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Beyond "justification": dimensions of epistemic evaluation

By William P Alston

Cornell University Press, February 2005, Pp. xv + 256. ISBN 0-8014-4291-5. Hbk Price Hbk. £24.50 (\$45.00)

The primary aim of this book is, 'to explore and explicate the modes of epistemic evaluation of belief and to develop a better framework for understanding and using them than is prevalent in the present state of the subject'(6). The present state of epistemology has, in Alston's view, a variety of different factions arguing about what exactly constitutes *justified* belief. Some argue that justification requires that the believer have cognitive access to or even knowledge of the fact that the belief is based on good reasons; while others argue that the belief's being formed by a reliable process is enough. Some argue that the believer must be able to defend the probable truth of the belief; while others argue that the belief must be part of a coherent set of beliefs or the result of an exercise of intellectual virtue. The list could go on.

In light of this pervasive controversy, the central thesis of this book is metaphilosophical and normative. Picking up on a theme stressed in his paper 'Epistemic Desiderata' (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 53, 1993), Alston suggests that there is no fact of the matter about what constitutes epistemic justification. This is why he thinks epistemology should move 'Beyond "Justification"—that is to say, beyond the search for 'the unique, epistemically crucial property of beliefs picked out by "justified"'(22). Once we reject the 'justificationist' approach to understanding the epistemic evaluation of belief, we shall be, according to Alston, better equipped to articulate and understand the interrelations between a variety of different epistemic desiderata whose proponents have, until now, struggled in vain in an all-or-nothing competition for the best account of epistemic justification.

In addition to making this metaphilosophical normative point, this book also begins post-justificationist project of categorizing, explicating, and relating the various epistemic desiderata. Fortunately, the labors of the justificationist project were not completely in vain. This is because each separate account of justification can now be viewed as suggesting a possible epistemic desideratum. Not faced with the task of proving that this or that good-making feature of a belief is what solely constitutes justification, it is open to us to recognize all good-making features as epistemically valuable. Moreover, at least some of the arguments for and against various conceptions of epistemic justification can now be recast in a more constructive light as helpful attempts to articulate the fine-structure of the relations between various epistemic desiderata. This is why Alston often refers to his approach to epistemic evaluation as a 'pluralist' or 'Let a thousand flowers bloom' approach to epistemic evaluation. Nonetheless, it is not a libertarian approach. For Alston clearly thinks that some epistemic desiderata are more important than others; and there is one class of proposed desiderata that he thinks fails to provide genuine desiderata at all.

The five general classes of possible epistemic desiderata he identifies in chapter 3 are (in order of theoretical importance): (i) truth, (ii) truth-conducive features of beliefs, (iii) features of belief favorable to the discrimination and formation of true beliefs, (iv) features of systems of beliefs that are among the goals of cognition, (v) deontological features of beliefs. According to Alston, treating truth as the most basic epistemic desideratum is definitive of the 'epistemic point of view'. He writes, 'We evaluate something epistemically...when we judge it to be more or less good or bad from the epistemic point of view, that is, for the attainment of epistemic purposes'(29). And, according to him, these purposes are to be gleaned from the goals of human cognition. He writes, 'epistemology consists of a critical reflection on human cognition. And the evaluative aspect of epistemology involves an attempt to identify ways in which the conduct and the products of our cognitive activities can be better or worse vis-à-vis the goals of cognition'(ibid.). However, in the end, he thinks there is really just one primary goal of cognition—truth. He writes, 'Along with many other epistemologists I suggest that the primary function of cognition in human life is to acquire true rather than false beliefs about matters that are of interest or importance to us'(ibid.).

On Alston's approach, this focus on truth provides the primary resource for evaluating the relative priority and nature of the different desiderata. So, naturally, truth-conducive features of beliefs—group (ii)—come out as the next most important class of desiderata in Alston's view. These are features of a belief such as the belief's being based on adequate grounds, the belief's being formed by a reliable process, the belief's being formed by the exercise of an intellectual virtue, etc. But in all cases, the relevant notion—i.e. adequate ground, reliability, intellectual virtue—must be understood in terms of truth-conduciveness, in order for the correlative desideratum to count as a genuinely *epistemic* desideratum.

By contrast, the desiderata of group (iii) come out as correlatively less important because their connection to truth is more indirect. These are classically internalist features of a belief such as the believer's cognitive access to or knowledge of the adequacy of the reasons for the belief and the believer's ability to carry out a successful defense of the belief's probable truth. Alston wants to recognize these as genuine epistemic desiderata, but not desiderata as important as truth and truth-conduciveness. Along a different axis of evaluation, we can evaluate whole systems of beliefs for things such as explanatory power, understanding, coherence, and systematicity. These are the group (iv) desiderata. Again, Alston wants to recognize these as genuine epistemic desiderata, but not desiderata as important as the other groups.

Before moving on to the final group of possible desiderata and Alston's argument that they are not in fact genuine desiderata, I want to register a worry about Alston's method for evaluating the relative priority of the various genuine epistemic desiderata. Since this book pioneers the epistemic desiderata approach, while Alston may have opponents to the approach, he doesn't yet have opponents who agree in approach but disagree with the details of the resulting account of the structural priorities of the various desiderata. However, imagine an opponent of this sort who argues as follows:

Group (ii) desiderata such as adequacy of grounds and reliability are certainly important, but, when it comes to epistemically evaluating human believers, group (iii) desiderata such as a believer's ability to defend her belief in the face of legitimate challenge is more important, because it is only when this is true that it the believer will have reached the end of inquiry—i.e. knowledge. Or, if you like, group (iv) desiderata such as a belief system's explanatory power and coherence are more important since understanding the world we live in is more important than collecting a hodgepodge of disconnected true beliefs.

As we have seen, Alston thinks this is wrong because he thinks that it is truth rather than knowledge or understanding that is the central cognitive goal definitive of the epistemic point of view. Maybe that is right, but now imagine a new kind of critical pluralist who diagnoses this standoff by suggesting that there is actually no fact of the matter about whether it is truth, knowledge, or understanding that is the distinctive cognitive goal. To be sure, they are desirable from an epistemic point of view. But this sort of pluralist critic will argue that debate about which one is definitive of the epistemic point of view is spurious, and we should therefore move beyond thinking of the 'definitive cognitive goal' and 'let a thousand flowers bloom' here too. The point I want to make is not (although I think this is true) that this pluralist position about definitive cognitive goals is correct; rather the point I want to make is that the same sort of considerations that motivate Alston's pluralist response to the debate about what constitutes epistemic justification would seem to militate against his totalitarian view of what constitutes the cognitive goal definitive of the epistemic point of view.

Now, whatever the relative priority and importance of group (ii), (iii), and (iv) desiderata turns out to be, Alston thinks there is a class of apparent desiderata that we should reject as genuine desiderata. Within the justificationist framework, some have proposed a deontological conception of epistemic justification. The rough idea is that a belief is justified just in case holding it is epistemically permissible or one is not epistemically to blame for doing so. Deploying his strategy of transposing previous attempts to identify the unique, epistemically crucial property of beliefs picked out by 'justified' into proposals about what is desirable from the epistemic point of view, Alston uses this and related ideas to generate putative deontological desiderata—group (v). These are: (a) the belief is held permissibly, (b) the belief is formed and held responsibly, and (c) the causal ancestry of the belief does not contain violations of intellectual obligations.

Alston argues that none of these are genuine epistemic desiderata. In his view, (b) is effectively ambiguous between (a) and (c); so, whichever way we understand it, it is taken care of by his arguments against (a) and (c). He argues that (a) is rendered incoherent by the truth of doxastic involuntarism, and (c) isn't a genuinely epistemic desideratum because it lacks an appropriate connection to truth. I found both of these arguments to be weak, so I shall conclude by challenging them in turn.

Picking up on the major theme of his paper 'The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification' (*Philosophical Perspectives*, 2, 1988), Alston again

argues that we do not have effective voluntary control over our beliefs. There are several things we say that makes it seem as if we have effective voluntary control. For instance, we talk of 'making up our minds' and 'weighing evidence in pursuit of a decision about what to believe'. However, Alston attempts to explain away these and other ways of speaking. He grants that we may have indirect voluntary control over our beliefs, much like we have indirect voluntary control over our blood pressure, but, according to Alston, this is not enough for 'effective voluntary control'. His argument against effective voluntary control over our beliefs consists simply in asking us to try to exercise it: 'Can you, at this moment, start to believe that the Roman Empire is still in control of western Europe, just by deciding to do so?'(63) Of course we cannot.

This is significant because Alston thinks it implies that beliefs cannot be proper objects of deontological evaluation. This is because '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"(60). However, it is surprising that, at this crucial juncture in his argument, Alston does not engage with the many critical responses to his 1988 article. In direct response to Alston, Richard Feldman has suggested that epistemic oughts are like role-oughts, such as 'A teacher ought to explain things clearly', which do not, in general, imply cans (see his 'The Ethics of Belief,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60, 2000). Matthais Steup has argued that ability to intend effectively to believe is not necessary for doxastic freedom and it is only doxastic freedom that is necessary for deontological evaluation (see his 'Voluntarism and Epistemic Deontology,' *Acta Analytica*, 15, 2000). David Owens has distinguished between will-based freedom and judgment-based freedom and argued that there is a perfectly cogent sense in which we are responsible for our beliefs even though we enjoy neither sort of freedom with respect to them (see his *Reason without Freedom*, London: Routledge 2000.) Hilary Kornblith has argued that doxastic oughts are derivative of epistemic ideals which can transcend particular agents capacities (see his 'Epistemic Obligation and the Possibility of Internalism,' in *Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility*, Fairweather, A. and L. Zagzebski, eds. New York; Oxford, Oxford University Press). Nishi Shah has argued that decisional control is not necessary for doxastic voluntarism (see his 'Clearing Space for Doxastic Voluntarism.' *The Monist* 85, 2002). And Sharon Ryan has challenged both the general 'Ought implies can' principle and its application to epistemic oughts with a variety of interesting counterexamples (see her 'Doxastic Compatibilism and the Ethics of Belief' *Philosophical Studies*, 114, 2003). This is not the place to evaluate the effectiveness of these responses to Alston's 1988 paper, but I must say that I found it surprising that he repeats the same argument in this book without so much as mentioning any of these.

Moreover, there is a distinction that can help to diagnose why we do not have effective and direct voluntary control over our beliefs but nonetheless seem to say things such as 'One ought to believe that the earth is not flat.' This is Sellars' distinction between rules of action and rules of criticism (or, if you like, 'ought-to-do's and 'ought-to-be's) (see Sellars' 'Language as Thought and as Communication,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 29, 1969). What Alston's argument for doxastic involuntarism shows, in effect, is that believing is

not an action in the strict sense. However, as Sellars shows, it is not only actions that are proper subjects of deontological evaluation but also certain ways of being. Sellars' leading examples are rules of criticism that might be relevant in moral and linguistic education of our children, such as 'One ought to feel sympathy for the bereaved' and 'One ought to be disposed to respond with 'red' in response to red things under appropriate prompting'. Although deployed in a rather different context, the point of Sellars' distinction is that there are perfectly coherent deontological evaluations which do not trade on the subject of the evaluation having effective direct voluntary control over whether she is the way she ought to be. So, until Alston provides some further response to the criticisms of his 1988 article and argues that deontological desiderata such as (a) cannot be plausibly thought of as generating epistemic rules of criticism, his rejection of deontological desiderata is premature.

Regarding (c)—i.e. the putative epistemic desideratum that the causal ancestry of the belief does not contain violations of intellectual obligations—Alston argues that, while this may be a *cognitive* desideratum when properly understood, it is no *epistemic* desideratum. This is because it is not appropriately related to the goal of truth. His argument for thinking that it is not related to the goal of truth is complex, but the crux of it is that there is no necessary connection between meeting intellectual obligations in forming a belief and that belief being probably true. It seems that there are all sorts of counterexamples where one does everything that could be reasonably expected—one proceeds with an open mind, one double checks all of the calculations, one weighs all of the evidence appropriately, etc.—but, nonetheless, one ends up with a false belief through brute unluckiness, cognitive limitation, or something else.

There are two responses to this argument. First, even if Alston is right that there are breaks in the link between truth and meeting one's intellectual obligations, that does not show that all beliefs which have (c) are no more likely to be true than those that do not. After all, in cases where one does not proceed with an open mind, double check all of the calculations, weigh all of the evidence appropriately, it seems that one will be much more likely to form a false belief. But, second, why does it matter if (c) is appropriately related to truth, if beliefs that have this feature are anyway more desirable than beliefs that do not? Alston's response will surely be that such beliefs may be more desirable in some sense, but they are not more desirable from the 'epistemic point of view' because that point of view is defined by the central cognitive goal of truth. However, we have already seen why this response is not very satisfactory. Insofar as we follow Alston in his pluralist view of epistemic desiderata, it is far from clear why we should follow him in his correlatively totalitarian view that it is only the goal of truth which constitutes the 'epistemic point of view'.

So, while I commend the anti-justificationist pluralism towards epistemic desiderata that this book advances, I find the arguments Alston pursues in exploring the relative priority and genuineness of various putative epistemic desiderata to be far from convincing.