

We Have No Positive Epistemic Duties

Mark T. Nelson

Introduction

The General Confession in the *Book of Common Prayer* states, ‘We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done.’ According to it, there are both positive duties and negative duties, things we ought to do and things we ought not to do. As a claim about ethics, this is hard to deny. Not everyone thinks that we have duties, of course—moral nihilists and error theorists do not—but most people who think that we have any duties at all also think that we have both positive and negative duties.

Does the same hold true in epistemology? Are there things that we ought to believe and things that we ought *not* to believe? Not everyone thinks that we have epistemic duties—epistemic nihilists or error theorists, for example, do not (e.g. Black 1990). But supposing we accept the idea of epistemic duties generally, does it follow that we should accept the idea of both positive and negative epistemic duties? I think not. I think that we have negative epistemic duties, but no positive epistemic duties. There are things that we ought not to believe, but there is nothing that we ought to believe, on purely epistemic grounds. Or so I shall argue.

Why would anyone have thought that there *were* positive epistemic duties? In fact, the idea is a natural one, given the many parallels between ethics and epistemology generally. Besides the fact that both disciplines appear to be broadly normative or evaluative, we can observe: *parallel meta-frameworks* for ethics and epistemology, with non-cognitivist,

reductionist, non-naturalist and eliminativist accounts of discourse on both sides (e.g. Dancy 1982); *parallel normative theories* of epistemology and ethics, with consequentialist, deontological, and virtue theories on both sides (e.g. Nelson 2001); and *parallel accounts of structure*, foundationalist and coherentist, in ethics as well as in epistemology (e.g. Audi 2001). We might, therefore, suppose that whatever is true in ethics, about action, is also true, *mutatis mutandis*, in epistemology, about belief.

Moreover, the inner workings of particular normative epistemic theories, when developed to parallel particular normative ethical theories, might suggest positive duties as well. For example, teleological ethical theories, especially monistic ones such as classical utilitarianism, countenance both positive duties and negative duties, and this follows directly from their structures. Typically, these theories identify some good (such as pleasure) as primary. They then understand rightness as permissibility, and define permissibility in terms of some appropriate response to good. If the good is identified as a subjective, psychological state such as the experience of pleasure, then the appropriate response will typically be causal production of that subjective state. On maximizing versions of these theories, the appropriate response is causal production of the most, or the most intense, such states as possible. From this, the twin conclusions follow: we ought to do whatever would maximize the good and we ought not to do anything that would fail to maximize the good.

We might, therefore, expect teleological epistemic theories, especially monistic ones, to countenance both positive epistemic duties and negative epistemic duties. These theories identify some epistemic good (such as truth) as primary. They then understand epistemic rightness as permissibility, and define epistemic permissibility in terms of some appropriate response to truth. Since the good of truth is relevantly different from a subjective state such as pleasure, and is not the sort of thing that can be produced, the appropriate response to it

will not be causal production, but a sort of ‘embracing’, which in this case amounts to believing. On maximizing versions of these theories, the appropriate response will be the embracing of as much good as possible. Laurence Bonjour, in an earlier incarnation, came close to such a view when he stated:

The distinguishing characteristic of epistemic justification is thus its essential or internal relationship to the cognitive goal of truth. It follows that one’s cognitive endeavours are epistemically justified only if and to the extent that they are aimed at this goal, which means very roughly that *one accepts all and only beliefs which one has good reason to think are true*. (Bonjour 1985, p. 8, my emphasis)

This in turn yields both positive and negative epistemic duties. If we ought, epistemically, to accept all and only beliefs that we have good reason to think are true, then (assuming there *are* things that we have good reason to think are true and other things that we lack good reason to think are true) there are things that we ought to believe and things that we ought not to believe.

Of course, utilitarianism faces some well-known problems, so if ethics and epistemology are truly parallel, we might expect the epistemic equivalent of utilitarianism to have similar problems. For this reason, we may wish to consider deontological conceptions of ethics and epistemology as well. One particularly attractive deontological approach to ethics is W.D. Ross’s theory of obligation, from chapter two of *The Right and the Good* (1930). According to this view, an irreducible plurality of kinds or sources of duty exists; when we are subject to some particular duty, this is always in virtue of some feature of our moral circumstances; such circumstances give rise to prima facie duties or *pro tanto* obligations,

which may be defeated or overridden by other, weightier duties, which themselves are generated by features of our circumstances.

If we like this Rossian moral theory, we might also like a Rossian epistemic theory, according to which an irreducible plurality of kinds or sources of justification exists, such as being a delivery of sense perception or induction or memory or rational introspection. When a particular belief is justified, this is always in virtue of some feature of our epistemic circumstances; such circumstances give rise to *prima facie* or *pro tanto* justification, which may be defeated or overridden by other, more justified beliefs, which themselves are justified in virtue of some features of those circumstances.¹

According to Ross's moral theory, there are things that I ought to do in virtue of my moral circumstances and things that I ought not to do. If I have broken your window, I have a *prima facie* duty to repair it; if I am in a position to harm you, I have a *prima facie* duty not to do so. That is, we are subject to both positive and negative moral duties. By the same token, we might suppose that, according to a Rossian epistemic theory, we are subject to both positive epistemic duties and negative epistemic duties: that there are things that I ought to believe, given my circumstances, as well as things that I ought not to believe. On both the teleological and deontological epistemic theories, then, we might expect to find positive epistemic duties.

But do we have corresponding positive and negative duties in epistemology? Are there things that we *must* believe and things that we *must not* believe? In particular, the idea that we have *positive* epistemic duties seems demanding and unrealistic. It is natural to think of evidence as giving us reason to believe something, but do I really have a *duty* to believe

¹ This sort of theory has been developed in Audi 2001 and sketched in Nelson 2002. A rather different version may be found in Alston 1993.

everything for which I have evidence? I have perceptual evidence, for example, for an enormous number of beliefs, and I shall be very busy indeed if I have to believe all of them!

2. A Permissive Epistemic Theory

Such worries 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. (Our epistemic circumstances are, roughly, those aspects of our circumstances that count in favour of the truth or falsity, probability or improbability, of certain propositions.) Of course, permission and obligation are interdefinable, so we cannot get rid of obligation simply by restricting ourselves to talk about permission, as the following schema reveals:

(‘Pa’ means ‘It is permissible to do A’, ‘ $\neg O \neg a$ ’ means ‘It is *not* the case that it is obligatory *not* to do A’, and so on.)

$$(1) Pa = \neg O \neg a$$

$$(2) Oa = \neg P \neg a$$

$$(3) \neg Pa = O \neg a$$

$$(4) \neg Oa = P \neg a$$

My proposal therefore is to restrict epistemic duties to categories (1) and (3). Since (1) does not positively involve a duty at all, our only genuine duties will belong to category (3), i.e., negative duties.² The core idea of the permissive theory is this: our believings are

² If calling such a theory ‘permissive’ misleadingly suggests laxer standards of justification or knowledge, we could call it a ‘theory of negative epistemic obligations’.

licensed and constrained by features of our epistemic situation. Let us consider licensing and constraining in turn.

2.1 Licensing

Given the appearance of some distinctive dark, winged shapes, moving across my visual field, what should I believe? That visual evidence, joined with other factors, 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
- (4) At least three jackdaws exist

Which of these propositions I *do* believe, given that visual evidence, will depend on, among other things: how my perceptual abilities have developed (e.g have I learned to discriminate different kinds of bird on the wing?); the background information I happen to have (e.g do I know what a jackdaw is?); and my particular interests at that moment (e.g what do I want to know or do *now*?)

2.2 Constraining

Given this same visual evidence, which propositions should I *not* believe? On the permissive view, the answer is simple: other things being equal, I should believe nothing that is clearly incompatible with any beliefs that are on balance licensed for me.

Out of the set of licensed beliefs, 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. If I am interested in launching a model airplane without interference, perhaps I should form a belief such as (1) 'There are *things moving through the air* in front of me'. If I suffer from ornithophobia and am anxious to avoid birds, I should form belief (2) 'There are *birds* flying in front of me'. If I am an ornithologist conducting a species survey, I should

form a belief such as (3) ‘There are *jackdaws* flying in front of me’, and so on. If, on the other hand, I am merely looking to hail a taxi, I need not form *any* of those beliefs. I do nothing wrong, epistemically speaking, if I *do* form such beliefs, but, equally, I do nothing wrong if I do not.

The above example concerns perceptual beliefs, but the general point applies to inferential beliefs as well: what conclusion (epistemically) ought I to draw if I believe ‘*p*’ and ‘if *p* then *q*’ (and grasp the relevant logical rules, etc)? 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 premisses license 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.

3.3 Interim Summary

I have argued that our epistemic situations (including the experiential and propositional evidence available to us) set limits to what we are epistemically *permitted* to believe, while other, non-epistemic considerations determine, within those limits, what we *should* believe. These other considerations may include ‘devices and desires of our own hearts’, such as needs, interests, and preferences, but also moral duties.³ We might even suppose that negative epistemic duties derive solely from epistemic rationality, while positive epistemic ‘duties’ (such as they are) derive from epistemic rationality *plus* some other source of normativity, such as morality or instrumental rationality.⁴ This complication of the bases of

³ I may have an obligation to believe *p*, if believing *p* is a necessary condition of doing A, which I am morally obliged to do. In that case, my obligation to believe *p* is a moral one and not an epistemic one, since it could obtain even when the epistemic factors did not point to the truth of *p*.

⁴ These are just examples of possible sources; there may be others.

epistemic normativity may seem like a disadvantage, but the permissive approach also has some advantages.

For one thing, as noted, it is psychologically less demanding and more realistic than a theory with positive epistemic duties. For another, it allows for a sensible interpretation of the sceptical challenge and a sensible answer to that challenge. The challenge is to show that one is epistemically justified (hence, permitted) to believe some non-trivial proposition, *p*; the proper response consists in showing that it is ‘all right’ for one to believe *p* in one’s particular circumstances. It should *not* consist in trying to find some proposition that is epistemically *obligatory* either for oneself or for the sceptic.⁵

I claim that permissivism is attractive because of the advantages just sketched. If I were provocative, I would go further, and defy anyone to find a counter-example to it: a single, non-trivial case where one epistemically *ought* to believe *p* (i.e., do more than merely

⁵ It may even provide a solution to what Pascal Engel (2005) has called ‘The Logical Problem’. According to Engel, these three propositions form an inconsistent triad:

- (1’) Logical judgements (as to whether an inference is valid) are true and express beliefs about logical facts (‘logical cognitivism’)
- (2’) If *S* recognizes that an inference is valid, then *ceteris paribus* she should be moved to infer accordingly (‘logical internalism’)
- (3’) What moves a subject in such a case must be a psychological state (‘psychological constraint’)

While these propositions are all plausible, the problem, says Engel, is that any two of them appear to entail the denial of the third. But if this is a problem, then permissivism shows us a simple solution, by denying (2’) and endorsing the logical or epistemic equivalent of externalism: to judge that an inference is valid is not necessarily to be motivated to infer accordingly, even *ceteris paribus*. It might be thought that the permissivist move can easily be blocked by changing (2’) to (2’), ‘If *S* recognizes that an inference is *invalid*, then *ceteris paribus* she should be *inhibited* from inferring accordingly’. But in that case, we would have to change (3’) to (3’’) ‘What *inhibits* a subject in such a case must be a psychological state’—but this is no longer obviously true, since in such cases it is the absence of the appearance of validity, i.e. *the absence of a psychological state*, that may inhibit *S* from inferring accordingly. And the mere absence of a psychological state is not a psychological state, any more than the absence of a jackdaw is a kind of jackdaw. Logical facts merely establish the range of permissible inferences, but which inferences we actually make and which beliefs we form will, *pace* Engel, be at least partly motivated by such things as desires or interests. In structuring the problem this way, Engel intentionally echoes Michael Smith 1994, though Engel later backs away from this comparison with Smith, because he notes that Smith’s moral problem depends on the Humean Theory of Motivation (according to which an action’s motivation must include a desire), but there seems to be no equivalent ‘Humean Theory of Logical Motivation’. According to Engel, such a position would have to hold that ‘one of the determinants of the act of inferring is a desire, which is, on the face of it, utterly implausible’ (Engel 2005, p. 6). According to permissivism, however, this is not only plausible, but almost always true!

withhold regarding *not-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. The upshot of this is to highlight a crucial difference between ethics and epistemology, or at least between the theory of obligation and epistemic theory: 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.

3. Objections and Replies

Not everyone will agree with this permissivism, of course, so in this section I consider and reply to some of the more serious objections to it.

Objection 1. Some will find my provocative challenge irresistible, and will immediately set about looking for counter-examples to my claim that we have no positive epistemic duties. They may cite obligations concerning epistemological policies, such as, ‘You ought to gather evidence and examine it before forming beliefs’, ‘You ought to proportion belief to the evidence’, or ‘If you discover that your beliefs are logically inconsistent, you ought to give up at least one of them.’ Or they may cite obligations concerning epistemological virtues and vices, such as ‘You ought to cultivate open-mindedness regarding evidence, and work to overcome tendencies to wishful thinking.’⁶

Reply to (1): It is doubtful that such epistemological policies concern *positive* epistemic obligations at all. Most are better construed as negative policies: ‘Do not form beliefs in advance of the evidence!’, ‘Do not believe things more strongly than the evidence warrants!’, or ‘Do not hold inconsistent beliefs!’ These obligations, if they *are* obligations, could be satisfied by not forming any beliefs at all, by *not* doing things, doxastically

⁶ Matthew Kieran, Aaron Meskin and Chris Hoeckley raised these objections to me.

speaking, as much as by doing them. This response may not suffice for the epistemological virtues counter-examples, however, as those obligations require us to *do* certain things. But even if the duty to try to overcome the vice of wishful thinking requires us to do certain things, those requirements will primarily concern *doings* and not '*believings*'. It may require us to engage in certain actions (e.g. scrutinizing the evidence for *p*, probing motives we may have for wanting *p* to be true, considering ways in which *p* could still be false for all we know, etc), but it does not require us to believe anything. In particular, it does not require us to add any beliefs or to retain any already-held beliefs. We can see this clearly if we consider how such obligations concerning virtues might fit into one of our sample epistemic theories and the ethical theory on which it was modelled, namely Ross's theory of obligation.

Ross's theory of obligation does not itself include an obligation to acquire moral virtues.⁷ There is a simple reason for this: it is only a theory of obligation, and not a complete ethical theory. We can fit a theory of virtue into Ross's overall theory, perhaps as part of the theory of value (i.e., an account of what makes for good human agents) or perhaps as second-order machinery (i.e., an account of the habits that will enable us more readily to fulfil our first-order moral obligations). Either way, such virtues and the demand to acquire them, will themselves not be first-order obligations. Moreover, on Ross's view, first-order obligations concern neither general policies nor particular act-tokens, but general act-types.⁸ Some of these obligations will be negative (not to perform acts of certain types); others will be positive (to perform acts of certain types). If I have a positive obligation to repay you five pounds, the content of my obligation is the act-type of *giving you five pounds*. My actual

⁷ Actually, this is not quite right. Ross's general principles of duty include a duty of self-improvement, which he describes as a duty 'to improve our own condition in respect of virtue or of intelligence.' Ross 1930, p. 21. I am inclined to think, however, that he should not have considered it a duty. I agree with Bernard Williams that Ross here falls into the mistake of 'trying to make everything into an obligation'. See Williams 1985, p. 176, ff.

⁸ I owe this clarification to Andrew McGonigal.

giving of the five pounds will necessarily be a particular act-token (e.g giving you *this* bank note at *this* place and time via *this* movement of my *left* hand), but any number of different act-tokens would have satisfied my obligation equally well.

By analogy, a Rossian epistemic theory would not itself include any obligations to acquire epistemic virtues. It is, of course, compatible with a theory of epistemic virtues, understood either as part of the theory of value (e.g an account of what makes for good human knowers), or as second-order machinery (e.g an account of the habits that will enable us more readily to fulfil our first-order epistemic obligations). Either way, intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness and vigilance against wishful thinking are not themselves first-order epistemic obligations which, on a Rossian account, concern certain belief types. To pursue the analogy with actions, we might say that the epistemic equivalent of performing an action is *adding a new belief*.⁹ In denying that we have any positive epistemic obligations, I am denying only that there is ever a particular belief that I ought to add, merely in virtue of my epistemic circumstances.

This sheds light on one of the previous counter-examples: in cases where my circumstances include my discovery that I believe both *p* and *not-p*, it is not the case that there is one specific ‘epistemic act-type’ I must perform. Even if I have an epistemic obligation to make some change in my doxastic set—and this is not obvious—it does not follow that there is a unique member of the offending pair that I must drop, let alone a unique, new belief that I must add.

Objection 2. It might be objected that my account distinguishes too sharply between our epistemic circumstances and our non-epistemic circumstances, between those things that we ought to believe simply in virtue of (say) the evidence and those things that we ought to

⁹ I owe this way of putting the idea to Roger White.

believe given some further interest, desire, or goal. ‘In reality’, this objector might observe, ‘the boundaries are blurred. Our interests and desires often include epistemic interests and epistemic desires. Sometimes, we want to know things for their own sake; we want to discover truths about a good many things, where these wants apparently are not grounded in any moral or practical interests or goals.’¹⁰

Reply to (2): I agree that some people have such desires and interests. Indeed, for the sake of argument, I shall grant that *all* normal people have them. I shall even grant that there are intrinsically interesting propositions such that any normal person will have an interest in knowing whether they are true, and not simply in virtue of any *further* moral or practical interest. Perhaps a normal person will want to know, for example, about the nature of reality or the truth about their own history and relationships, even where this satisfies no important practical interests—or, indeed, where this would frustrate such interests. All of that may be true, but it does not affect my argument, because such ‘purely epistemic’ desires and interests are still desires and interests. My thesis is that there is nothing we positively ought to believe simply in virtue of our epistemic circumstances, and nothing that we ‘ought’ to believe at all except given some further interest, desire, duty or such like. Perhaps another comparison with ethics will help here: in most deontological systems, such as Kant’s or Ross’s, both positive and negative duties are conceived of as categorical and not hypothetical. That is, there are some things we must do and other things we must not do, regardless of whatever desires or interests we may happen to have. In permissivist epistemology, however, the only ‘categorical imperatives’ concern negative epistemic duties, that is, what we must not believe, given the evidence. Any ‘positive imperatives’, that we ought to believe certain

¹⁰ An anonymous referee for this journal pressed this objection.

things given the evidence, will be ‘hypothetical imperatives’, conditional on some desire, interest, need or concrete moral duty.

Objection 3. Still others may reject permissivism for reasons other than putative counter-examples. William Tolhurst (1998), for example, rejects it partly on phenomenological grounds. In his perceptive discussion of ‘seemings’, Tolhurst claims that when it seems to S that O is Φ , such a seeming not only provides psychological and epistemic support for S’s belief that O is Φ , but it issues in a felt demand for S actually to believe that O is Φ . Tolhurst argues further that this demand is grounded in ‘felt veridicality’, ‘the feel of a state whose content reveals how things really are’ (Tolhurst 1998, p. 299). Thus, he observes, ‘Insofar as it seems to Bert that Ernie is angry, Bert feels believing Ernie is angry *to be required of him*; he feels believing this to be a fitting or proper response to his situation’ (Tolhurst 1998, p. 297, my emphasis).

Reply to (3): Tolhurst’s observation here is correct, but possibly misleading. He has correctly noticed that there is normative pressure here, and one way to characterize this normativity is to say that a certain believing is ‘a fitting response’. ‘Fitting response’, however, is a weaker notion than ‘required response’, and may mean nothing more than ‘a response that is permitted but not required’, unlike other responses that are *not* permitted. Moreover, this phenomenology may be accounted for in terms of the ‘epistemic hypothetical imperative’ described earlier: In Tolhurst’s example, if Bert cares whether Ernie is angry—and it is natural for friends to care about such things—Bert ought to believe ‘Ernie is angry’, because that is one of the beliefs permitted for Ernie by the way things seem in those circumstances, while ‘Ernie is not angry’ is ruled out. If, on the other hand, Bert and Ernie do not know each other, and Bert is only peripherally aware of Ernie gesticulating angrily across the street while he, Bert, is trying to hail a taxi, then our feeling that Bert ought to believe

‘Ernie is angry’ tends to evaporate. Once again, however, this grounds the positive obligation to believe p in some interest, desire or other non-epistemic circumstance of the knower.¹¹

Objection 4. Still others may reject permissivism on the grounds that one normally withholds from believing p only when one judges one’s evidence insufficient for justification, but our cases are ones where the circumstances provide sufficient justification for belief in p . We can approach this objection by asking, ‘What would be wrong with someone who did not form a belief that p , given the evidence available in those circumstances?’ The permissivist answer is, ‘Nothing, or at least nothing *epistemic*.’ This critic, on the other hand, holds that such a person somehow gets her epistemology wrong by, say, tacitly denying a correct principle of justification. In withholding belief that p , given that evidence (which is *ex hypothesi* sufficient evidence for p), they are in effect saying ‘That evidence is not good enough!’, when it *is* good enough.

Reply to (4): If someone did in such a case refuse to believe p on the grounds that the evidence was inadequate, they would be making an epistemic mistake, but in my example they are doing no such thing. In my example, the knower fails to conclude p , not because she judges the evidence inadequate, but simply because she is not interested to know whether p or *not-p*. Moreover, it would be absurd to reply that one ought to believe everything that one is entitled to believe, given the evidence. This reply is far too strong to be plausible, as any bit of evidence, sensory or propositional, could justify an infinitely large set of beliefs. Is there really something wrong with me if I fail to believe them *all*?

4. Explanations?

Moral theory and epistemic theory run closely parallel, but this parallel breaks down on at least one important point: there are positive obligations in ethics but not in

¹¹ I am indebted to the editor for pressing me to clarify this point.

epistemology.¹² I have not explained why the parallel breaks down there, but it would be nice to have an explanation, if ethics and epistemology are otherwise so similar.

Unfortunately, one tempting explanation does not even get off the ground: namely, the non-voluntary nature of belief. On this view, this difference between ethics and epistemology follows directly from an obvious difference between their subject matters: ‘Ethics is about action and epistemology is about belief. Actions are, well, *actions*, and beliefs are not. We have direct, volitional control over our actions, but we do not have direct control over our beliefs, so it should be no surprise that normative notions such as “obligation” simply do not apply in matters epistemic.’ Even if beliefs are largely non-voluntary, however—and this need not be accepted without qualification—this cannot be the explanation we want, for two reasons. First, even if beliefs are not directly voluntary, they are nevertheless subject to normative evaluation generally, as, for example, rational or irrational, silly or wise, credulous or cautious. Second, in the present argumentative context, we cannot accept an explanation that would rule out all epistemic obligations whatsoever, because we have already admitted that we have some epistemic obligations, namely negative ones. We will have to look elsewhere, and, though a complete answer would take us beyond the scope of this paper, I shall sketch some possibilities .

1. One reason we should not expect positive epistemic obligations is a fact that Bernard Williams noticed over forty years ago. In his discussion of conflicts, Williams (1965) pointed out that we can avoid conflicts of desire by cultivating indifference to the passions, and we can avoid conflicts of belief by cultivating *ataraxia*, but we cannot avoid

¹² I do not say this is the only difference between the two domains, or the most important one. Ernest Sosa (2007), e.g has recently suggested another: ‘Unlike ethics, epistemology repels arbitrariness. Facing a choice between bringing it about that *p* and bringing it about that *not-p*, you may have no sufficient reason to prefer either over the other, in which case you might well be free to take your pick. That's how it is for practical choices or actions. By contrast, with no more reason for *believing* either a proposition or its negation in preference to the other, you are definitely not free to proceed either way. Here you *must* withhold, if you are to proceed reasonably at all, *epistemically*.’

conflicts of duty by cultivating indifference to morals, by simply ‘not going in for’ morality. Belief is somehow optional or escapable in a way that ethical action is not.

2. Another reason is that the act/omission distinction seems clearer in epistemology than in ethics. According to most ethical theories, whether Kantian, Rossian or utilitarian, we have negative duties (‘Do not do A!’) and positive duties (‘Do B!’), and we are morally blameworthy for our not-doings as much as for our doings, for our omissions as much as for our acts. Indeed, such bare omissions often seem to be a kind of act. According to permissivist epistemology, on the other hand, we have negative duties (‘Do not believe *p*, which is not permitted by your epistemic circumstances!’) but not positive ones. It is hard to see ourselves as epistemically blameworthy for our not-believings as much as for our believings, because not-believing is not necessarily a kind of belief.¹³

3. Another possible explanation of the difference concerns overridingness. In ethics, as noted, often there is something that one ought to do, in virtue of the totality of ethically relevant features of one’s circumstances. But in epistemology, there is nothing one ought to believe in virtue of the totality of epistemically relevant features of those circumstances. If there *is* anything that one ought to believe, this will be determined by something other than epistemic reasons *per se*, such as desires or interests. This suggests that reasons operate differently in the two spheres, or relate to each other differently, and that the subject’s personal interests play a role in epistemology that they do not play in ethics. We might express this point by saying that ethical reasons are overriding, or that overriding reasons just *are* ethical reasons. Purely epistemic reasons on the other hand, do not seem to be similarly overriding.

¹³ I mean ‘omitting to believe’, of course, rather than ‘disbelieving’.

One may suspect, however, that these are not explanations of the difference so much as further descriptions of it. *Why* is belief optional in a way that ethical action is not? *Why* is the act/omission distinction clearer in epistemology than in ethics? *Why* are ethical reasons, but not epistemic reasons, overriding? These are not the *explanans*, but just different facets of the *explanandum*. A good explanation will have to go deeper.

5. A Deeper Explanation

The best explanation I can give starts from something we have already observed in passing: what we might 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. By itself, this may not appear terribly significant. When combined with positive epistemic duties, however, it takes on a different appearance, because together they entail the duty to believe everything that is justified for us in our epistemic circumstances. After all, to admit positive epistemic duties is to admit that, for any proposition, p , I ought to respond appropriately to p , given the epistemically relevant features of my circumstances. The epistemically relevant features of my circumstances are, broadly speaking, evidential: those aspects of my circumstances that tend to make p justified or unjustified for me. The epistemically appropriate response to p when it is not justified for me is withholding; the epistemically appropriate response to p when it is justified for me is belief or acceptance. To respond otherwise would be to discriminate on epistemically arbitrary grounds. In sum, the positive epistemic duties thesis implies that I ought to add every propositional belief that the evidence epistemically justifies for me; the fecundity thesis says that the evidence justifies infinitely many propositions; together, they entail that I ought to add infinitely many beliefs.

What would be wrong with that? One possible answer is that it would be too demanding, in the same way that simple act-utilitarianism is sometimes thought too demanding: that is, the unqualified requirement always to maximize utility swamps all other practical considerations and demands that we sacrifice the personal projects and commitments that make life worth living.¹⁴ I doubt, however, that this is the best way to understand our worry here. First, as some utilitarians like to point out, the mere fact that a standard is demanding does not necessarily make it false. Second, and more importantly, our worry about positive epistemic duties is not merely that they would be difficult to satisfy. That makes it sound as if it would be onerous, but humanly possible, to add so many beliefs. That this is not the real worry becomes clearer if we consider the analogous ethical point.

Suppose I agree with the utilitarian that I have a duty to maximize utility. Does it follow that I have a duty to produce a large positive net amount of utility? Of course not. I may be so situated in life that the best I can do is to produce some small net gain. If, on the other hand, I am a person of great power, resources, and good fortune, I may be able to produce a lot of net utility—in which case I have a duty to do so. Might I then have a duty to produce an *infinite* amount of utility? Even the most enthusiastic utilitarian should say ‘No’, for the reason that we are not obliged to do the truly impossible, and (given reasonable assumptions about the finite length of the causal future and the finite utility value of any individual events or states of affairs I can cause), it is impossible for any human being to produce an infinite amount of utility.¹⁵ By parity of reasoning, we might suppose that we cannot have a duty to add an infinite number of beliefs at any given moment, because (given similarly reasonable assumptions about our limited psychological capacities) this is not

¹⁴ I am indebted to the editor of this journal for raising this point.

¹⁵ Let us ignore ‘accidentally impossible duties’, such as when, through careless over-booking, I schedule two different appointments for one time. These can be handled as defeasible *prima facie* duties and anyway seem relevantly different from the epistemological case we are considering.

humanly possible, and we do not have a duty to do the impossible. Hence, we have no positive epistemic duties.

It may be objected that this is an odd explanation to offer here, insofar as it trades on a similarity between epistemology and ethics, when we are trying to explain a dissimilarity between them.¹⁶ Odd or no, it may nevertheless be correct, and anyway it is not very odd, because I am not trying to explain how epistemology and ethics are different overall, but only how they are different on a particular point. Moreover, the explanation just offered, in terms of the infinite justificational fecundity of evidence, need not be interpreted primarily as analogous to an ethical point about excessive demandingness or “ought” implies “can”. A rather different interpretation may be possible, one that focuses on the fact that the fecundity of evidence does not over-determine our duties so much as it under-determines our beliefs. This can be illustrated by adapting a thought experiment we have already considered.

Suppose I am in a scenic park, looking through one of those large, stationary coin-operated telescopes. I cannot turn the telescope much at all, so I can really only look in one direction. I can, however, focus the telescope on any distance I choose, though I can only focus it on one distance at a time, and objects outside that distance will be blurry or at least less vivid. Suppose also that the area around the telescope is a normal perceptual environment (no fake barns, etc) and that I have normal perceptual and recognitional capacities (no hallucinations, etc). Suppose further that the telescope is an instrument of excellent quality and I know how to use it properly. The upshot of all this is that, when I look through the telescope, I am presented with a rich field of good perceptual data that constitute excellent evidence for a wide range of perceptual beliefs. Suppose, finally, that I am a perfectly conscientious believer: not epistemically superhuman, but the sort of person who

¹⁶ This point was pressed forcefully by the editor of this journal.

always ‘does the right thing’ with any evidence he or she happens to have. Suppose all this is true. Can you predict which particular, occurrent perceptual belief(s) I am having or adding *now*? Will I be adding the belief that ‘In the foreground, a man (Ernie) is arguing angrily with someone’? Or ‘In the middle distance, some jackdaws are flying from left to right’? Or ‘In the distance, some children are launching a model airplane’? Or ‘In the far distance, at the edge of the park, some taxis are waiting in a taxi rank’?

If you know that I believe everything that I ought to believe given the evidence available in my epistemic circumstances, and you know that all of the above beliefs are justified by the available evidence, then you ought to be able to predict that I believe them all—but in fact you cannot.

It may be objected that, of course, you cannot predict which particular perceptual beliefs I am having until you know on which distance I am focusing the telescope, and this is not fixed by purely epistemic facts about my evidential field and my status as a conscientious believer. That is, even if you know the whole set of beliefs that *would* be justified for me in these epistemic circumstances and you know that I believe everything that I am justified in believing, you cannot predict what I believe until you fix the degree of resolution of my telescope.¹⁷ But even if you learn that my telescope is focused on the middle distance, you still cannot predict which particular perceptual beliefs I am having out of the following set:

- (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
- (4) At least three jackdaws exist

¹⁷ The language of ‘degree of resolution’ was suggested to me by David Vander Laan.

The fecundity thesis implies that all these beliefs are equally well supported by the evidence available at that particular focal distance, but we still cannot predict which ones a conscientious believer believes. This is because, in addition to degrees of ordinary optical resolution, our beliefs are subject also to something like degrees of ‘conceptual resolution’. The precise degree of resolution is not fixed by purely epistemic factors, so when it *does* get fixed, it must be fixed by non-epistemic factors, such as interests, needs, desires and so on.¹⁸ This points up a curious difference between the two versions of the fecundity explanation we have considered: the first version claims that the fecundity of evidence gives us too many things to believe; the second version claims, in some sense, that it gives us too few!

If either one of these is correct—both may be, since they are not competitors—and evidence is fecund in this way, then we have an explanation of why there are no positive duties in epistemology. This, however, is not yet a full explanation of why there are positive duties in ethics but not in epistemology. Is it because there is no analogue of this sort of fecundity in ethics? Actually, there is an analogue of fecundity in ethics, in which particular aspects of our moral circumstances favour a potentially infinite number of actions. We can find it, for example, in an unqualified duty to produce utility or an unqualified Rossian duty of beneficence. There are, of course, indefinitely many ways I might produce utility *now*: send a cheque for £10 to Oxfam, send a cheque for £10.01 to Oxfam, send a cheque for £10.02 to Oxfam, and so on; eat a biscuit, eat an apple, eat an orange, and so on; phone my father, phone my wife, phone my brother, and so on; read a novel, read a newspaper, read a

¹⁸ Audi makes a related point when he observes: ‘Nature seems to incline us to form no more complex attitudes than the situation requires, and to build the more complex from the less so. [B]elieving ... is in a sense underdetermined by experience. When I see a tree-lined field before me as I step out on to a friend’s deck, I do not normally form all the beliefs I could—about the height of the trees, for instance, or their distance from me’ (Audi 2001, p. 92).

magazine, and so on ... and so on, *ad infinitum*. I simply cannot do *all* those things now, and the unqualified duty gives me no way to select between them.

In ethics, the problem is easily solved by qualifying our duties with a maximizing condition: ‘Choose an action that *maximizes* utility!’ or (if a Rossian) ‘Choose the action that *best* satisfies one’s prima facie duties in those circumstances!’¹⁹ The corresponding move will not work in epistemology, however. The corresponding move would be to add whichever beliefs are most justified in one’s epistemic circumstances, but, as we have seen, the same bit of evidence justifies an infinitely large set of beliefs equally well, so no one belief (or small set of beliefs) *is* most justified in one’s circumstances. Some further principle of selection is required, and since purely epistemic factors do not provide it, it must arise from non-epistemic factors, such as interests, preferences, needs, and inclinations, or possibly even moral obligations. Moreover, where these non-epistemic factors are best characterized as ‘interests’, it seems that in epistemology, unlike in ethics, only the interests of the agent or knower are relevant.²⁰ How could *your* epistemic interests give *me* a reason to add a particular belief to my doxastic set, except where I happen to share your interests, or where your interests create a moral or instrumental (but not purely epistemic) reason for me to believe? This goes a long way towards explaining why belief, but not ethical action, is optional; why the act/omission distinction is clearer in epistemology than in ethics; why epistemic ‘obligations’, unlike ethical obligations, are not over-riding; and, most importantly, why there are positive, categorical duties in ethics, but not in epistemology.

¹⁹ As Ross puts it, ‘What I have to do is study the situation as fully as I can until I form the considered opinion ... that in the circumstances *one of them is more incumbent than any other*; then I am bound to think that to do this prima facie duty is my duty *sans phrase* in this situation’ (Ross 1930, p.19, emphasis mine).

²⁰ I am taking it for granted that in ethics other persons’ interests are relevant, and *can* create positive as well as negative duties for me. That is, this account is not neutral with respect to ethical egoism, but that should not be surprising, given the non-egoist ethical theories I took as my models.

In any case, this is as close as I can come to an explanation for now, but even without an explanation, the permissive epistemic theory I have outlined here fits the facts, solves some problems and avoids others.²¹

Department of Philosophy

MARK T. NELSON

Westmont College

Santa Barbara, CA 93108-1099

USA

manelson@westmont.edu

References

Alston, William P. 1993: *The Reliability of Sense Perception*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Audi, Robert 2001: *The Architecture of Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Black, Robert 1990: 'Moral Scepticism and Inductive Scepticism'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 90, pp. 65–82.

Bonjour, Laurence 1985: *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dancy, Jonathan 1982: 'Intuitionism and Metaepistemology'. *Philosophical Studies*, 42, pp. 395–408.

Engel, Pascal 2005: 'The Logical Problem'. *Philosophical Explorations*, 8, pp. 21–38.

²¹ A distant ancestor of this paper was presented at the Universities of Paris IV-Sorbonne, Rijeka, and Leeds, Westmont College and 'The Value of Knowledge' Conference at the Free University of Amsterdam. I thank my audiences on those occasions and the editor of this journal for their comments and discussion. The research for, and writing of, this paper was supported in part by a faculty development grant from Westmont College.

- Nelson, Mark T. 2001: 'On the "Lack of True Philosophic Spirit" in Aquinas: Commitment versus Tracking in Philosophic Method'. *Philosophy*, 76, pp. 283–96.
- 2002: 'What Justification Could Not Be'. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 10, pp. 265–81.
- Ross, W.D. 1930: *The Right and the Good*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Smith, Michael 1994: *The Moral Problem*. Oxford, Blackwell.
- Sosa, Ernest 2007: Personal Correspondence.
- Tolhurst, William 1998: 'Seemings'. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 35, pp. 293–302.
- Williams, Bernard 1965: 'Ethical Consistency'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society: Supplementary Volume*, 39, pp. 103–24.
- 1985: *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. London: Fontana.