

Epistemic Negligence

Alonzo Fyfe (20180505)

In this paper, I wish to consider the thesis that epistemic justification can be understood in terms of deontological justification.

When it comes to beliefs, we often use the same terms that we use when we talk about an agent's moral responsibility for action. Specifically, we talk about what an agent ought and ought not to believe given the evidence, just as we talk about what an agent ought or ought not to do under the circumstances. The question arises as to whether these parallel ways of talking is merely coincidental, or whether it represents some deeper truth.

In 1988, William Alston wrote an influential criticism of the idea that epistemic justification can be understood along the same lines as deontological justification. In that criticism, Alston related epistemic justification to moral permissibility. Permissibility is one of three categories of action; the other two being moral obligation and moral prohibition. Effectively, an act is permissible if it is not prohibited – if it violates no moral rules. Comparably, if epistemic justification matched deontological justification, a belief would be justified if the basis for the belief violated no epistemic rules.

Alston demonstrated that this relationship fails on two grounds. First, we do not have the type of voluntary control over our actions to justify using deontological terms. Second, the permissibility standard is too . . . well . . . permissive.

It is true that morality applies to voluntary actions. This builds on the principle that “ought” implies “can”. Nobody gets blamed for failing to teleport a child out of a burning building. If we are going to be morally responsible for our beliefs, then our beliefs have to be, in some sense, voluntary. Alston charges that our beliefs are not voluntary, so deontological terms are not applicable.

Furthermore, all actions are permissible unless one can come up with an objection, or unless one can come up with objections to all alternative actions (in which case the action is obligatory). If epistemic justification follows this model, all beliefs are justified unless they are defeated and obligatory if all alternative beliefs are defeated. Alston argues that many permissible beliefs are not justified.

I want to suggest a potential answer to these objections.

Alston himself was on track to an answer to the first objection. We are not only responsible for what we aim to accomplish or prevent through our voluntary actions, but also the unintended side effects. This includes the moral categories of recklessness and negligence. I wish to examine this option in more detail.

To answer the second objection, I wish to suggest that, instead of using Alston's permissibility standard, we use a stricter non-culpability standard associated with a defense from accusations of deontological negligence.

My overall concern is with comparing epistemic justification to deontological justification. To make this more explicit, I want to specify what it is we are comparing.

Part I: The Object of Evaluation

In comparing epistemic and deontological justification, the first question to address is, “What is it, exactly, we are justifying?”

Alston argues that we are evaluating states of affairs, rather than actions. In the case of epistemic justification, we are concerned with an agent’s belief states.

Now a belief, in the psychological sense that is being used here (as contrasted with the abstract sense of that which is believed), is a more or less long-lived state of the psyche, a modification of the wiring that can influence various actions and reactions of the subject so long as it persists. (p. 261).

If we are going to compare epistemic and moral justification, we should have something comparable on the moral side that we use in the comparison. I am going to be using the state in which Vic is dead. The manner of his death has not yet been determined. He may have been shot, run over by a car, or because surgery that went poorly.

I confess that I am deliberately choosing a moral option that will raise questions of culpability. Vic is dead, and we are interested in discovering if Alph is responsible for this being the case. In the other case, Alph has a false belief, and we are similarly interested in knowing if Alph is, in any way, responsible for the fact that this is the case.

Now, I want to say a few things about how we can evaluate Alph’s culpability in bringing about these states.

Part II: Standards of Justification

How are we going to evaluate the realization of these states? Here, I want to look at Alston’s permissibility standard and compare it to a non-culpability standard.

Alston’s Permissibility Standard

Alston took the primary deontological terms to be ‘requirement’ (e.g., ‘obligation’, ‘duty’), prohibition, and permission. All other deontological terms, he argued, being derived from these three and the specifics of the situation. (p. 257)

Among these three categories, Alston focuses on the category of ‘permission’.

[W]hen we consider the justification of actions, something on which we have a firmer grip than the justification of beliefs, it is clear that to be justified in having done something is for that action not to be in violation of any relevant rules, regulations, laws, obligations, duties, or counsels, the ones that govern actions of that sort. It is a matter of the action's being permitted by the relevant system of principles. (p. 261)

Note that the term ‘permission’ is ambiguous. On one understanding of the term, it includes obligatory action. A person cannot be obligated to do that which he is not permitted to do. On a different understanding, an act is permitted if the agent may choose to perform or not perform the action. Neither option is prohibited. Alston has in mind the first understanding; anything not prohibited.

He is going to use this as the deontic equivalent of the epistemic justification of belief.

The upshot of the paper thus far is that the only viable deontological conception of justification is the one that identifies being justified in believing that p with not being intellectually to blame for believing that p. (p. 284)

“Not being intellectually to blame” here is understood as not being in violation of the epistemic rules – being epistemically permitted. Any belief that is epistemically permissible is justified.

The Non-Culpability Standard

As an alternative, I am proposing that we use the deontological category of non-culpability.

Ethicists often distinguish four categories of responsibility. These four categories are also recognized in law. The Model Penal Code defines them as follows:

Purpose [Intent]: A person acts purposefully (intentionally) if he acts with the intent that his action causes a certain result. In other words, the defendant undertakes his action either intending for, or hoping that, a certain result will follow.

Knowledge: A person acts knowingly if he is aware that his conduct will result in certain consequences. In other words, a person acts knowingly if he is aware that it is practically certain that his conduct will cause a specific result.

Recklessness: A person acts recklessly if he is aware of a substantial risk that a result will occur as a result of his actions. The risk must be substantial enough that the action represents a gross deviation from what a reasonable law-abiding person would do

Negligence: A person acts negligently if they should have been aware of a substantial and unjustifiable risk that a certain consequence would result from their actions. Although the level of risk is the same for both recklessness and negligence, the difference between the two is that with recklessness, the actor must be aware of the risk involved with her actions, whereas, for negligence, the actor is not aware of the risks but should have known what those risks were.¹

As an example, Alph intentionally brings about Vic’s death if Alph sought Vic’s death either as an end (he wanted Vic dead for its own sake), or as a means to an end (he wanted to prevent Vic from testifying

¹ National Paralegal College, *Law Shelf Educational Media*, “Model Penal Code’s Mens Rea”, <https://lawshelf.com/courseware/entry/model-penal-codes-mens-rea>, Accessed May 6, 2018.

against him on a securities fraud case). Either way, he actively sought to bring it about that Vic was dead.

An example of knowingly bringing about a death would be that in which Alph is a property owner who torches some property with an intent to collect on the insurance, knowing that the fire would trap and kill Vic, a homeless person sleeping on the property. Alph would have been just as happy if Vic had not been in the building. However, he could not have warned Vic without giving the police evidence of arson, so he let Vic die in the fire.

A case of recklessly bringing about a death has Alph rushing home to catch the game on TV, racing through intersections and ignoring lights. Vic is a pedestrian properly crossing the road with a walk sign. Alph knows he is creating a risk but hopes to make it home without an accident. Actually, he may miss Vic and do no harm. However, because he created a risk, his action is reckless.

For a case of negligently bringing about a death, consider one in which Alph is a surgeon who, when told to remove Vic's left (diseased) kidney, removed the kidney on his left as he faces the patient, and not on Vic's left. Vic, with no functioning kidney, soon dies. Alph should have used more care to make sure that he was removing the correct kidney.

I wish to note a difference between "intentionally" and "knowingly" bringing about a state on the one hand, and "recklessly" and "negligently" doing so on the other. The first pair of terms do not contain a judgment – an agent can also intentionally or knowingly bring about a desired state. Whereas "reckless" and "negligent" actions are always bad. A person is not referred to as recklessly or negligently doing something good or right.

If we look at negligence, we already see a strong connection between epistemic and moral responsibility. An individual is guilty of negligence if he *should have been aware of* or *should have known* certain facts. Of course, epistemic justification is also, in a sense, a measure of what a person *should have been aware of* or *should have known*.

With these concepts in mind, I would like to look at Alston's objections to a relationship between epistemic and deontological justification. I will begin with Alston's objection that we lack voluntary control over our actions.

Part III: Direct Voluntary Control

As Alston points out, we do not seem to have direct voluntary control over our beliefs. I cannot make it the case that I believe that P simply by willing or deciding that I believe that P.

At the same time, I also cannot directly will Vic's death either. I cannot, by thought alone, make it the case that "Vic is dead" is true. At best, I have to do something to make it the case that Vic is dead; shoot him, run him over with my car, or remove his one functioning kidney. Consequently, we cannot say that direct voluntary control is required for moral justification. If the two types of justification are related, then direct voluntary control is not required for epistemic justification either.

There are philosophers debating whether we have direct voluntary control of our beliefs. However, I hope that the inability to directly will Vic's death does not imply that one cannot be held responsible for the death shows that the ability to directly will a result is not necessary for moral culpability.

Instead of direct voluntary control, moral justification usually looks at what we bring about by action (or inaction), such as Vic's death. Alston calls the type of control we exercise when we must do one thing to bring about another "indirect voluntary control."

Part IV: Indirect Voluntary Control

Though I lack the power to will Vic's death, I can will certain actions that I can be relatively certain will bring about his death. I could shoot him or push him in front of a runaway trolley. The next question Alston examines is whether we have a similar control over our beliefs.

In terms of the categories of responsibility that I identified in Part II, we are still within the first culpability category: intentional action. I intentionally bring about Vic's death any time I seek that state of affairs – either as an end in itself (I want him dead), or it is a means to some other end (he knows something about me that I wish to keep secret), regardless of whether I try to bring it about directly by will alone or indirectly – by shooting him.

Alston was specifically concerned about our ability to voluntarily realize a state in which a person believes that *p* using indirect methods similar to realizing that Vic is dead by shooting him. He argues that this type of control does not exist.

According to Alston, there is nothing we can do to directly make ourselves have a belief that *p* – at least nothing that can be done in a relatively short amount of time. Alston builds his argument on evidence that we cannot cause ourselves to have a belief that *p* where *p* is false. "Can you, at this moment, start to believe that the U.S. is still a colony of Great Britain, just by deciding to do so?" (p. 263). He then argues that if you cannot believe *p* is false at will, then you cannot believe that *p* is true at will, since believing that *p* is true is believing that *p* is not not-*p*.

However, what we get from the deontological concept of culpability is not an obligation to believe that *p*. It is better to express as "an obligation to believe that *p* if *p* is true."

Alston explicitly rejects this as a legitimate case of indirect voluntary control.

These claims ignore the difference between doing A in order to bring about E, for some definite E, and doing A so that some effect within a certain range will ensure. In order that the "looking for more evidence" phenomenon would show that we have immediate voluntary control over propositional attitudes in basically the way we do over the positions of door and light switches, it would have to be the case that the search for evidence was undertaken with the intention of taking up a certain particular attitude toward a particular proposition. (p. 271)

I see this as an arbitrary limitation. If I have an obligation to make sure that the plants in the nursery are kept at the right temperature, then this is an obligation to turn on the heat if it gets too cold, and to turn

off the heat if it gets too warm. I can be blamed if I miss the mark with respect to keeping the room at the correct temperature. Similarly, if I have an obligation to believe that p if p is true and believe that not- p if p is false, I can also be blamed if miss the mark.

Alston drops this limitation when he writes about indirect voluntary influence, which I will get to in the next section. (pp. 280-1)

In the case of recklessness, Alph does not have an obligation to believe, as he races home to catch the game, that Vic (or any other pedestrian) is crossing a street ahead. This might be false. However, to avoid the charge of recklessness, Alph is obligated to put himself in a position to believe that Vic is crossing the street if, in fact, Vic is crossing the street and to stop in time to prevent running over Vic.

To avoid the charge of negligence, Alph is obligated to believe that the kidney on Vic's left is to be removed regardless of whether it is true. He is obligated to believe that the kidney on Vic's left is to be removed because it is true that the kidney on Vic's left is to be removed. He is obligated to make sure that his belief that the kidney on his left as he faces Vic is to be removed, and, as he double-checks this belief, he should discover that it is false.

To see that this counts as indirect voluntary control, imagine living in a world where, within a day of coming to believe that Vic deserves to die, Vic dies. No further action is necessary. There is no room for any type of voluntary influence between judging that Vic deserves to die, and Vic dies other than, perhaps, Alph changing his mind.

You determine that you might be able to come to believe that Vic deserves to die by examining the evidence against him. You have indirect voluntary control over Vic's death, and can be held responsible for that death, in virtue of your voluntary control over whether to examine the evidence.

You can even intentionally kill Vic in this sense. Assume that you want Vic dead – as an end in itself or as a means. You can bring about Vic's death if you come to believe that Vic deserves death. You know that you have at least a chance of coming to believe that Vic deserves to die by examining the evidence against him. Therefore, you voluntarily choose to examine the evidence. Deontologically, this is no different from setting up a bomb in his car in the hopes that Vic will be in the car when it explodes.

An important species of this type of indirect voluntary control is found where one has an obligation to believe that p if p is true. If Alph is under such an obligation, and he knows that he has a chance of being in a state of believing that p if p is true if he examines the evidence, then he has an obligation to examine the evidence.

Now, continue the assumption that Alph has an obligation to believe that p if p is true and that Alph might come to believe that p if p is true by examining the evidence. Furthermore, he can in erase the chance that he will believe that p if p is true if he examines the evidence in a particular way – according to certain rules and principles. Now, not only does Alph have an obligation to look at the evidence, he has an obligation to look at it in a particular way, under those rules that increase the chance of success. He would be exercising indirect voluntary control.

Negligence and recklessness represent the flip side of this obligation. At least one species of recklessness is failure to put oneself in a position that one can believe that p if p is true, such as driving too fast to stop when there is a pedestrian in the crosswalk, or a failure to verify that it is the kidney on Vic's left side that is to be removed. Recklessness and negligence, understood in this way, fall under Alston's category of "indirect voluntary influence."

Part V: Indirect Voluntary Influence

Alston also presents another type of control that an agent may have over her beliefs that he calls "Indirect Voluntary Influence."

It is easy to confuse this with indirect voluntary control discussed earlier. Alston mentioned an example of indirect voluntary influence that comes from the fact that a person's cholesterol build-up is influenced by his diet, and an agent's diet is under his voluntary control. Unfortunately, this allows for two interpretations.

Under the first interpretation, a person who is aware of the relationship between diet and cholesterol can intentionally regulate his cholesterol build-up by regulating his diet. He can voluntarily give up high-fat, high-cholesterol foods and, thereby, lower his cholesterol. This falls under the previous category of "indirect voluntary control." The agent still has controlling his cholesterol as an end in itself or as a means of achieving some further end such as avoiding a heart-attack or stroke. This does not exemplify a new type of relationship.

What does exemplify a new type of relationship, and thus illustrates this new category, is the fact that the agent is responsible for his cholesterol level regardless of whether he acts on these facts. If he eats high-fat food, suffers from high cholesterol build-up, and then suffers a heart attack or stroke, the effect is still his fault because he could have controlled his cholesterol build-up if he had wanted to. This represents indirect voluntary influence. Cholesterol build-up is not an end or a means to an end, but it is a consequence of voluntary actions performed for other reasons.

This understanding of "indirect voluntary influence" would include instances of knowingly, recklessly, and negligently causing the death of somebody. Alph has indirect voluntary influence on whether Vic lives or dies when he knowingly kills Vic by setting fire to a building for insurance purposes that he knows Vic is in, when he races home to see the game and risks running Vic over, or removes the wrong kidney.

Alston was aware of this type of responsibility (though he seemed to be unaware of the fact that if you have indirect voluntary influence, then you have indirect voluntary control simply by intentionally using your influence). After asserting that we have indirect voluntary influence over our beliefs, Alston then argued that the permissive standard of moral justification was too weak for epistemic justification. While the deontological version argued that all acts not prohibited are permitted, Alston's epistemic version claims that all beliefs not prohibited are justified.

S is justified in believing that p iff it is not the case that if S had fulfilled all her intellectual obligations, then S's belief forming habits would have changed, or S's

access to relevant adverse considerations would have changed, in such a way that S would not have believed that p. (P. 284)

To discredit this hypothesis, Alston then provided a number of examples of permitted but unjustified beliefs.

Here, I wish to examine his examples and show that we can address them using a stricter standard of non-culpability. As I do this I will examine how the non-culpability standard differs from the permissive standard.

Case 1: Testimony

One of Alston's examples of permitted unjustified beliefs are beliefs acquired from testimony.

We accept claims from others and form a great many of our beliefs based on this testimony, even though testimony lacks the quality of evidence that would qualify as justified belief. Alston correctly points out, "Most of what we believe, beyond what we experience personally, comes from this source." Yet, we seldom give testimony the type of attention that would be required to justify the beliefs that we form from this source. We accept the word of a co-worker that it is raining outside without checking them, and trust that the photo that a friend posted on social media really is the meal she ordered the night before (if one has such friends). Alston is correct in claiming that many of the beliefs that come from testimony are permitted but not justified.

Yet, testimony also fails the test of non-culpability where questions of recklessness or negligence arise. Having somebody "just tell you" that a gun was not loaded would not be enough to answer a charge of recklessness for pointing the gun at somebody, or negligence for leaving it on the coffee table in the living room where a child could pick it up.

Consider the case mentioned earlier of the doctor who removed the wrong left kidney. He removed the (healthy) kidney on his left as he faced the patient, and not the (diseased) kidney that was on his patient's left as the patient faced him. Getting confused about right and left is perfectly permissible when one is playing a game of Twister at a party. It is not permissible when one is deciding which vital organ to remove.

This identifies a key difference between the permissive standard and the non-culpability standard. When there is virtually no risk of a wrong or harm to others from a false belief, we have little reason to care whether they are poorly justified. However, when we see a potential risk of wrong or serious harm, the standards go up. Being mistaken about what a friend had for dinner is not important enough for us to verify her claim. Being potentially wrong about removing the wrong kidney requires a bit more care.

One might object: Don't we always need to hold our beliefs to this higher standard to avoid charges of negligence?

The answer is that we do not. We can identify a number of beliefs where being wrong is not morally significant. I could be wrong about what is in my backpack, which documents I am working on that I have posted in the cloud for others to review, and when my bus leaves. Some of these have practical

concerns, but not all practical concerns are moral concerns. We do not need to double-check these facts to ward off an accusation of negligence. These are permissible unjustified beliefs.

Case 2: Limited Time and Resources

Alston presented his testimony objection in the context of a broader discussion about each person's limited time and resources for checking all of one's beliefs. He said that we do not justify testimony because we do not have time. I separated the two objections because I think they address different concerns. Even if we have all the time we need, we do not need to check the claims of testimony where no wrong can be done. At the same time, we are often faced with the double hazard of making decisions with a potential for doing great harm and having limited time and resources.

Consider the case of a doctor at the scene of an accident involving hundreds of victims. She is a doctor performing emergency first aid. This is a situation where a charge of negligence could potentially arise – lives are at stake. Yet, because of the nature of the medical emergency, she would not give the patients nearly the quality of care that she would give each one individually under normal circumstances. She is diagnosing injuries on the fly without adequate investigation, and reaching beliefs grounded on little evidence. On the permissibility standard, these beliefs would count as justified. On the culpability standard, they seem to count as justified as well.

However, even the doctor recognizes the different, tighter standards that would be applicable in the hospital.

To handle this case, we are required to make an adjustment to the culpability standard. It does not refer to the standard of care we give to cases in emergency situations where even a responsible agent is forced to cut corners. It refers to the level of care required in non-emergency situations. The permissibility of actions in an emergency includes a permission to engage in actions that, under normal circumstances, would be considered reckless or negligent. Beliefs formed in like circumstances also often lack full justification.

Case 3: Cultural Heritage

A third case in which Alston thinks that deontological and epistemic justification breaks apart arises when our attitudes are found in our cultural heritage. Alston wrote that a person is blameless for adopting his tribe's origin story – which everybody in the tribe believes and nobody has thought to question. However, his beliefs in the origin story are not epistemically justified.

There is reason to doubt that this type of case even passes Alston's own permissibility test.

Yet, things are different when we consider an agent's harmless belief in a tribe's origin story compared to something that actually brings forth questions of negligence. The culture in the southern United States prior to the Civil War embraced white supremacy and slavery. We may attempt to explain their attitudes in terms of their cultural heritage. However, we must distinguish explaining people's practices from justifying them. Other than a few cultural moral relativists, moral theorists would deny that an appeal to cultural heritage morally justified slavery – makes it morally permissible to own slaves. They

would not deny that a lone person could emerge in such a society and sensibly and truthfully assert, “This is wrong.”

This corresponds to what we see with respect to the cultural acceptance of belief. We may forgive the individual who, raised in a culture that has never questioned the origin story, also accepts it. However, the instant the first person shows up and asks, “How do we know this is true?” we see somebody bringing into awareness a fact that was already true – their belief in the cultural story was never justified.

Alston may have seen the culture’s origin story as justified, unlike the slavery story, because it is easy to imagine that this is one of those harmless beliefs that does not require the tougher standards of culpability. Such a set of beliefs would pass Alston’s permissibility test. In contrast, a cultural heritage story about the legitimacy of slavery would trigger the higher standards of the culpability test.

Case 4: Irresistible Beliefs

A fourth point of disagreement that Alston brings up concerns the possibility of beliefs that we cannot help but have.

Next consider irresistible beliefs and belief tendencies. If it is strictly impossible for me to alter a certain belief or tendency, then I can hardly be expected to do so. But some of these irresistible beliefs may be formed in an unreliable fashion Such beliefs are often not formed in a truth-conducive fashion. But the person cannot be blamed for having something she can't help having, and so we get our discrepancy once more.

I would like to compare this problem to acts that spring from irresistible desires. Here, too, an agent cannot help but perform these actions. However, it does not follow from the fact that the agent is not to be blamed for these actions that they are permissible. An agent with an irresistible impulse to torture children would not be permitted on these grounds to torture children. Rather, the irresistible impulse only serves to remove these urges out of the realm of morality and put them into the realm of medicine. The same may be said for irresistible beliefs or delusions. If they are a problem, then they are a matter of concern for doctors and not of morality.

Part VI: Variable Justification

I have written this as if there are two standards of justification. One standard applies when there is no question of potential culpability – when our beliefs, even if mistaken, produce no harm or moral wrong. The second standard applies when there is reason to fear a potential wrong. Then the standards for justification are stricter.

This is not accurate.

Standards of justification are relative to the magnitude and certainty of the potential wrongs that could result. If the potential wrong is minor (e.g., handing back the wrong change at a checkout line), then the

standards for preventing the wrong are lower than they are when potentially removing the wrong kidney or potentially triggering a nuclear war.

There are three potential ways out of this problem short of abandoning the idea of a relationship between epistemic justification and deontological justification.

One could try to argue that epistemic justification either is or should be dependent on the magnitude of wrong. This option seems unlikely to work. It would imply that the evidence that *p* is true is relevant to the importance of believing that *p* is true.

A second option would be to argue that epistemic justification depends on achieving some deontological threshold. That is to say, it is the amount of justification required when the magnitude and certainty of wrong is above a particular limit. However, this option appears arbitrary.

A third option is to say that epistemic justification simply consists of the rules to use in meeting the obligation to believe that *p* if *p* is true, but that the obligation to apply the rules is variable. This option allows that epistemic justification comes in degrees – beliefs may be more or less justified depending on whether the agent more or less follows the rules. An agent's obligation is also variable, implying more or less obligation to follow the rules. Still, it follows that, "to the degree that you have an obligation to follow the rules, these are the rules you have an obligation to follow.

This third option introduces a difference between epistemic and deontological definition in that we never say of deontological rules, "these are the rules that you follow to the degree that you have an obligation to do so."

For an example of one possible way in which this third option could play out, let us use James Montmarquet's thesis that defines conscientiousness as a desire to believe that which is true and not believe that which is false.² He argues that this epistemic virtue should be understood as any other moral virtue, one that expresses itself in a disposition to adopt practices that would bring about such beliefs. It is to be defended on moral grounds as any other virtue is to be defended.

We can combine this with Rosalind Hursthouse's virtue-based theory of right action. On this account, an act is right iff it is the act that a virtuous person would have performed in the circumstances.³ A virtuous person with the virtue of conscientiousness will seek to believe what is true and not believe what is false. To realize this virtue, such a person would have a reason to adopt those rules that will tend to produce true beliefs and avoid false beliefs.

However, that which the virtue aims at cannot be understood in terms of that which a good person would pursue. That would be circular. Take honesty, for example. If honesty were defined as that which a virtuous person would tell, there would be no accounting for the situations where the virtuous person would lie – for example, telling the Nazis that she does not know where the Jewish family that once lived

² Montmarquet, James (1987), "Epistemic Virtue", *Mind*, 96(384): 482–497.

³ Hursthouse, Rosalind (1999), *Virtue Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

nearby went, when that family is in her attic. If we defined honesty as that which a virtuous person would say, then this would be an honest statement, which it is not.

The principles of what counts as honest and the principles governing what a virtuous person would do are distinct. Honesty is just one of the things that the virtuous agent would pursue.

Such an agent would also tend to pursue true beliefs and avoid false beliefs. However, what counts as epistemically justified is no more dependent on what the agent should do than what counts as honest.

This suggests that epistemic justification remains distinct from moral justification, even though it remains something, like honesty, that the virtuous person would tend to value and pursue.

Part VII: Conclusion

Whether there is an ethics of belief is one question. Whether the rules of epistemic justification are related to the rules of moral justification is a different question.

The deontological crime of negligence supports the thesis that there is an ethics of belief. After all, negligence is a crime that attaches culpability to an agent based on what that agent *should have been aware of or should have known*. This suggests that what an agent could have been aware of or could have known is, in some sense, under the agent's control. It may not be under the agent's control directly, but few things that morality is concerned with are. We are held accountable for the things we bring about indirectly – sometimes for what we bring about intentionally, and sometimes for what we bring about unintentionally while we go through the steps to bring about other things intentionally. This includes, perhaps, the death of an innocent person. It sometimes includes that which we fail to notice or to know.

Morality does not assign a consistent value to having true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs. Rather, it assigns this moral value to beliefs based on their importance – based on the magnitude and certainty of wrongs that come from failure to be aware of a truth.

Given that having true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs has moral value, the next that arises is, “How do I go about having true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs?” This question is not answered morally.

I have not been able to show that the rules of epistemology themselves are moral rules; and I have given a reason to doubt that they are. Once the rules for determining true belief from false belief are known, morality provides an importance to following them – though perhaps not always. It makes sense to praise those who follow the rules and condemn those who do not – and to do so according to how important the beliefs are – their contribution to realizing goods and avoiding evils. Failure to follow the rules with respect to trivial beliefs is not worth the effort of criticism; failure to do so when a life is at stake brings charges of reckless endangerment or negligent homicide.

However, the fact that morality might demand that I owe my co-worker \$20 does not imply that moral principles determine the meaning of “\$20”. And the fact that morality may demand that I follow epistemic principles in certain cases does not imply that morality determines the content of those principles.

