciter*. Rather, they are requirements that one ought to believe only propositions for which one has evidence, or believe responsibly, or gather evidence, and so on—in other words, requirements concerning the things which, according to the Standard Response, one can have voluntary control over.

Even so, this revised version of the Standard Response doesn't suffice to block Alston's argument. The problem is that deontic requirements which don't make demands on subject's beliefs *simpliciter* might well imply requirements that do make such demands. Consider for instance the deontic requirement that one *ought* to believe only that for which one has evidence. And suppose that one lacks

evidence for proposition p . It seems as though, in one's current situation, one *ought* not to believe that p *tout court* (another deontic requirement). In which case, (2**) does seem to be a consequence of (DTJ) after all. Proponents of the Standard Response cannot just take it for granted that the deontic requirements they posit don't have such consequences.

So, whether (3*) is true or false is irrelevant to the soundness of Alston's argument, provided that the friends of (DTJ) grant (3**)—which they do, and rightly so. The Standard Response simply misses the point: it says nothing that could salvage (DTJ) from Alston's argument.

3. Ought implies can?

So the now pressing question is: whether there is any reason to accept premise (2)—and interpretation (2**) in particular? The reason provided by Alston explicitly appeals to the familiar “ought-implies-can” principle:

(OC) S ought (has an obligation) to ϕ *only if* S can ϕ .

As he puts it: “By the time-honored principle that “Ought implies can”, one can be obliged to do A *only if* one has an effective choice as to whether to do A” (Alston, 1989: 118). This is how a psychological thesis about beliefs—Doxastic Voluntarism—is supposed to be a consequence of (DTJ). The latter entails that deontic requirements apply to beliefs, which by (OC), entails Doxastic Voluntarism. Note that all those who have something to say about Alston's argument appear to have granted at least that much.⁸

The problem is that (OC) in no way supports premise (2). Focus on the consequent of (OC): why should a claim about what one *can* (or cannot) believe

⁸ Even Richard Feldman (2000, 2001), who responds to Alston's argument by rejecting (OC), appears to grant the inference from (OC) to premise (2). His rejection is based on counter-examples to the “ought-implies-can” principle, which involve what he calls ‘role-oughts’. Examples include cases where a teacher—*qua* teacher—ought to explain things clearly, where and a believer—*qua* believer—ought to believe things on the basis of evidence (2001: 88; 2004: 175). But Feldman fails to appreciate that his examples involve cases where what falls in the scope of ‘ought’ (“ S ought to perform her role of believer right”, “ S ought to form beliefs supported by evidence”) and ‘can’ (“ S has control over being a believer”, “ S is able to believe that p ”) aren't quite the same propositions. And so, it seems, they aren't really counter-examples to (OC), which is of the form “if S ought to ϕ , S can ϕ ”. A similar problem faces Feldman's distinct (1988) response. Unfortunately, we lack the space to pursue this point any further.

entail anything about *voluntary control* and whether one can believe *at will*? It doesn't—and this is the simple mistake we think undermines Alston's argument.

It is natural, we assume, to interpret the 'can' in the 'ought-implies-can' principle (OC) as the 'can' of ability. Thus, if *S* ought to perform an action ϕ , then (OC) requires that *S* *can* ϕ , in the sense that *S* is *able* to ϕ . For instance, if you ought to carry out your national service (or give a speech in Japanese), you have to be able to carry out your national service (or give a speech in Japanese). If you aren't able to, such deontic requirements don't apply to you. This, we take it, is the simple idea behind (OC).

Likewise, if *S* *ought* to believe that *p*, (OC) entails that *S* must be *able* to believe that *p*. This will no doubt impose some constraints on *S*. For instance, *S* might have to possess the various concepts required to grasp the proposition that *p*. Or *S* might have to have sufficient cognitive sophistication to entertain that proposition. But none of this requires that *S* have any *voluntary control* over her beliefs: it doesn't require that *S* be able to *decide* to believe *p*, or to form the intention to believe *p* and act on it, etc. (OC) says nothing whatsoever about *voluntary control*.

This, in essence, is the simple, yet fatal, mistake that besets Alston's argument. Contrary to what Alston says, (2) does not follow from (OC), since having an ability to ϕ isn't necessarily equivalent to having voluntary control over whether to ϕ . Perhaps, Alston might try to motivate premise (2) on the basis of another principle—call it “ought-implies-voluntary-control”:

(OV) *S* ought (has an obligation to) ϕ *only if* *S* has voluntary control over whether to ϕ .

This, however, is much stronger than—and ought not to be confused with—the relatively uncontroversial (OC). As such, we haven't been provided with any reason to accept (OV).

Alston could try to argue that (OC) implies (OV), when combined with the additional assumption that “can-implies-voluntary-control”:

(CV) *S* can ϕ *only if* *S* has voluntary control over whether to ϕ .

Again, though, it's unclear what reasons we could have to accept (CV). For one thing, it simply embodies the very conflation which, we have found, is fatal to Alston's argument. For another, (CV) is obviously false: we are able to breathe (sleep, feel pain, digest, etc.) without voluntarily controlling our doing so.

To be sure, *some* abilities come with control: we can walk (and pay taxes) and do so by deciding to walk (and to pay taxes). The central question, then, is whether beliefs and the ability to believe are of the latter kind. Certainly not, according to Alston's own premise (3)—and we agree. Beliefs and most (though not all) other propositional attitudes are quite different from actions in this very respect. Whereas it is part of what it is to be an action ϕ that an agent has voluntary control over whether or not she ϕ s, it is no part of what it is to be a belief that the believer has voluntary control over whether or not she has that belief.

4. Diagnosis

A final question remains. Why is it that Alston and others have repeatedly fallen prey to the simple mistake we have uncovered, if that mistake is, as we claim, so simple?

Here is a tentative diagnosis of this puzzling fact. When (OC) applies to actions, what comes after "ought" and "can" is, of course, an action. And actions are by their very nature the kinds of things over which we have voluntary control. Thus, if a subject *S* performs an action ϕ , she does so by intending to ϕ in such a way that causes her to ϕ . This is precisely part of what distinguishes (genuine) actions from certain kinds of automatic or reflexive responses. Actions are voluntary or intentional in the sense that they can be directly caused by intentions (and other 'volitions'). And this, we have assumed (with Alston), is a natural way to understand what it means to have voluntary control over ϕ .

However, and this is the important point, this has nothing to do with the 'can' of ability in (OC). By itself, 'can' carries no intentional or volitional implications. Thus, when applied to beliefs, the 'can' of ability in (OC) doesn't entail that beliefs are similarly intentional or under our voluntary control. The mistake, we suggest, is to read the intentional or volitional implications of "S can ϕ "—where " ϕ " is an action—into "can" itself, and then to mis-interpret "S can believe" in that way.

This is why there is no good reason to think that the ‘ought-implies-can’ principle (OC) entails Doxastic Voluntarism. Premise (2) in Alston’s argument rests precisely on such a mistake.

5. Concluding remarks

We have argued that Alston’s famous objection to Deontological Theories of (Epistemic) Justification suffers from a simple mistake. This doesn’t necessarily mean that premise (2) is false and the argument unsound. Nor does it rule out the possibility that some more cogent motivation could be found for (2). What it does mean, however, is that premise (2) is unmotivated. Alston’s argument is thus inadequate as it stands.

Is this good news? It is for the proponents of (DTJ)—but not *just* for them. For note that Alston’s argument, if it did work, wouldn’t just threaten (DTJ). Rather, due to the generality of premise (2), the argument would jeopardise any view in epistemology, ethics, philosophy of mind and philosophy of religion, that is committed to the idea that beliefs are subject to deontic requirements (of any kind). The failure of Alston’s argument thus has considerable philosophical significance.

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