

***Deontological Perspectivism: A Reply to Lockie***

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**Abstract**

In his (2015) paper, Robert Lockie seeks to add a contextualized, relativist dimension to rationality by targeting Alston's epistemic poverty objection to the deontological conception of epistemic justification. I shall argue that Lockie's presentation of the dialectic of Alston's argument is flawed and that his appeal to a subjective notion of justification cannot answer Alston's challenge unless he is able to show that such a notion best represents our epistemic practices.

In his paper, 'Perspectivism, Deontology and Epistemic Poverty'<sup>1</sup>, Robert Lockie considers the so-called epistemic poverty objection against the deontological conception of epistemic justification. According to Lockie, the proper response to this objection is to embrace an account of subjective, bounded rationality instead of an objective one. He thinks, however, that such an account must incorporate cultural limitations and concludes that it is, therefore, in part cultural. In defense of this claim, Lockie appeals to the empirical research in the psychology and economic literature.

I am not going to challenge Lockie's claim that cultural differences are relevant to any viable subjective account of epistemic justification. I am only concerned and worried about the way he represents the dialectic of Alston's epistemic poverty challenge. He begins by noting Alston's main problem with deontological justification ( $J_d$ ), namely, that "it does not hook up in the right way with an adequate truth-conducive ground. I may have done what could reasonably be expected of me in the management and cultivation of my doxastic life and still hold a belief on outrageously inadequate grounds".<sup>2</sup> However, Lockie subsequently remarks that "[t]his stock argument...has a stock response. This is to draw a distinction between objective and subjective duty"<sup>3</sup>. He further adds that "[t]o escape the epistemic poverty objection, deontic, oughts-based justification must be restricted in its application to the "subjective", "practical" realm. There is another, "objective", "absolute", sense of being justified for which the discharge of duty, the fulfilment of obligations, be we ever so diligent, is not guaranteed to satisfy"<sup>4</sup>.

I find Lockie's account of the dialectic of Alston's argument puzzling. How could the distinction between objective and subjective duty be regarded as a "response" or as a way of "escaping[ing] the epistemic poverty objection" when the distinction between those species of duty was actually something that Alston himself heeded when setting up the epistemic poverty objection? To explain, let us briefly summarize how Alston arrives at this objection. This would also show why Lockie's retreat to subjective justification

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<sup>1</sup> Lockie 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Alston (1985, 95).

<sup>3</sup> Lockie 2015, 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

cannot be regarded as an adequate way out of this problem. Lockie needs to say more in order to adequately address this objection.

### **The Epistemic Poverty Objection**

To say that a belief is epistemically justified is to appraise it favorably from the epistemic point of view and assign a positive status to it.<sup>5</sup> There are, however, many ways of thinking about this favorable evaluative status. One of the major trends in this area sees epistemic justification as necessarily involving a deontic dimension. It thus analyses the favorable epistemic status in terms of the fulfillment of one's intellectual duties and obligations. To say that a belief is (deontologically) justified ( $J_d$ ) is to say that, in holding that belief, the cognizer has flouted no epistemic duties, that he has been epistemically responsible and is subject to no blame or disapproval. Distinct modes of these obligations or duties, however, as well as their content, give rise to different varieties of deontological theories of justification. Epistemic obligations can be taken in objective, subjective, and other modes resulting, in turn, in the corresponding modes of justification.

The content of these obligations, on the other hand, could equally be construed in a number of different ways, but, for the sake of concreteness, let us, following Alston, take our epistemic duty to consist of forming beliefs on the basis of adequate evidence. This leaves us with the modes of this obligation. Alston discerns four such modes and then seeks to find out which of the resulting versions of deontological justification best captures the spirit of that concept. (By focusing only on propositional, rather than doxastic, justification we can ignore Alston's motivational mode.)

(X) S is objectively justified in believing that p iff S has adequate evidence for p.

(XI) S is subjectively justified in believing that p iff S believes that he has adequate evidence for p.

(XII) S is cognitively justified in believing that p iff S is justified in believing that he has adequate evidence for p.

Which of these contenders best represents deontological justification? Alston dismisses (XI) on the ground that it makes it too easy to be justified. He also rejects the objective version (X) because  $J_d$  is, primarily, a concept of freedom from blameworthiness, and this feature is lost in (X). Provided I have not been epistemically negligent in forming my belief on the basis of the evidence available to me i.e., as long as I am justified in supposing that my evidence is adequate, my belief is blameless even if the evidence is, in fact, inadequate. This means that it is the cognitive version (XII) that really brings out what it is to be  $J_d$  in holding a belief. Having identified the proper form of deontological justification, Alston then turns to its evaluation.

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<sup>5</sup> Here I am heavily relying on Vahid 1998.

He initially criticizes the deontological conception on the ground that it presupposes the implausible doctrine of doxastic voluntarism according to which we have direct voluntary control over our beliefs. But he immediately goes on to say that once we stop thinking of epistemic obligations on the model of obligations to do things over which we have voluntary control, the deontic conception can be modified accordingly. But he nevertheless rejects it on the ground that it fails to give us what we expect of epistemic justification.

To show this, Alston considers, what he calls, an 'evaluative' sense of epistemic justification ( $J_e$ ) that no longer involves a deontic dimension, and can, in one natural interpretation, be fleshed out as follows. To say of S that he is  $J_e$  in believing that p is to say that he has adequate grounds for his belief, where the adequacy is measured by whether the grounds are sufficiently indicative of the truth of p. Now, as with the deontological conception, there are different modes of thinking about the adequacy of the grounds. They might be thought of as being in fact adequate, believed (or justifiably believed) by the cognizer to be adequate and so on, resulting, in turn, in the corresponding objective, subjective and cognitive versions of being  $J_e$  in holding a belief.

Alston rejects the subjective version for the same reasons that led him to dismiss the subjective version of  $J_d$ . Unlike the deontological case, however, he rejects the cognitive version because being  $J_e$  in believing that p is, primarily, a question of whether believing that p is a good thing from the epistemic point of view regardless of whether or not the cognizer is subject to blame. It is therefore the objective mode that brings out what it takes to be  $J_e$ , and, ignoring further complications, it can be defined as follows.

(DJ<sub>e</sub>) S is  $J_e$  in believing that p iff S's believing that p, as S did, was a good thing from the epistemic point of view, in that S's belief that p was based on adequate grounds.

Accordingly, in identifying the correct forms of  $J_d$  and  $J_e$ , Alston seems to be guided by the following two principles.

(a) " $J_d$  is, most centrally, a concept of freedom from blameworthiness."<sup>6</sup>

(b) Any discussion of justification should proceed on the assumption that "there is something wrong with believing in the absence of adequate evidence".<sup>7</sup>

These principles allow him to adjudicate between different versions of  $J_d$ . It is (a) rather than (b), however, that is given the pride of place in the context of identifying the proper form of deontological justification.<sup>8</sup> The objective version of  $J_d$ , (X), is rejected on the ground that it

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<sup>6</sup> Alston 1985, 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> In rejecting the subjective version (XI), however, Alston seems to be mainly relying on (b): "I would also hold that if the evidence is not in fact adequate, my [believing to have] that evidence cannot justify me in believing that p" (1985, 89). But one could also dispose of (XI) by invoking (a): merely believing that one has adequate evidence for a belief does not get one off the hook.

fails to do justice to (a), even though it satisfies (b). For precisely the opposite reason, Alston takes the cognitive version, (XII), as exhibiting the central features of deontological justification. So, ignoring the motivational rider for the sake of simplicity,  $J_d$  can be defined as follows.

(XII) S is  $J_d$  in believing that p iff S is justified in believing that he has adequate evidence for p.

The question that immediately springs to mind in regard to the above definition concerns the sense in which 'justified' is used on the RHS of 'iff'. It cannot, surely, be the cognitive sense of deontological justification, for that would threaten the definition with circularity as well as engendering an infinite regress of beliefs. It cannot also be the objective sense of  $J_d$ , for, as we just saw, Alston rejects it for not being a deontologically respectable concept. We thus seem to be forced to say that the sense in which 'justified' is used on the RHS of 'iff' is a non-deontological, truth-conducive sense very much in the spirit of Alston's preferred conception, namely, the 'evaluative' sense of epistemic justification ( $J_e$ ). We thus arrive at a more precise formulation of deontological justification.

(DJ<sub>d</sub>) S is  $J_d$  in believing that p iff S is  $J_e$  in believing that he has adequate evidence for p.

Let us now see how this bears on Alston's critique of deontological justification. Alston criticizes the deontological conception of epistemic justification for failing to "give us what we expect of epistemic justification".

The most serious defect is that it does not hook up in the right way with an adequate truth-conducive ground. I may have done what could reasonably be expected of me in the management and cultivation of my doxastic life and still hold a belief on outrageously inadequate grounds.<sup>9</sup>

He cites "several possible sources of such a discrepancy". These include, what he calls, 'cultural isolation' and deficiency in cognitive powers. In both cases the subject is  $J_d$  in holding those beliefs despite the fact that those beliefs are inadequately grounded. Alston's reasoning here in rejecting the deontological conception is almost the reverse of what he presented when he sought to identify its proper form. There he allowed one of his guiding principles (namely, (a)) to override the e (b), thus, highlighting the role of duty fulfillment in characterizing the deontic conception of epistemic justification. Now in evaluating its credibility as a concept of epistemic justification he allows (b) to take precedence over (a).

But Alston's way of setting up his argument against  $J_d$ , gives rise to the following conundrum. The reasons why he takes the trouble of going through such cases as cultural isolation is to show "the possibility of a gap between deontological justification and truth-conducive justification"<sup>10</sup>. But if the credibility of  $J_d$  really hangs on whether or not it can

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<sup>9</sup> Alston 1985, 95.

<sup>10</sup> Alston 1988, 147.

diverge from  $J_e$  (or any other truth-conducive account of justification), Alston need not have bothered himself with going through such scenarios, or defend their cogency against his critiques. For if  $(DJ_d)$  is to represent the proper form of deontological justification, the possibility of such a gap is already guaranteed from the very beginning.

To see this let us first note that Alston, along with other contemporary epistemologists, refrains from claiming that justification implies truth. This means that a belief can be objectively justified (i.e., being  $J_e$ ) and yet be false. Now recall the definition of  $J_d$ :  $S$  is  $J_d$  in believing that  $p$  iff  $S$  is  $J_e$  (objectively justified) in believing that he has adequate evidence for  $p$ . Given the stated difference between justification and truth, it follows that  $S$  can be  $J_e$  in believing that his evidence for  $p$  is adequate, thus satisfying the RHS of the definition, and yet the evidence be in fact inadequate. This means that  $S$  can be  $J_d$  in believing that  $p$  and yet fail to be  $J_e$  in holding the very same belief. The possibility of a gap between deontological justification and truth-conducive justification, thus, simply follows from the failure of epistemic justification to be truth-entailing and the peculiar form of  $(DJ_d)$  which involves the justification of the higher order belief in the adequacy of the reasons for the target belief.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Now, however one thinks of the proper form of Alston's way of setting up the epistemic poverty objection, Lockie's claim that the distinction between objective and subjective duty is a response to this objection does not seem to be very coherent. Whatever one thinks of the objection, either as resulting from reflection on such scenarios as the "cultural isolation" or as simply following from  $(DJ_d)$  and  $(DJ_e)$ , it is something that is *founded* on the distinction between objective and subjective duty. Accordingly, making such a distinction cannot be a response to the epistemic poverty objection. What Lockie needs to do in order to respond to such objections, along the subjective lines he favors, is to show that it is subjective justification ( $J_d$ ), rather than  $J_e$ , that best represents our epistemic practices. After all, there seems to be something essentially right about the claim that our concept of justification is sensitive to the truth conducivity of the grounds of beliefs. But Lockie makes no efforts in that direction. He does consult certain empirical investigations (such as Luria's "white bear" case), but one can always argue that such cases pertain to rationality rather than justification.

Finally, Lockie seems to think that deontological theories are inherently internalist as when he says that "[t]he access restrictions [on justificatory grounds] is rather derived from the deontic core of the theory".<sup>11</sup> It was once popular to think that access internalism follows directly from the requirements of a deontological conception of justification.<sup>12</sup> This line of reasoning is, however, no longer popular. For example, Laurence Bonjour, who was once a supporter of such a view, is now inclined to reject it on the ground that epistemic blameworthiness is neither necessary nor sufficient for epistemic justification precisely on account of epistemic poverty cases.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, all that an argument from deontological justification entails is that an agent must have *some* way of coming to know

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<sup>11</sup> Lockie 2015, 4.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Bonjour 1985.

<sup>13</sup> See Bonjour in Bonjour and Sosa 2003.

what the justifiers of his beliefs are (without specifying any particular mode of knowledge or access). Without further assumptions, it does not follow from this fact that the pertinent evidence for a belief should be reflectively accessible to a cognizer.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Goldman 1999.