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The deontological conception of epistemic justification: a reassessment

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Abstract This paper undertakes two projects: Firstly, it offers a new account of the so-called deontological conception of epistemic justification (DCEJ). Secondly, it brings out the basic weaknesses of DCEJ, thus accounted for. It concludes that strong reasons speak against its acceptance. The new account takes its departure from William Alston's influential work. Section 1 argues that a fair account of DCEJ is only achieved by modifying Alston's account and brings out the crucial difference between DCEJ and the less radical position of epistemic deontologism. Section 2 starts by setting up two fundamental problems for proponents of DCEJ to solve. It argues further that proponents of DCEJ may not convincingly solve those problems by appeal to a notion of permissible belief. Section 3 investigates, whether an appeal to the notion of blameless belief may help DCEJ overcome its central problems. It argues that, even if an appeal to the notion of blameless belief has advantages over an appeal to the notion of permissible belief, DCEJ cannot convincingly overcome the problems set up for it. Further, it is brought out that DCEJ commits its proponents to a problematic non-standard view regarding the intrinsic value of epistemic justification. Section 4 concludes that DCEJ is not the natural conception of epistemic justification, that Alston takes it to be. However, its problems do not leave a scratch on epistemic deontologism, properly conceived.

Keywords Epistemology · Epistemic justification ·
The deontological conception of epistemic justification ·
Epistemic deontologism · William Alston

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1 Introduction

According to William Alston, epistemic justification (henceforth: EJ) is not only “most naturally understood in what we may call a ‘deontological’ way” (1989, p. 115); this is also the most popular conception of epistemic justification among conscientious epistemologists (1989, p. 117). But exactly what this allegedly popular and natural way of understanding epistemic justification amounts to, does not fall naturally out of Alston’s presentation. In fact, I shall argue, he presents at least two versions of the deontological conception of epistemic justification (henceforth: DCEJ), which are not obviously equivalent.

Alston’s initial characterization of DCEJ occurs very early in his presentation:

The terms ‘justified’, ‘justification’, and their cognates are most naturally understood. (...) ...as having to do with obligation, permission, requirement, blame and the like. (1989, p. 115)

This broad characterization is of little use unless the “having to do with” relation is clarified: it is hard to imagine a sensible theorist denying that epistemic justification bears some relation (however weak) to permissibility in some legitimate sense of the term (more about this in Sect. 2 below). Also it needs to be specified which types of obligation, permission etc. are relevant to DCEJ. Alston makes a crucial clarification in the following passage:

To say that S is justified in believing that p at time t is to say that the relevant rules or principles do not forbid S’s believing that p at t. (1989, p. 116)

By “the relevant rules and principles” Alston here means the *epistemic* principles, defined in the following manner:

On a deontological conception of [epistemic] justification, the principles will forbid beliefs formed in such a way as to be likely to be false and either permit or require belief formed in such a way as to be likely to be true. (1989, p. 117)

Here a simplification is in order. For obviously any belief formed in such a way as to be likely to be true is not formed in such a way as to be likely to be false. So the first type of principle is really subsumed under principles permitting *only* beliefs formed in such a way as to be likely to be true. Earlier on, Alston has made it perfectly clear that by terms such as “understood” and “say that” as occurring in the passages quoted above, we are not to understand anything in the line of conversational implicature or mere indication of criteria for identification of a relevant extension: Alston is after old-fashioned conceptual analysis; pinning down in exact words, which “concept the term [‘justified’] is used to express” (1989, p. 81). Putting all of this together we may express Alston’s first canonical version of DCEJ thus:

DCEJ_{permission}: Necessarily, Agent S is justified at time t in believing that p if, and only if, S’s believing that p at t is *permitted* by our epistemic principles

As seen above, according to Alston (1989) only one such principle is ultimately needed: The principle of only holding beliefs formed in such a way as to be likely to be true.

However, by the end of his paper, Alston has seemingly shifted his terminological preferences. He now writes:

We have examined several forms of a deontological conception of epistemic justification in terms of freedom from blame in taking up a certain propositional attitude. (1989, p. 152)¹

Here Alston implicitly refers above all to his “model deontologist” (1989, p. 117) Carl Ginet, who argued that

One is [epistemically] justified in being confident [i.e. believing] that *p* if and only if it is not the case that ought not to be confident that *p*; one could not be justly reproached that *p*

Ginet (1975, p. 28) quoted Alston (1989, p. 117)

This allows us to establish the following as Alston’s second canonical version of DCEJ:

DCEJ_{blame}: Necessarily, Agent *S* is justified at time *t* in believing that *p* if, and only if, *S* is blameless for believing that *p* at *t*.²

It should be noted that Alston himself endorses neither of his canonical versions of DCEJ. I shall not blame him for that: Below I shall argue that DCEJ_{permission} is a bad candidate for singling out a deontological conception of EJ among competing conceptions: It is simply too ambiguous as it stands. DCEJ_{blame} on the other hand, is beset with different problems. Shortly put, I shall argue that, on DCEJ_{blame} properly understood, it becomes hard to see how EJ can be conceived of as an epistemic notion in any traditional sense. Also it is very hard to find convincing reasons to accept DCEJ_{blame} over rival conceptions of EJ, at least if DCEJ is taken as a conception capturing an ordinary concept of justified belief.

2 Getting a grip on DCEJ

As we saw above, on DCEJ_{permission}, epistemically justified belief is conceived of in terms of *permitted belief*. The primary problem with this version of DCEJ, I shall argue, is its failure decisively to set apart DCEJ from rival conceptions of EJ: One may argue about whether there are additional principles for doxastic conduct worthy

¹ See Feldman (2004, p. 176) for other comments on Alston’s shift in perspective.

² One may doubt whether Ginet does in fact commit himself to logical bi-implication. But in the context of Alston’s reading of DCEJ, it is clear that Alston takes him as committed thus. Given this, Ginet is taken as committed to the present reading, in so far as, plausibly he takes a subject to be justly reproachable only if she is in fact blameworthy. One could favor a less robust reading of “justly”, so that e.g. one could justly reproach, if only the blameworthiness of the target of reproach is strongly indicated by the available evidence. But such a reading of “justly” seems wrongheaded in the present context: Surely a blameless target of reproach could recognize her reproachers’ entitlement to reproach her, while still counting their reproach an injustice towards her due to her innocence. In this sense of “injustice”, which I shall consider the most relevant sense here, even the most well-warranted and blamelessly faulty reproach is not necessarily just reproach. Justice, in this sense, is justice as seen from the target’s perspective. Here, only if one is blameworthy, may one justly be reproached.

of being called an epistemic principle, yet not implied by Alston's master principle of holding only beliefs formed in a way so as to be likely to be true. Also, one may argue about whether Alston's principle is in fact clear enough as it stands to offer even rough guidance relative to our doxastic conduct. Still, it remains a fact that any epistemologist conceiving of EJ as belief satisfying some idiosyncratic standard N, could choose to phrase her position thus: On my conception of EJ, no belief in violation of standard N is *permitted*.

As a consequence DCEJ_{permission} fails to cut out a distinctively deontological conception of EJ. Imagine a standard evidentialist, conceiving of an epistemically justified belief as a belief adequately supported by evidence. It seems perfectly open for such a theorist to phrase her position thus: My principle of EJ only *permits* beliefs with an adequate degree of evidential support. She could then endorse Alston's DCEJ_{permission}

DCEJ_{permission.evidentialist}: Necessarily, Agent S is justified at time t in believing that p if, and only if, S's believing that p at t is *permitted* by the principle of believing only on adequate evidence.

In short, If it takes nothing more to be a proponent of DCEJ than to endorse a version of Alston's DCEJ_{permission} as construed here, the popularity of DCEJ is hardly surprising. DCEJ loses its bite as a distinctive conception of EJ: Any conception of EJ appealing to a norm or principle satisfied only by justified beliefs comes out a deontological conception.

A proper epistemic deontologist conceiving of her conception of EJ as distinct from evidentialism may now reply: Something has gone terribly wrong here. The conception of EJ the evidentialist endorses may legitimately appeal to permission in a certain sense. Her view limits which beliefs may *permissibly* be deemed *epistemically justified*. But a true deontologist appeals to permission in a more committing sense than that.

It is far from obvious that this response on behalf of DCEJ will work. DCEJ_{permission.evidentialist} remains safely within the bounds initially set up by Alston: Surely by endorsing her version of DCEJ_{permission} the evidentialist construes EJ as "having to do with obligation, permission, requirement, blame and the like" cf. Alston (1989, p. 115); at least in the weak sense that EJ has to do with one or more members of that family of notions.³ Rather, I shall suggest, what the deontologist needs to do in order clearly to stand out from e.g. a standard evidentialist conception of EJ, is a commitment to a strong reading of Alston's "having to do with" in the passage just quoted. What she may advance is the following thesis:

No non-deontic sufficiency condition (NNDSC): No statement containing only non-deontic terms logically entails a statement affirming a subject's EJ.

The advantages for DCEJ of making explicit a commitment to NNDSC, hopefully, should become clear as this paper progresses. Remark, initially, that NNDSC takes

³ Notice that it does not help to point at this stage that some terms, e.g. "blameworthiness" are more genuinely deontic than others, e.g. "permissibility". Such a restriction clearly, has no warrant in Alston's treatment, and it seems uncharitably to leave out those adherents of DCEJ, which may prefer to couch their position in terms of "permissibility".

care of the evidentialist, for surely she is committed to it being the case that epistemic justification is logically (or “conceptually” if one prefers) entailed by a statement in terms of belief based on adequate evidence. Of course the possibility remains that certain evidentialists may prefer to cash out “adequate” or “evidence” in deontic terms. This complication need not concern us here.⁴ The point remains that with NNDSC, DCEJ has managed to set itself properly apart in the epistemological landscape. Still, NNDSC is too weak to support an interesting version of DCEJ. For it is consistent with the thesis that no statement interesting from an epistemological perspective—in deontic terms or not—is entailed by a statement concerning an agent’s EJ. What the deontologist needs in order to cut out a substantial positive thesis on the nature of EJ is this:

Deontological entailment (DE): Any statement concerning an agent’s EJ for a belief logically entails a statement applying deontic predicates to the agent (such as “_has breached certain obligations”, “_is blameworthy for_” etc.)

I shall consider a proper proponent of DCEJ any theorist committed to (NNDSC & DE). I consider this account of DCEJ superior to Alston’s for the following main reasons:

1. DE substantializes Alston’s vague “having-to-do-ness” in terms of logical entailment.
2. NNDSC makes sure that non-deontologists do not take improper advantage of the legitimacy of using deontological terminology in a less committing fashion, thus bereaving DCEJ of its bite.
3. (NNDSC & DE) do not imply that EJ may be given an exhaustive semantical analysis⁵ in deontic terms (or in any other terms for that matter) along Alston’s suggested lines or otherwise. In this sense (NNDSC & DE) is weaker than any version of DCEJ put forth by Alston.
4. By focusing on the linguistic level, (NNDSC & DE) makes clear the difference between a concept and a conception (DCEJ belonging to the latter kind). Here a conception is taken to be a linguistic phenomenon: A string of words clarifying (by way of relevant concepts expressed), a controversial concept such as EJ.⁶

⁴ Such evidentialists, by the analysis undertaken here, will count as deontologists in disguise in the sense that they do not directly employ deontic terms in analysing EJ, but prefer to use terms such as “adequate evidence” in a sense ensuingly clarified in deontic terms. The fact that some proponents of DCEJ may wish to disguise themselves thus, should not present an obstacle to the present paper. Neither does it matter, of course, if certain evidentialists wish to conceive of evidence in a reductionist way, as a notion ultimately replaceable, e.g., by neurological notions. Such evidentialists will unproblematically qualify as opposed to DCEJ, since they oppose NNDSC.

⁵ By “an exhaustive semantical analysis” I mean here a statement “P”, such as to make true the statement “Necessarily, Agent S has EJ for her belief that p if, and only if, P.”

⁶ Thus it makes perfect sense to say that there is a concept of EJ but no legitimate conception of it. If so, the concept counts as an un-analyzable primitive. But what epistemologists are typically after is not the epistemic concepts of knowledge, belief etc. (like any competent language users, presumably they already have those concepts “in their possession”), it is conceptions of those concepts they are after; the sort of thing one can write down on paper and discuss. And in many cases such conceptions have proven very difficult to come by.

(NNDSC & DE) purport to clarify the concept of EJ by way of making explicit certain important inferential relationships between EJ statements and other statements.

Some may argue at this point that DE makes NNDSC redundant: For how could an EJ statement be at once entailed by a statement containing only non-deontic terms *and* itself entail a statement concerning deontic status?

I do not find this objection pressing: It rests on the implicit principle that a statement containing no deontic terms cannot entail a deontic statement. But in order to make good this principle we would need an independently well-motivated criterion of what separates deontic—from non-deontic terms. And no such criterion is forthcoming. It is hardly mere sloppiness which makes Alston gesture rather vaguely at the deontic realm as “having to do with obligation, permission, requirement, blame and the like” (1989, p. 115). Actually it is difficult to give a clearer statement.⁷ Merely prolonging the list of *kosher* deontic terms makes no substantial difference. Thus, it seems a tough challenge to convince e.g. an evidentialist concerning EJ that her talk of justified belief as belief permitted by her evidentialist principles, is not truly deontic. For the term “permission” belongs squarely in the deontic family, in so far as we define it, like Alston, by listing the most standard deontic terms. Luckily it is a battle we need not engage in. Rather than fighting over the exact criteria governing deonticness, by defining DCEJ in terms of NNDSC & DE, I shift the focus to analyses of EJ, which clearly do *not* contain deontic terms. Standard evidentialism or reliabilism are proper examples. DCEJ as I conceive it, cf. NNDSC, does not tolerate such analyses by insisting that they leave something important out, namely the deontological component of EJ. Speaking deontologically (sic!), DCEJ can allow itself permissiveness concerning the rights of evidentialists and reliabilists to couch consequences of their analysis in allegedly deontic terms, thus allegedly satisfying DE. Due to their commitment to a violation of NNDSC, those theorists do not become proper proponents of DCEJ for that reason.

Another important point is in order before proceeding. As conceived here, DCEJ does commit one to *epistemic deontologism*, understood as the thesis that there are appropriate ascriptions of deontic status to an agent with regard to her beliefs,

⁷ I have no room to elaborate in full detail on this point in the present context. A few notes are in order, though: One could imagine an attempt at setting apart genuine deontic expressions syntactically: They are such terms in the permission, blame etc. family which apply to agents: “Permitted belief” then, when understood differently from “belief the believer is permitted to have”, is no proper deontic notion. The evidentialist’s statement that only evidentially well-supported belief is permitted by her, thus disqualifies as a genuine deontic statement. However, it is easy to rephrase the evidentialist’s claim so as to conform to the above syntactical requirements: She may simply say that a believer is only permitted to hold evidentially well-supported beliefs on her account. And there seems no obvious way of ruling out this mode of expression as inappropriate. Another line one could take is anchoring genuinely deontological discourse in a discourse concerning reactive attitudes in P.F. Strawson’s sense (see Strawson 1993), e.g. resentment and reproach. One could argue that truly deontic statements must have consequences concerning the relevant subject’s receptivity of such attitudes. This approach, however, founders on the observation that it is only consequences concerning which reactive attitudes the subject may *justly* receive, which have any hope of anchoring deontological discourse. But “justly” in this context is itself a core deontological term, the status of which is still left unaccounted for. I hope to have shown by this, why Alston’s blunt approach of simply listing terms intuitively qualified as deontic, is in fact the most straightforward way to go.

e.g. blameworthiness for holding a particular belief, warranted on the basis of the epistemic quality of those beliefs.⁸ But, crucially, the reverse is not the case. For one might endorse epistemic deontology on grounds different from DCEJ, namely insofar as one holds that the relevant ascriptions are never warranted solely on conceptual grounds as a consequence of the agent's status with regard to EJ. To bring out more clearly this point, consider a comparison between the epistemic deontologist and a religious believer in a doctrine of mortal sin: The latter may e.g. believe in fratricide as a mortal sin: Killing your sibling is an offense, for which you are severely guilty (perhaps to the extent that you deserve a very uncomfortable afterlife) no matter the particular circumstances. But such a believer would not for that reason consider the *concept* of fratricide a deontic concept; "committing fratricide" means willfully ending the life of a male biological sibling. It is up to conceptually independent religious doctrine to evaluate such conduct as irredeemably inducing severe guilt. On the same token the epistemic deontologist adheres to a principle that at least sometimes a believer is to some degree guilty on the basis of holding a belief of bad epistemic quality, e.g. an epistemically unjustified belief. But in no way does such a principle make epistemic justification a deontic concept.

For many reasons I believe epistemic deontology to be correct. For other reasons I believe it to be much better supported than any religious doctrine of original guilt. But neither matter shall occupy me in the present paper.

In this section, then, I have argued that DCEJ is well conceived of as a commitment to (NNDSC & DE). (NNDSC & DE) does not commit one to an "iffy" analysis of EJ in deontic terms. Firstly, DE does not commit one to the deontic status entailed by EJ being also sufficient for EJ. And NNDSC does not commit one to *any* deontic sufficiency conditions for EJ. Some reasons for modifying my account of DCEJ in this fashion relative to Alston were already pointed out above. Not least the present version of DCEJ arguably is more robust in face of the problem of distinguishing genuinely deontic evaluations from non-deontic evaluations. This is because standard non-deontological conceptions of EJ will declare themselves by explicitly violating NNDSC, even when it is less clear that they violate DE.

Still, other advantages of (NNDSC & DE) over Alston's "iffy" analyses cannot be brought out until a very important issue is resolved, namely that of accounting for the inadequacies of a version of DCEJ in terms of "permission". This will be the topic of the next section.

3 Permitted belief

May DCEJ underwrite DE solely in terms of "permitted belief"? The thesis that DCEJ may do this I take to be the true core of Alston's suggested reading of DCEJ in terms of DCEJ_{permission}. However, I shall argue that this approach meets with difficulties, when scrutinized in detail.

⁸ E.g. an epistemic deontologist find it sometimes appropriate to declare an agent's beliefs blameworthy or impermissible. For further elaborations on the nature of epistemic deontology see e.g. Nottelmann (2007, pp. 47–52) and Nottelmann (2008, pp. 325–330).

The main problems with the suggested approach, I maintain, were already brought out by Roderick Firth in his Firth (1959):

Firstly, if we take “A’s belief is epistemically justified” to logically imply “A’s belief is permitted”, saying that A’s belief that *p* is epistemically justified, yet A ought not really believe that *p*, should involve a blatant contradiction. Yet this seems not to be the case. Firth offers the case of a man who seems epistemically justified in believing that his wife is not virtuous (at least he has adequate evidence for believing this), yet really he ought (for general ethical reasons) not hold this belief.⁹ To this we may well add that also it seems an open question whether it is ever permissible to hold a belief, which is epistemically unjustified. Again, if EJ equals permissibility, this question should be answered in the negative on purely conceptual grounds, since an answer in the positive involves a blatant contradiction.

The second basic problem is this: It is hard to find evidence decisively favouring DCEJ over rival conceptions of EJ. To clarify: Suppose EJ is something we generally value to the point of finding

(IUSB) At least in any close possible world, it is impermissible to hold an epistemically unjustified belief.

a trivial thesis to which we routinely assent. On which grounds, now, do we distinguish a situation in which we endorse the inference from “A unjustifiedly believes *p*” to “A impermissibly believes *p*” on the basis of DE from one in which we endorse this inference on the basis of IUSB? The point is this: If we cannot distinguish the two, any attempt on behalf of DCEJ to take our endorsement of the relevant inference as evidence in favour of DE (and thus evidence towards establishing DCEJ) flunks. For the evidence would equally support IUSB, which is consistent with any non-deontic conception of EJ.¹⁰

Now, what may DCEJ offer against the first problem set up above? At least two lines of response are viable. Taking the first line, DCEJ may take a dismissive line against all examples in Firth’s mould and argue that epistemically justified beliefs are always permissible. Taking the second line, DCEJ may appeal to an exclusive dimension of permissibility, “epistemic permissibility”.

The first response seems to attribute to those who find it an open question whether epistemically justified beliefs are always permissible, a deep semantic blindness. The blindness attributed here is deep in the sense that arguably it persists, even after the allegedly correct conception of EJ, namely DCEJ_{permissible}, is pointed out to those defending the relevant open question hypothesis. In this regard the semantic blindness attributed here is deeper than the ubiquitous type of semantic blindness occurring, when a language user has not yet been introduced to the correct meaning of a term: Someone may e.g. find it an open question whether a sequoia is a tree, but change her mind, when the meaning of the word “sequoia” is pointed out to her.

⁹ Firth (1959, p. 496).

¹⁰ I take this to be the gist of Firth’s charge against Roderick Chisholm of confusing the semantical content of an evaluative term with a criterion of its application. See Firth (1959, p. 499). Firth’s example concerns the term “worthy of belief”, but his point equally and naturally apply to “permissible belief”.

This is not the place to evaluate the ultimate merit of appeals to semantic blindness in confronting open question arguments; a topic well worthy of a substantial research paper in itself. Sadly, then a few sketchy remarks must suffice in the present context: it would seem that appeals to semantic blindness carry force, when natural kind concepts or exotic theoretical concept are involved. In such cases, arguably, common intuitions regarding open questions carry little weight: It does not change the fact, if it is a fact, that water is necessarily H₂O, if the common man or woman regards it as an open question whether it is so. And if Kripke is right, in fact this necessary identity *did* pose an open question to our ancestors.¹¹ Similarly, common opinions whether it is an open question that all transuranians are radioactive, carry little weight. But, it seems to me, theorists acknowledging that an open question hypothesis is widely accepted concerning EJ and permissibility face a difficult task arguing that EJ is a natural kind term or a theoretical term. And open question arguments seem to carry less weight outside those domains. As noted above, in the present context I must leave it at that.

Rather I shall focus on the following problem: To insist that only epistemically justified beliefs are permissible, amounts to taking Clifford's side in the legendary Clifford-James feud on the ethics of belief. Again, here is no place to attempt a full scholarly treatment of this venerable debate. The following brief introduction will do: In his famous "The Will to Believe" William James argued that belief unsupported by the believer's present evidence is sometimes permissible. Not least if sufficiently "momentous" consequences turn on whether the proposition is believed or not, suspension of the belief is out of the question and positive evidence in support of the belief may *only* be gathered conditionally on holding the belief.¹² To James, certain religious beliefs, such as belief in a blissful afterlife reserved for those who believed in it when alive, are prime examples of this kind. W. K. Clifford unrelentingly took the opposite view. To him, famously, "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence".¹³

Clifford, however, is a dangerous ally to DCEJ. Not only is there no sign that he endorsed DE. In his seminal essay Clifford (1999) it seems clear that he supports his condemnation of belief inadequately supported by evidence by reference to the great *harm* such beliefs may cause, together with an implicit ethical principle that risking such harm is flat-out impermissible: "No real belief, however trifling and insignificant, is ever truly insignificant; ..." we are told (1999, p. 73). And, in Clifford's characteristic grand style, counter-evidential belief is compared to a contagious disease:

But if the belief has been accepted on insufficient evidence, the pleasure is a stolen one ... (...) it is sinful, because it stolen in defiance of our duty to mankind. That duty is to guard ourselves from such beliefs as from a pestilence, which may shortly master our own body and then spread to the rest of the town. What

¹¹ See, famously, Kripke (1980, p. 99).

¹² James (1979). I basically follow the lead of Pappas (1994) in my reading of James' much debated view on the permissibility of belief ahead of evidence, although I shall not go into exegetical detail here. The literature on the James-Clifford debate is extensive and shows no signs of slowing down its steady rate of growth. I shall make no attempt at a survey here.

¹³ Clifford (1999, p. 77).

should be thought of one who, for the sake of sweet fruit, should deliberately run the risk of bringing a plague upon his family and his neighbours? (1999, p. 76).

Clifford, thus, is hardly an adherent of DCEJ. If anything in modern terms, he seems closer to being a standard evidentialist strongly believing in the ethical significance of the potential harmfulness of epistemically unjustified beliefs. Apart from that, Clifford's position seems overly zealous: Take a harmless case of boosting one's self-confidence by forming a belief that one can manage a difficult task ahead, such as playing through a difficult piece on the piano in front of a discerning audience. Often, holding such a belief is vital to the actual success of the task, and thus may quickly produce evidence adequate to holding the belief on distinctive evidential merits. Given that the belief is only of marginal wider significance, yet successfully playing the piece is crucial to the happiness of oneself and one's audience, is it really obvious that one should be condemned for believing ahead of evidence in a case like this? Psychologically, robust beliefs ahead of evidence may be hard to come by, but in certain cases like the one just described, arguably many of us are willing to top James and not only tolerate such a belief, but even praise the believer for her doxastic condition.

Clifford's unrelenting line proved no safe harbour for DCEJ. But DCEJ may now attempt the *second* approach in order to overcome the first problem set up above: Let us grant to Firth that no conceptual impossibility be involved in talk of "impermissible, yet epistemically justified belief". But a proponent of DCEJ_{permission} may insist that conceptual impossibility rules out epistemically justified belief, which is *epistemically* impermissible. As this line of response goes, it is in its conceptual relation to an *epistemic* dimension of impermissibility that the distinctive deontological nature of EJ resides.

In reply to this, I shall maintain that, in the sense of "permissible" crucially relevant to DCEJ, either a belief is permissible or it is not. Period. I shall not deny that one may make sense of the expression: "In one sense believing *p* is permissible, in another sense it isn't", but prefer to interpret it in the following way: There are reasons telling against the permissibility of believing *p*, and reasons telling in favour of the permissibility of believing *p*. Focusing on the latter set of reasons, belief *p* seems permissible, whereas focusing on the former set of reasons it does not.

Notice that I do not thereby suggest that all kinds of reasons—be they epistemic, moral or aesthetic—can be weighed against each other to produce a decisive *all-things-considered* reason. In fact I do not know how to even begin an argument to this conclusion.¹⁴ Notice also that, in the same key, the so-called "epistemic ought"

¹⁴ Notice that it does not suffice to point out that plausibly, some kinds of reasons for believing *p* trump reasons of another kind for not believing *p* with regard to the permissibility of believing *p*. E.g. one may hold that certain strong moral reason tell strongly in favour of believing my child to be beautiful to the degree that they may trump at least weak epistemic reasons against believing that my child is beautiful, and thus produce a mixed some-things-moral-and-epistemic considered reason to regard my belief that my child is beautiful as permissible. For this observation, even if correct, goes no way towards establishing an all-things-moral-and-epistemic-considered reasons, yet alone an all-things-considered reason. For establishing the latter kind of reason would demand the ruling out of existence *any* incommensurable class of reasons pertaining to belief, and at present I have idea whether this could be done.

is not endangered. For the phrase: “Epistemically speaking, S ought to believe that p” makes perfect sense as saying that, in so far as only S’s *epistemic* reasons for and against believing p are consulted, S may permissibly go ahead and believe that p. In other words, an epistemic ought provides a *pro tanto* reason for considering a belief permissible. But this does not mean that the belief was ever *epistemically* permissible, in the sense that the belief remains permissible in a deontic epistemic sense, no matter the weight of non-epistemic reasons telling against its permissibility. I wish to stress again that I do not thereby claim that, at least for some proposition p, there is a way to produce an “all-things-considered” reason to believe p from a set of non-epistemic and epistemic reasons for and against believing p. Rather, I mean to suggest that we may legitimately say “A is *epistemically* permitted to believe p” if thereby we mean simply “A epistemically ought to believe p” or, what amounts to the same, “A’s epistemic reasons, *pro tanto*, tell in favour of believing p”. And I also wish to suggest that there are no alternative ways of construing “A is epistemically permitted to believe p”, purportedly making it true that, no matter if A is *ultimately* permitted to believe p, A *remains* permitted to believe p in a specifically *epistemic* sense. In such a case, I maintain, at best A’s epistemic reasons offer a *pro tanto* reason to consider the belief p permissible. This in so far as, only taking A epistemic reasons into account, A’s believing seems permissible.

Now, why should an adherent of DCEJ_{permission} not rest perfectly happy with the construal of “epistemic permissibility” given just above? Why not simply say that a belief has EJ if certain epistemic reasons sufficiently establish its permissibility *pro tanto*? The reason this will not do is the following: If DCEJ is construed as in the present paper, it must respect NNDSC: EJ cannot be inferred from non-deontic premises. But if “epistemic permissibility”, in the suggested reading, is taken to sufficiently establish EJ, the belief’s backing by the relevant epistemic reasons suffices to establish EJ. Now, the adherent of DCEJ_{permission} is left unable to counter the objection that one might just as well equate EJ with the backing by the relevant set of epistemic reasons (e.g. sufficient grounding in evidence). One would then be free to argue on independent grounds that EJ, thus construed, constitutes *pro tanto* progress towards establishing the relevant belief’s positive deontic status. But EJ is no longer clearly an essentially deontic notion.

I hope that with the clarifications undertaken above, my reader will share my feelings that there is no specific epistemic dimension of permissibility relevant to DCEJ, but that epistemic reasons may sometimes *pro tanto* establish unqualified permissibility. Again I stress that nothing in this conclusion commits one to there ever being all-things-considered reasons for belief. Still, I realize that my conclusion here is perhaps the most controversial element of the present paper, or has at least struck some readers as being so. In the vain hope of relinquishing at least some doubts, I shall take some time to explicitly discuss an important objection:

Your view that holding a belief p cannot be permissible in one sense, namely the epistemic sense, while being impermissible in another sense, e.g. an all-things-considered sense, would seem to globalize. But the view seems plainly false, generally speaking: If I allow you to kill me, you have permission to kill me relative to my rules,

but you do not have permission to kill me relative to standard ethical rules. So in one sense, you are permitted to kill me, in another sense not.¹⁵

This objection gives me a welcome opportunity to further clarify the view, which I find intuitively irresistible: Certainly there is a sense in which, in the example above, I am permitted to kill you, namely the sense that I *have your explicit permission* to kill you. But, even if you have given your permission, it remains entirely unclear that your permission carries any normative force towards allowing my killing you. Perhaps, in any case where you have voiced a permission to kill you, I am *not* permitted to go ahead and kill you, exactly because for ethical reasons I should not respect such suicidal speech-acts. So, the example is disanalogous to the case of permitted belief: The notion of epistemically permitted belief, which relevant adherents of DCEJ_{permission} are after, is surely such that the epistemic permissibility of a belief weighs positively towards permissibly believing it in an ethical sense, even if the belief's epistemic permissibility might presumably be outweighed by others factors in determining its ultimate ethical permissibility: It is hard to imagine any adherent of DCEJ wedded to the principle that EJ is, all things being equal, ever neutral or even bad in an ethical sense. Also, there is another, and perhaps even more important disanalogy between the case of permissible belief and the example given: In the case of permissible belief, generally there is no agent explicitly granting the believer permission to hold the belief. Perhaps, it may be that some normative standard "grants" the believer permission to hold the belief. But, firstly such talk is arguably metaphorical. Secondly, the mere fact that a belief is permitted in the sense of being consonant with some standard phrasable in non-deontic terms, does not make it permitted in the sense relevant to DCEJ as conceived in this paper. For, if permissibility were to be conceived along such lines, in violation of NNDSC one could logically infer that a belief is permitted, hence epistemically justified, simply from the fact of its consonance with the relevant non-deontic standard.

Concluding my reply to the objection given above: Of course I readily grant that a belief may be permitted in the sense that someone or something has granted the believer permission to hold it. But this act, or fact, of a permission granted is itself not a deontic condition, since this fact does not in itself establish that the belief is one we are permitted to hold in virtue of the permission granted. Only a further independent principle that we are permitted to, or even should, believe according to a granted permission of the relevant type would establish that. Now, in order to clarify, I do not deny that sometimes it makes sense to say of a belief *p* and believer *A*: "*A* is permitted to believe *p* in one sense, but, in another sense she is not permitted to believe *p*" (e.g. playing on various senses of being permitted as in the objection discussed). What I deny is merely that a belief may be permitted in more than one properly *deontic* sense, when deontic norms are understood as in the present paper. My central point being that appeals to "epistemic permissibility" cannot provide help to DCEJ. Also, I do not deny that various considerations, even explicit permissions given, may sometimes provide *pro tanto* reasons to hold a belief. I am entirely sympathetic to this view.

¹⁵ I owe this thoughtful objection to an anonymous referee for this journal.

What I deny is rather that such *pro tanto* reasons establish genuinely deontic dimensions of *pro tanto* permissibility relevant to the defense of DCEJ.

Notice also, again, that befriending the epistemic ought does not in any way commit one to DCEJ. This particular ought has no more intimate friend than Richard Feldman. Yet Feldman vigorously champions an evidentialist conception of EJ.¹⁶ Epistemic oughts, in his book, are mitigated by a version of IUJB: “It is our plight to be believers, we ought to do it right”, Feldman presents as a plausible basic insight.¹⁷ Nothing Feldman says, seems to save epistemic permissibility, however. Interpreting epistemic permissibility in terms of *not violating epistemic duties*, also cuts no ice. It is perfectly sensible to say, when “epistemically ought” is understood as suggested just above, that a belief not in breach of any epistemic duties is simply a belief one epistemically ought to have (or at least not epistemically ought not to have), i.e. a belief which, at least in so far as one’s epistemic duties are concerned, one may consider permissible, since one is in the clear regarding those specific duties or obligations. Yet again this does not translate to the belief’s being *epistemically* permissible, which is a very different matter from recognizing that various sorts of oughts and duties pull in different directions regarding the belief’s permissibility.

If, in the context of DCEJ, “permissible” cannot fruitfully be taken to mean “epistemically permissible”, what *does* it mean? The key is to see that “impermissible” (plain) is in fact a highly ambiguous term as used in ordinary discourse. The following case should bring this out: Suppose I am taking a leisurely drive down the highway in my new Toyota Prius®, when suddenly this otherwise placid vehicle unpredictably speeds off as if possessed by its own will (really a serious speeder malfunction occurred). As a result I break a local 100 km/h speed limit by at least 50%. Here it seems perfectly sensible to say the following: By breaking the speed limit, I did something I was *not permitted* to do. After all, the traffic regulations prescribe that my car should not move at a speed above 100 km/h. In most jurisdictions the regulations even ascribe *objective* responsibility a.k.a. *strict liability* to me for this transgression, meaning that, no matter the circumstances, I may be held legally accountable for it. Yet, it also makes sense to say the following: In so far as I were an innocent victim to Toyota’s engineering mishaps, my being carried away by my rampant car was not something I was not permitted to do. After all, who would seriously prohibit people from falling victim to such events? The up-shot is this: I seem at once permitted and not permitted to do what I did.

In order to avoid a blatant contradiction, two ways seem open: The first is to fine-grain the evaluated events, thus arguing that my falling victim to my Toyota’s malfunction was not the same event as my violating the speed limit. There is much to be

¹⁶ Feldman (2004, p. 180) provides an energetic defense of the epistemic ought in an evidentialist context.

¹⁷ Feldman (2004, p. 175). Feldman is so happy with qualified oughts, that he even goes to the extreme of declaring nonsensical any *unqualified* ought (or “just plain ought” as Feldman calls it). However, he acknowledges that he has no way of supporting his claim save by appeal to intuition (2004, p. 192). I suspect that Feldman overreacts here: Even though it is often extremely hard to decide what one plainly ought to do, all relevant things considered, to me the question itself does not seem senseless. Rather it seems a central question to any human existence. However, I shall not consider the issue further in the present context.

said concerning the individuation of events.¹⁸ But, for all it is worth, fine-graining is no convincing way out of trouble here: The two events occupy the exact same region of space-time. And norms of permissiveness should be able to guide our conduct. It is no good having a norm permitting one concrete way of conduct, if by conducting oneself thus, just by virtue of occupying the relevant portion of space-time required to perform the action, one cannot help doing something prohibited. In that case, the norm offers no acceptable guidance about what to do and not to do: For it would permit something, which may only be done by virtue of doing something not permitted.

The second solution, which I favour, is to acknowledge the ambiguity of “permitted” in the relevant context. Disambiguation may then proceed by clarifying the implications of various uses of “permitted” with respect to the agent’s blameworthiness. In the case above, the sense in which the speeding was not permitted is a sense in which its being not permitted does not entail that the driver is in any way *blameworthy* for the speeding. The traffic regulations simply prohibit speeding. Period. Its paragraphs do not take into account the appropriateness of the driver’s excuses. Neither does, in this first sense of “permitted”, “her speeding was not permitted” entail that the driver was *blameless* for speeding. Blame simply is not an issue here. In contrast, in the sense of “permitted” involved in the statement that the driver was permitted to let herself carry away in the rampant vehicle, permissibility entails blamelessness: What we mean, when we say that the conduct was permitted, so described, seems to be nothing beyond the statement that the circumstances of conduct excused the driver from any blame for it. In other words, in this sense “she was permitted to φ ” is meant to imply that she was blameless for φ -ing.

What does all of this come to, in the context of DCEJ? According to the permissive lines I have allowed above concerning which terms count as genuinely deontic, “permission” may count as a deontic term in both suggested senses. So as long as a state of EJ has logical consequences expressible in either of those senses, DE is satisfied. But because of NNDSC, DCEJ must take leave with the first less committing use of “permission”: if an adherent of DCEJ allows that one may coherently deem A unjustified in believing p while also deeming A blameless for believing p , she puts herself in the same boat as any non-deontic analyst of EJ, who would insist that, conceptually speaking, blameworthiness and EJ are two entirely separate issues. But, moreover, the very reason why permissibility in the first sense is detached from blameworthiness, is that statements of permissibility in this sense are expressible in *non-deontic* terms, namely in terms of *compliance with a particular standard*: In the first sense of “permitted”, “her speeding was not permitted”, is meant to follow from “her speeding was an offense according to the current traffic regulations”. And the latter statement contains no deontic terms. It is exactly because no statement is made concerning the appropriateness of deciding the agent’s *blameworthiness* relative to the standard

¹⁸ Not least in the mental event causation debate, where Donald Davidson and Jaegwon Kim have famously championed very different criteria for the individuation of mental events with decisive implications for the causal explanation of action. For a canonical expression of Kim’s view, see e.g. Kim (1998, p. 60). For Davidson’s more coarse-grained approach, see e.g. Davidson (1980, p. 125): For Davidson, unlike Kim, two distinct events cannot occupy the exact same region of spacetime.

governing the relevant use of “permitted” that the first sense of “permitted” is a different one from the second sense.

Thus, in so far as she is committing to NNDSC, it is not enough for DCEJ to rely on the first sense of “permission” indicated above. At least not, if the adherent of DCEJ insists, cf. DCEJ_{permission}, that a permitted belief is necessarily a justified belief. For statements concerning permitted belief (with “permitted” taken in the first sense) were themselves entailed by *non-deontic* statements concerning compliance with some relevant standard, such as the traffic regulations in the example above. Due to the transitivity of logical entailment, a non-deontic statement would then entail an EJ statement in violation of NNDSC. This in effect leaves DCEJ with the second use.¹⁹ In order to avoid confusion with the first, now irrelevant use, it is better to shift our basic terminology and cash out DCEJ in terms of blamelessness. Proponents of DCEJ are then taken to clarify the concept of EJ in terms of blameless belief (perhaps in some suitably qualified sense). It is this phrasing, which shall occupy me in the next main section. But before that it is time to take stock.

We have investigated Alston’s proposal of cashing out DCEJ in terms of permissible belief. Following the lead of Roderick Firth, two problems were set up for DCEJ, thus conceived. The first problem, initially, found no convincing solution: DCEJ_{permission} could not immediately account for the intuitive possibility of epistemically justified, yet impermissible belief (as in the case of Firth’s wife and husband example) without shifting to talk in terms of “epistemic permission”. But such talk was found to make dubious sense. It remains to be seen whether DCEJ_{blame} fares better: Perhaps the problematic possibility envisaged turns on employing “permission” in the first sense not involving entailments concerning blame? I shall investigate this issue in the next section.

The second problem also found no obvious solution: How can DCEJ convincingly establish that our acceptance of inferences from statements concerning EJ to statements involving deontic predicates, rests on our competence with the concept of EJ rather than our implicit recognition of the ethical significance of EJ? As we saw a shift to talk of “epistemic oughts” made some progress with the first problem, but not with the second. Rather it seemed clear that proponents of epistemic oughts (such as Feldman) did not by their “oughty” statements commit to DCEJ, since they did not commit to DE. So why should we? The problem is only made more severe by the fact that DCEJ needs *anybody* competent with the concept of EJ to be committed to endorsing the relevant inferences. But, given the truth of the rival hypothesis that those inferences are endorsed by anybody because of an implicit endorsement of the ethical value of EJ (e.g. expressed by IUJB) together with a non-deontic conception of EJ, the difference becomes even harder to tell: In that scenario we simply cannot find anybody not endorsing the ethical value of EJ, so we might empirically compare them with those not endorsing it. Our only relevant evidence would then seem to derive

¹⁹ I stipulate that those two sense of “A was permitted to φ ”, i.e. 1. “A’s φ -ing was in accord with a relevant standard” (a standard somehow indicated by the context of utterance) and 2. “A was blameless for φ -ing”, exhaust the field of legitimate uses in the context of evaluating DCEJ. I strongly suspect this to be the case, although I do not know how to further argue the point save by appeal to linguistic intuitions ruling out further readings.

from introspection: In deciding whether to accept DCEJ, we should investigate each of us, whether we feel a pull towards the relevant inferences not in any way primed by a prior pull towards accepting something like IUJB when bracketing the issue of the correct conception of EJ. This seems a strenuous mental exercise. And DCEJ is forced to declare incompetent with the concept of EJ (and not just confused about its proper conception) any epistemologist, who like Richard Feldman refuses to endorse inferences from EJ statements to deontic predicate statements on purely conceptual grounds, in so far as full conceptual competence includes endorsing without further ado correct logical entailments when being presented with them. Notice that a proponent of a non-deontic conception of EJ is in no parallel predicament: E.g. an evidentialist need not insist, in virtue of her signature commitment to EJ conceptually entailing adequate evidential support of the relevant belief, that a proponent of DCEJ has less than full competence with the concept of EJ. For it is fully open to DCEJ to endorse this signature evidentialist inference. DE only requires her to *also* endorse inferences to deontic statements. So the overall dialectical situation seems poised against DCEJ: Not only is decisive evidence in its favour hard to obtain. It is also committed to declare less than fully competent with the key concept of EJ all rivals in the field competing for the formulation of its proper conception.²⁰

Very difficult concerns are raised above, which I cannot hope to even browse. It needs only be said that, unless we accept that DCEJ does in fact command evidence relevant to solving the second main problem, its case ends here. Personally I expect the second problem to be too deep for DCEJ to overcome. But in order to give the position a full clarificatory treatment, I shall lay this problem aside, and proceed to investigate, whether an explicit shift to terms of blamelessness may in fact salvage DCEJ from its other troubles.

Before advancing to that stage of the argument, however, I need to address a different issue: The acute reader may well have noticed that a phrasing of DCEJ in terms of “obliged belief” or “belief not in breach of obligations” dropped out of the picture early on. It is time to state my reasons for this. I shall maintain, firstly that “belief not in breach of any obligations” translate straightforwardly into “permissible belief”. The notion is also ambiguous in the same way that “permissible belief” was shown to be ambiguous above: In one sense my speeding in the example given was in breach of an obligation, namely an objective obligation specified by the relevant traffic rules. In another sense my speeding was not in breach of an obligation, in so far as by “obligation” we mean those obligations, the breach of which induce blameworthiness. In this second sense of “obligation” it makes sense to say, e.g. that I am not always obliged to honour my legal obligations, the second occurrence of “obligation” referring, e.g., to the traffic regulations. Thus, “blameless belief” is a notion preferable to “permissible belief” as well as “belief not in breach of obligations”.

²⁰ Some have suggested to me that this is no real problem for DCEJ, since accusations of conceptual incompetence are common-place in philosophical debate. This is surely correct. But in specific debates about conceptions, such accusations carry a different weight. Here, it seems, a fruitful debate demands that the debaters do in fact possess a common concept, but are merely confused about how to clarify this concept verbally.

On the other hand, “obliged belief” carries a different meaning from “belief not in breach of obligations”, in so far as one may hold that some beliefs are permissible, without being therefore obliged or required. Thus, some readers may feel that I have advanced too quickly by ignoring the notion of “obliged belief”. But notice first that Alston explicitly keeps obliged belief out of consideration when carving out DCEJ:

To say that S is justified in believing that p at time t is to say that the relevant rules or principles do not forbid S’s believing that p at t Again, it is not to say that S is required or obligated to believe that p at t, ... (1989, p. 116)

And notice, secondly, that Alston’s preference seems well motivated: To equate justified belief with required/obliged belief, is to insist that any justified belief you may ever have is a belief you were required to have under the circumstances, and this seems a strange insistence given the often capricious circumstances accounting for our having a certain belief or not. To argue this conclusion in detail would most likely require a separate paper. I hope the remarks given here at least sufficiently explains why I have followed Alston in ignoring “obliged belief” as a term relevant to carving out DCEJ.

4 Blameless belief

As we saw above prominent proponents of DCEJ like Carl Ginet have preferred to put forward their conception of EJ in terms of blame (or reproach, or fault, or culpability, the four shall be considered synonyms here). To recount, Ginet submits:

One is [epistemically] justified in being confident [i.e. believing] that p if and only if it is not the case that one ought not to be confident that p; one could not be justly reproached that p,

Ginet (1975, p. 28)

Another case in point is Alvin Goldman, who finds that “epistemic justification” is ambiguous between expressing a “strong” and a “weak” concept of EJ. The weak concept he analyses thus:

On another conception, a justified belief is a faultless, blameless, or non-culpable belief ...[this] seems to me to a legitimate conception ...[it] captures some chunks of intuition involving the term “justified” (in its epistemic application).

Goldman (1988, p. 53)²¹

To recapture, what Ginet and Goldman agrees upon (at least enforcing the reading of Ginet intended by Alston, see n2 above), is that there is a concept of EJ at least

²¹ Notice that I prefer to use the terms “concept” and “conception” differently from Goldman. In my preferred terms, what Goldman is after is not two rival conceptions of EJ. To me it makes no sense for one theorist to wholly endorse two incompatible conceptions of one and the same concept. What Goldman is after is rather a disambiguation of the term “epistemically justified”, pointing to intuitions indicating that the term may, depending on context, express two different concepts, whose proper conceptions Goldman then proceeds to formulate.

sometimes expressed by the term “justification” in epistemological contexts, whose proper conception goes like this:

DCEJ_{blame}: Necessarily, Agent S is justified at time t in believing that p if, and only, if S is blameless for believing that p at t

As we saw above, this conception of EJ has significant advantages to DCEJ over DCEJ_{permission}: We found out, that in a legitimate sense of “permission”, DCEJ_{permission} is equivalent to DCEJ_{blame}, but there is also a legitimate sense in which it is not. And taken in the latter sense DCEJ_{permission}, in virtue of violating NNDSC, really was not a version of DCEJ after all. So in order to avoid confusion, DCEJ is better served with DCEJ_{blame}.

DCEJ_{blame} as it stands, still seems in need of refinement. For blamelessness in the minimal sense of non-blameworthiness sometimes comes cheaply. In fact too cheaply, it would seem, to take a version of DCEJ predicated on plain blamelessness seriously as a conception of EJ. The problem is that there could be beliefs which are blameless, only because it makes no sense to blame the believer for holding them. But intuitively it would then seem that it makes as little sense to evaluate such beliefs as epistemically justified.²² In terms of conceptual analysis it makes no difference, if, in the actual world, we humans hold such beliefs. But suppose that each of us is for some reason born with an irradicable belief, for or against which we may never obtain relevant evidence. E.g. the belief that the Big Bang beginning the present Universe was the fifth in a series of Big Bangs. Blaming us for this belief, if it is truly innate and irradicable, seems strange. But so does declaring it somehow epistemically justified. I shall assume here that adherents of DCEJ_{blame} are willing to bite this bullet. Perhaps they will, like Goldman rest content that their conception of EJ captures “some chunks of intuition regarding “justification” (in its epistemic application).

With this in place we can continue to investigate whether DCEJ_{blame} helps DCEJ overcome the first problem set up by Firth (the second and possibly deeper problem, I remind the reader, we have bracketed above). That is, can DCEJ now somehow, with the help of the clarifications undertaken, bypass the intuition that an agent may have belief which is at once blameworthy (or “impermissible” in the second sense) and epistemically justified as in Firth’s husband-and-wife example, where allegedly the husband would be blameworthy for sticking to a belief he should not stick to, even if it epistemically justified? If this case seems farfetched we might add another one: Could not one, in violation of DCEJ_{blame}, hold a belief which is at once epistemically *unjustified* and *blameless*? Namely in so far as one has an appropriate (i.e. exculpating) excuse for holding the relevant unjustified belief?

I believe that DCEJ_{blame} makes some progress with undermining the intuitive force of Firth’s husband and wife example. Indeed, when set up in terms of blame, where the risk of confusing the two basic senses of “permitted” no longer applies, one could

²² One way out of trouble here, is distinguishing justified belief from responsible belief, and maintain that the former is a purely negative concept, e.g. consisting in the absence of obligations breached in holding the belief. In this vein, irradicable beliefs may well be held justified, even if they are neither responsible, nor irresponsible. I hold this reply to be unconvincing: To me, justification seems more than a merely negative concept and cases of irradicable belief provide decisive evidence against this view.

argue that Firth begs the question in favour of a non-deontic conception of EJ: Arguably, the most straightforward way of making sense of his notion of epistemically justified, yet impermissible belief is to read “impermissible” is a non-deontic way. A belief impermissible in this sense is a belief falling short of a certain standard (in Firth’s case: a moral standard), just as the speeding in the example given earlier may be ruled “impermissible” in the sense that a standard set down by the traffic rules was violated without passing verdict on the driver’s level of blame or responsibility. If this is correct, Firth is not clearly committed to there being epistemically justified, yet blameworthy beliefs. Return again to the case of the innate “fifth Big Bang” belief above. This belief seemed blameless due to its irradicability. Yet, it seems strange to declare it epistemically justified. Still, adherents of DCEJ_{blame} most likely regard this conclusion a soft bullet to bite.

Even given this, though, I believe it advantageous to insist, cf. my prior statement that NNDSC & DE \Rightarrow DCEJ that adherents of DCEJ are not strictly committed to mere blameless belief being sufficient for EJ: For DE does not force upon them the right-to-left implication involved in DCEJ_{blame} as attributed to Ginet and Goldman above. Since this implication is at least somewhat controversial, I believe that from DCEJ_{blame}, DCEJ should salvage:

DCEJ_{blame,necessity}: Necessarily, Agent S is justified at time t in believing that p, only if S is blameless for believing that p at t

Taking stock in other, less formal, words, the best version of DCEJ (i.e. NNDSC & DE) we could find is now expressed by the following claims:

- A. By the most plausible rendition of DE, namely DCEJ_{blame,necessity}, if an agent is blameworthy for holding a belief, this necessarily bereaves her of EJ for it (by contraposition of DCEJ_{blame,necessity}).
- B. Due to NNDSC, no non-deontic condition logically suffices for EJ.

Let us see if this makes sense!

Arguably, debating (B) is ultimately a fight over intuitions: Proponents of non-deontic conceptions of EJ will present examples allegedly boosting their intuitions that a certain set of non-deontic conditions necessarily suffice for EJ. Proponents of DCEJ will deny this. I see no point of reviewing those debates in the current context.

Rather, I submit, (A) is the pivot around which the entire discussion interestingly turns. As we already saw above, an evidentialist (possibly following Clifford’s lead) may endorse the implication involved in (A), but insist that it is a *contingent* implication predicated on the actual ethical value attributed to belief with an adequate evidential support: In other words, by virtue of holding all beliefs without proper evidential support blameworthy, an evidentialist may enforce a materially conditionalized version of (A). As we also saw above, the proponent of DCEJ faces a very hard challenge finding sufficient evidence indicating that (A) should indeed be accepted in her preferred version involving logical necessity.

In the closing parts of this section, I shall address a rather different problem, threatening DCEJ on another level. This problem concerns how, given (A), DCEJ may still think of EJ as a distinctively *epistemic* notion. Here it is: Suppose S holds a belief strongly violating our moral as well as aesthetic values. We simply find S's belief that p very ugly (or rather, we find S very ugly in virtue of her believing p) as well as morally despicable. Now, does it not make sense to declare S's belief that p blameworthy based on these *non-epistemic* concerns alone? Are there really no non-epistemic conditions so severe that pointing to its epistemic justification does not suffice to exculpate a belief held under such conditions? DCEJ is committed to there being no such conditions. Remark, that DCEJ cannot convincingly take refuge in the claim that, even if "plain" blameworthiness does not suffice to establish epistemically unjustified belief, *epistemic blameworthiness* will. For, arguably, epistemic blameworthiness fails to make sense for the very same reasons that epistemic permissibility did: An agent, arguably, cannot at once be blameworthy and blameless for one and the same thing (e.g. believing that p). To insist otherwise is possibly a result of confusing the fact that various concerns (epistemic, moral, aesthetic etc.) may pull in different directions with regard to deciding an agent's ultimate blameworthiness for believing that p with the very different claim that an agent may be blameworthy in various respects (epistemic, moral, aesthetic etc.).²³ Above I have already elaborated on the reasons why "epistemic permissibility" makes no sense if not translated into terms uncommitting with regard to DCEJ. The same concerns apply here *mutatis mutandis* and do not need recapitulation. Suffice it to remind the reader that epistemic oughts and epistemic duties are quite different matters, but that the legitimacy of those notions does not establish DCEJ.

So, cannot DCEJ simply insist, in response to the worry just raised, that "plain" blameworthiness is in some legitimate sense an *epistemic* notion (in so far as, according to DCEJ, it nurtures close conceptual ties to EJ)? I maintain that, for reasons ultimately turning on the very nature of epistemic normativity, this reply will not work: Blamelessness, if anything, is an *intrinsic good*. To clarify, we may follow John O'Neill in carving out three senses of "intrinsic good":

1. Non-instrumental good. A good whose value does not depend on its being good for something else.
2. Non-relational good: A good which supervenes only on the intrinsic properties of the valuable object.
3. Objective good: A good which is not constituted by the evaluations of those valuing the good.²⁴

It is the first sense of "intrinsic good" which is important here. For, arguably, it makes little sense to say that my blamelessness is only valuable as a mean to some end. Rather my blamelessness is among those ends that might make other things valuable as means to achieve it.

²³ Here again, an elaborate argument must be omitted for lack of space. Some ethicists, perhaps, will insist that there are situations where one is "damned if one does, and damned if one doesn't".

²⁴ Paraphrased from O'Neill (2003, pp. 131–132).

If this is correct, DCEJ is saddled with a commitment to EJ being intrinsically valuable in O'Neill's first sense. For if not, how could it necessarily induce an intrinsic good? If EJ is taken to be an instrumental good, it would be at least logically possible for it not to be valuable, namely insofar that it did not causally promote the good to which it is a mean. But in virtue of (A) and the intrinsic goodness of blamelessness, according to DCEJ, EJ comes out necessarily good: good whenever it occurs. The problem is that, traditionally, no matter if epistemological normativity is predicated on the value on truth (as did Alston), the value of knowledge, or both, EJ is seen as valuable in virtue of being a mean to achieve the end of either truth or knowledge, and its claim to being an epistemic normative concept is seen as residing in its claim to be a mean to achieve those definitive epistemic master ends. So DCEJ must deviate from mainstream epistemology in regarding EJ as a non-instrumental good in O'Neill's first sense. I believe this provides yet another reason to regard DCEJ as a problematic position.

Remark that it does not help to hold EJ valuable even in demon worlds where all, or most, epistemically justified beliefs are false. And this irrespective of whether DCEJ is correct. For even though there is indeed a legitimate sense in which one would then regard EJ as an intrinsic good, it is not the sense relevant here: Even in a demon world, in an important sense EJ aims at true belief, only due to circumstances entirely external to believers in that world, EJ is doomed to be forever unsuccessful in that regard: From the believers' perspective, even in such a world aiming for EJ is a way of aiming for the truth. So, on the suppositions that ultimately we do not know if we live in a demon world, but still we value EJ, we may coherently value EJ as something to aim for if we aim for the truth. But this is not to claim that EJ is an intrinsic good in O'Neill's first sense. It remains the case that we value EJ only because we value truth, and therefore we value aims we might pursue in aiming for truth, such as EJ. Valuing something as a means to an end, does not mean that one should only value it when it is a *successful* mean to the relevant end. So valuing EJ even in demon worlds does not commit one to valuing EJ as an intrinsic good in the problematic way relevant here. In conclusion, even if, plausibly, EJ is valuable even in demon worlds, this does not help out DCEJ. For DCEJ is committed to EJ being intrinsically valuable in a sense much stronger than that.

5 Conclusion

Above we have scrutinized the nature of DCEJ. After considerable foot-work we found that arguably William Alston's influential account could be improved. Rather than being a thesis postulating synonymy between EJ statements and certain deontic statements, DCEJ was most charitably construed as a commitment to the dual principles:

Deontological entailment (DE): Any statement concerning an agent's EJ for a belief logically entails a statement applying deontic predicates to the agent

No Non-Deontic Sufficiency Condition (NNDSC): No statement containing only non-deontic terms logically entails a statement affirming a subject's EJ.

After much further foot-work we discovered that the most palatable reading of those principles were:

- A. Necessarily, An agent is blameless for holding any belief, if only this belief is epistemically justified.
- B. Necessarily, no non-deontic condition suffices for EJ.

In the run of the paper we also found that those principles put DCEJ in some trouble. Most importantly, the fierce modal strength of (A) makes DCEJ exceedingly hard to support evidentially and also forces DCEJ into accusing its enemies of an incomplete mastery of the concept of EJ, whereas the enemies of DCEJ may in turn more modestly accuse DCEJ of just getting its conception of EJ wrong without passing verdict on the basic competence of its adherents with regard to epistemic concepts. If, however, the modal strength of (A) is weakened, (A) becomes at once consistent with non-deontic conceptions of EJ, locating its exculpating force in auxiliary principles rather than logical necessity.

We also found that DCEJ needs to run against intuitions that (B) is subject to counter-examples, as well as intuitions that (A) is false due to there being beliefs so bad on non-epistemic merits that EJ cannot exculpate them. Finally we found DCEJ saddled with a very unusual commitment to EJ being a non-instrumental good in a very strong sense, a status arguably only ascribed within standard epistemology to true belief or knowledge (whether wisdom is a further non-instrumental good definitive of epistemic normativity need not concern us here).

It should be remarked that the entire discussion has turned on the *intension* of the concept of EJ. Its extension is quite another matter. Thus, we have not touched upon the vexed issue of whether there is in fact no blameworthy beliefs, e.g. due to our beliefs being outside the realm of circumstances we may control. I have argued at length elsewhere that there are in fact blameworthy beliefs and that such beliefs play a crucial part in inducing blameworthiness for actions partly caused by them.²⁵ But nowhere have I committed myself to blameworthy belief being necessarily epistemically unjustified belief. And the actuality of blameworthy belief does not in any way help out DCEJ. For it does not in any way establish conceptual ties between blamelessness and epistemic justification.

If this paper is successful in convincing the epistemological community of its conclusions, I believe its central significance lies in its demonstration of the conceptual as well as evidential independence of DCEJ from epistemic deontology, understood as the thesis that there are appropriate ascriptions of deontic status to an agent with regard to her beliefs: Epistemic deontology was shown not to be committed to DCEJ, which, again, was shown to be as a position with a lack of obvious evidential support by an argument in no way touching upon the possibility of belief blameworthy due to a lack of epistemic merit. Personally, I take epistemic deontology as a position with a great potential in terms of underwriting and clarifying vital parts of our general moral discourse, not least concerning ignorance and force as conditions exculpating certain actions. If epistemic deontology is a position anywhere as fruitful as I expect it to be and DCEJ is a position anywhere as problematic as I have argued above, it is

²⁵ See Nottelmann (2007) for a general treatment of such issues.

important that general discussions over epistemic deontology are not lead astray by concerns relevant to the appreciation of DCEJ only.

Many important issues, for lack of space, have received a rather brief treatment above. I hope that those unconvinced of my general conclusions will still appreciate that I have brought up a range of issues for adherents of DCEJ adequately to address, before DCEJ may deserve general recognition. It should be remarked, of course, that I do not have the slightest quarrel with theorists introducing “epistemic justification” as a term of art defined in deontic terms and willing to accept any commitment undertaken thereby. But I hope to have shown why the deontological conception of epistemic justification is nowhere as natural as Alston attempted to make it appear. Arguably, if construed along the lines suggested above, it is nowhere as popular either. But that is for another, more historical, paper to bring out.

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