We Have no Positive Epistemic Duties

Mark Nelson

Westmont College

Long Abstract

In ethics, it commonly supposed that we have both positive duties and negative duties, things we ought to do and things we ought not to do. Given the many parallels between ethics and epistemology (e.g., parallel meta-frameworks;[1] parallel normative theories;[2] and parallel accounts of structure[3]) we might suppose that the same is true in epistemology, and that we have both positive *epistemic* duties and negative *epistemic* duties.

Even so, I argue that we have negative epistemic duties, but no positive ones. There are things that we ought not to believe, but there is nothing that we ought to believe, on purely epistemic grounds. In particular, the idea that we have *positive* epistemic duties seems demanding and unrealistic. It is natural to think of evidence, e.g., as giving us reason to believe something, but do I really have a *duty* to believe *everything* for which I have evidence?

Such problems do not arise if we adopt what I shall call a "permissive" approach to normative epistemic theory. According to this approach, first-order normative epistemic principles concern what we are permitted to believe, given our epistemic circumstances – not what we are obligated to believe.

To illustrate: given the appearance of some distinctive dark, winged shapes, moving across my visual field, what should I believe? That visual evidence may license me to believe propositions such as:

1. There are things moving through the air in front of me.
2. There are birds flying in front of me.
3. There are jackdaws flying in front of me.

Which of these propositions I *do* believe, given that visual evidence, will depend on, among other things: how my perceptual abilities have developed; the background information I happen to have, and my particular interests at that moment.

Given this same visual evidence, which propositions should I *not* believe? On the permissive view, the answer

---

[1] See, e.g., J. Dancy, 'Intuitionism and Metaepistemology', *Philosophical Studies*, 42, (1982).

[2] See, e.g., M. T. Nelson, 'On the "Lack of True Philosophic Spirit" in Aquinas: Commitment versus Tracking in Philosophic Method', *Philosophy*, 76 (2001).

[3] See, e.g., R. Audi, *The Architecture of Reason*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

is simple: other things being equal, I should believe nothing that is clearly incompatible with any beliefs that are on balance licensed for me. Which ones *should* I believe? Here the answer is not so simple, and will depend partly on my epistemic situation, but also on my needs and interests, etc. If I am interested in launching a model airplane without interference, perhaps I should form a belief such as (1). If I suffer from ornithophobia and am anxious to avoid birds, I should form belief (2). If I am an ornithologist conducting a species survey, I should form a belief such as (3), and so on. If, on the other hand, I am merely looking to hail a taxi, I need not form *any* of those beliefs.

This point holds for inferential beliefs as well: what conclusion (epistemically) ought I to draw if I believe '*p*' and 'if *p* then *q*'? It is impossible to say in advance. It may be '*q*', of course, but depending on my needs or interests it may equally be '*q* or *r*', or '*p*', or '*p* and *if p then q*' – or, if I am looking to hail a taxi, nothing at all. The premises licence all of these and more, they constrain me from believing anything incompatible with the licensed beliefs, but they require me to draw no conclusion on any topic that does not concern me.

This permissive approach is plausible in its own right and has some distinct advantages:

1. It is psychologically less demanding and more realistic than a theory with positive epistemic duties.
2. It allows for a sensible interpretation of the sceptical challenge and a sensible answer to that challenge.
3. It may even provide a solution to what Pascal Engel has recently called "The Logical Problem".[4]

Moreover, I defy anyone to find a counter-example to it: a single, non-trivial case where one epistemically *ought* to believe *p,* and where this 'ought' is grounded wholly in one's epistemic circumstances and not also in the aims, desires, moral duties, etc of the agent.

All of this highlights a major difference between ethics and epistemology: there is often something that I positively ought to *do*, given the totality of the morally relevant features of my circumstances, but there is never anything that I positively ought to *believe*, given the totality of the epistemically relevant features of those circumstances alone.

I consider and reply to several objections to my permissive approach, including:

1. "But we are subject to obligations concerning epistemological policies, and obligations concerning epistemological virtues and vices."
2. "This account distinguishes too sharply between our epistemic circumstances and our non-epistemic circumstances."
3. William Tolhurst's phenomenological objection: "when it seems to S that O is Φ, such

---

4   See P. Engel, 'The Logical Problem', *Philosophical Explorations,* vol. 8, 2005, pp. 21-38.

a seeming not only provides psychological and epistemic support for S's belief that O is Φbut it issues in a felt demand for S actually to believe that O is Φ".[5]

4. "One normally withholds from believing *p* only when one judges one's evidence insufficient for justification, but *ex hypothesi* our cases are ones where the circumstances provide sufficient justification for belief in *p*."

I also ask why, if ethics and epistemology are otherwise so similar, they are *dis*similar at this particular point. I consider and reject the following possible explanations:

1. "We have direct, volitional control over our actions, but we do not have direct, volitional control over our beliefs."
2. "Bernard Williams's discussion of conflicts of duty, belief and desire shows that action is inescapable in a way that belief is not."[6]
3. "The act/omission distinction seems clearer in epistemology than in ethics."
4. "Ethical reasons are overriding, but epistemic reasons are not similarly over-riding."

Some are false, others are irrelevant and still others merely repeat the *explanandum*. A better explanation starts from something that I call the "infinite justificational fecundity" of evidence: the fact that every single bit of evidence, whether experiential or propositional, potentially epistemically justifies an infinitely large array of different beliefs. I consider two different versions of the fecundity explanation, assess them for plausibility, and show how they shed light on our initial attempts at an explanation.

[5] W. Tolhurst, 'Seemings', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 3, 1998, pp. 293-302.
[6] B. Williams, 'Ethical Consistency', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. 39, 1965.