JUSTIFICATION WITHOUT EXCUSES:

A DEFENSE OF CLASSICAL DEONTOLOGISM

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Abstract

Arguably, the original conception of epistemic justification comes from Descartes and Locke, who thought of justification deontologically. What’s more, their deontological conception was especially strict: there are no excuses for unjustified beliefs. Being the original, we ought to accept this conception of justification unless it proves untenable. Nowadays, however, most have abandoned classical deontologism as precisely that—untenable. It stands accused of requiring doxastic voluntarism and normative transparency. My goal is to rescue classical deontologism from these accusations. I show how, given a specific form of internalism coupled with a plausible theory of epistemic blame, we can be blameworthy for all of our (non-exempt) unjustified beliefs without transparency or voluntarism. The result is that the classical deontological conception of justification should regain its privileged status.

On the deontological conception of epistemic justification, justification pertains to whether we have met our epistemic duties or responsibilities in pursuit of the epistemic goal (roughly, attaining truth and avoiding falsehood). If holding a belief is epistemically permissible for us, then that belief is justified; if it is not permissible, then it is unjustified. Accordingly, unjustified beliefs invite some kind of blame. This was the conception of the early moderns, and it is from their discussions that our contemporary debates about justification descend. This is why the term “justification” was chosen in the first place—a term that “suggests duty, obligation, requirement…the whole deontological stable” (Plantinga 1993, p. 4). The early moderns who thought of justification in this way also saw justification as something that we could ensure our beliefs enjoyed if only we proceeded with enough care. Accordingly, they took the demanding stance that *every* unjustified belief (that could properly be considered ours) invites blame. There are no epistemic excuses. We can call this “classical deontologism” (Plantinga 1993). Being the original conception of justification, classical deontologism has a kind of default status for us: it should be accepted as correct *unless* it proves untenable.

Alas, from such exalted beginnings, the classical deontological conception has fallen on hard times. Though it still boasts esteemed adherents (e.g., Bonjour 1985; Chisholm 1977; Ginet 1975; Kornblith 1983; Pollock 1986; Steup 1999), most have abandoned it as untenable. Some object to the deontologism. The worry is that deontological categories such as duty, permissibility, and blame apply to beliefs only if we have sufficient voluntary control over them; but we apparently do not have the requisite kind of control over our beliefs. Even more object to the strictness. To exclude the possibility of excuses seems to require that we always be in a position to know what the norms of justification demand of us. But such normative transparency is highly suspect. So, the classical deontological conception appears to rely on two highly questionable assumptions—doxastic voluntarism and normative transparency.

In this instance, appearances are misleading. I will argue that the classical deontological conception of justification can be preserved without assuming either voluntarism or transparency.

Having removed the main objections to the classical deontological conception, I conclude that it should regain its status as the default conception of justification.

I begin in section 1 by explaining why I take the classical deontological conception to be the default and what exactly I mean by that. I follow this in section 2 by articulating the main objections leveled against this conception of justification: namely, that it requires doxastic voluntarism and normative transparency. In section 3-4, I show how classical deontologism can be preserved sans voluntarism or transparency with the aid of a specific form of internalism.[[1]](#endnote-1)

1. Classical Deontologism

My starting assumption is that the contemporary notion of justification emerges predominantly from the epistemological debates of the early modern period—particularly from Descartes and Locke, though also Hume, Reid, and others as well. This is not to say that discussions relevant to justification do not occur before this. Everyone is familiar, for instance, with Plato’s claim in the *Theaetetus* that knowledge requires true judgment *with an account* (201d). And the philosophical schools following Plato foreshadowed many of the same debates about justification present today. Nevertheless, our conversations about justification today are *continuations* of early modern debates in a way that isn’t quite true of ancient or medieval debates (even if the latter contain valuable lessons for the former). It is in this sense that the contemporary notion of justification originates from early modern epistemology (see Plantinga 1993, ft 24).

I propose that the original conception of justification should serve as the default for our own. By this I mean two things. First, as a matter of language, if the term “justification” originally denotes X but not Y, then other things being equal, “justification” will continue to denote X and not Y, and those who try to use it to denote Y are simply misusing the term. Of course, if people continually use “justification” to denote Y instead of X, then at some point they can actually shift the meaning of the term such that “justification” (at least in some contexts) actually does come to denote Y. (I fear this has happened or is dangerously close to happening in epistemology today.) So, second, I also mean that we ought to resist this semantic shift and the linguistic behavior that leads to it. After all, it is not always improper to change the meaning of a term, say, if it is currently being used to refer to X but Y is more coherent than X and better fits the role in our system that X was originally intended to play. But the onus is on those who would deviate from the original meaning. Thus, we should resist reconceiving of justification unless the original conception proves to be problematic in serious ways.

When we look at early modern figures, what we see is that justification is a decidedly *deontological* notion. We were assumed to have duties, responsibilities, requirements governing how to believe, and the beliefs that failed to meet these were deemed impermissible. Descartes and Locke are especially clear that they are relying on deontological conceptions of justification (see Plantinga 1993, Ch. 1, § 3-4). Locke writes:

He that believes, without having any Reason for believing, may be in love with his own Fancies; but neither seeks Truth as he ought, nor pays the Obedience due his Maker, who would have him use those discerning Faculties he has given him, to keep him out of Mistake and Error. He that does not this to the best of his Power, however he sometimes lights on Truth, is in the right but by chance; and I know not whether the luckiness of the Accident will excuse the irregularity of his proceeding. This at least is certain, that he must be accountable for whatever Mistakes he runs into: whereas he that makes use of the Light and Faculties GOD has given him, and seeks sincerely to discover Truth, by those Helps and Abilities he has, may have this satisfaction in doing his Duty as a rational creature, that though he should miss Truth, he will not miss the Reward of it. For he governs his assent right, and places it as he should, who in any Case or Matter whatsoever, believes or disbelieves, according as Reason directs him. He that does otherwise, transgresses against his own Light, and misuses those Faculties, which were given him... (Locke 1695/1975, p. 688)

In this passage, Locke indicates that we have a *duty* to believe in a justified manner. We are *accountable* for our errors when we do not, and stand in need of *excuse* if we are to escape reactive responses. Indeed, Locke’s suggestion is that to fail to believe as one should is to disobey God, and may therefore be considered a kind of epistemic *sin*. Descartes adds to this:

But if I hold off from making a judgment when I do not perceive what is true with sufficient clarity and distinctness, it is clear that I am acting properly and am not committing an error. … But were I to embrace the other alternative, it will be by sheer luck that I happen upon the truth; but I will still not be without fault, for it is manifest by the light of nature that a perception of the part of the intellect must always precede a determination on the part of the will. Inherent in this incorrect use of free will is the privation that constitutes the very essence of error. (Descartes 1641/2006, p. 33)

Descartes says here that we are at fault, or *blameworthy*,for believing as we ought not. Unjustified beliefs stem, he says, from “the privation that constitutes the very essence of error,” which he elsewhere defines as “a lack of some knowledge that somehow ought to be in me” (Descartes 1641/2006, p. 30). They arise, in other words, from some *deficiency* in us or our intellects.

While neither as explicit nor severe as Descartes and Locke, other early moderns like Hume and Reid also employ deontological conceptions of justification (McAllister 2016). For instance, Reid is constantly arguing against Hume—his paradigm skeptic—that the man of common sense cannot be blamed for believing as he does. Nicholas Wolterstorff writes, “Reid’s skeptic has his eye on *entitltement*—on what one is permitted to believe and on what one is not permitted to believe—on what one may believe and on what one must not believe” (Wolterstorff 2001, p. 188). Reid and Hume’s point of dispute is not a practical one: both men acknowledge that, practically speaking, we cannot be blamed for holding such beliefs given their indispensability for governing the affairs of common life. Rather, the charge that Hume lays against the man of common sense is a distinctively *epistemic* one—it is that, unlike the wise man, the man of common sense does not apportion his beliefs to the evidence and so believes in a manner that is epistemically impermissible. Hume doesn’t seem to think of this as a form of intellectual sin, as Locke does, but he does think it unwise. And it is this epistemic accusation that Reid attempts to refute. Regardless of who is right (short answer: Reid; long answer: McAllister, forthcoming), both Hume and Reid are thinking of justification deontologically.

Another aspect to the early modern’s deontological conception—again, most prominently in Descartes and Locke—was its strictness. Unjustified beliefs always stem from some defect in the subject’s theorizing and so warrant blame. For instance, Descartes thought that unjustified beliefs could be avoided simply by limiting beliefs to only those things that one clearly and distinctly perceives. Moreover, he believed one is always in a position to detect whether this condition obtains, if only one reflects carefully enough, and can voluntarily withhold belief when it does not. Generally speaking, I think the early moderns are united with Descartes in taking our epistemic duties to involve believing only if certain internal conditions obtained—conditions that, because they are internal, are supposed to be within our ability to discern and satisfy if only we are sufficiently contentious. Thus, Plantinga writes: “As the classical deontologist sees things, … whether we are justified in our beliefs is up to us.” He continues:

We need give no hostages to fortune when it comes to justification; here our destiny is entirely in our own hands. The fates may conspire to deceive me …. Even so, I can still do my epistemic duty; I can still do my best; I can still be above reproach. (Plantinga 1993, p. 15)

As such, we are without excuse against unjustified beliefs.

Of course, there may be circumstances where doing one’s best doesn’t make sense practically speaking, in which case one has a *practical* excuse for terminating inquiry prematurely; but from a purely epistemic point of view, unjustified beliefs will always fail in a way that deserves epistemic blame. There are no distinctively *epistemic* excuses.[[2]](#endnote-2) Here I am drawing a distinction between the practical and epistemic realms of evaluation. This is a distinction that some of the early moderns I have appealed to would not themselves recognize. If necessary, I can avoid this controversy simply by focusing on those situations in which one has good practical reasons to be fully contentious, to do one’s best. In *those* situations, the beliefs we form are without excuse.

One further qualification must be made. Unjustified beliefs formed by bypassing or obstructing the believer’s own rational belief-forming dispositions do not subject one to (as much) blame. Extreme examples include beliefs forced on one through neurological rewiring, brainwashing, or hypnosis. For these, the subject is not eligible for blame at all. More ordinary examples include beliefs formed while sleep deprived, under a serious time crunch, or drunk. These beliefs may be less blameworthy than they otherwise might be. This is not because such beliefs are *excused*, however, but because they are to varying degrees *exempted* (Strawson 1962).[[3]](#endnote-3) The difference is that excuses defeat *prima facie* blame. They operate in a context where blame is initially invited but, because of the excuse, subsequently set aside. Exemptions, however, prevent one from being opened up to blame in the first place. Beliefs that do not result from the full and uninterrupted operation of the subject’s belief-forming dispositions are to that extent exempt, and this is precisely because they are not *the subject’s* beliefs in the fullest sense. They do not represent the subject’s settled take on the matter. And as such they do not open the subject up to criticism as one’s non-exempt beliefs do.[[4]](#endnote-4) Let us center our discussion, then, on these non-exempt beliefs. These are the ones for which there is supposedly no shelter from blame.[[5]](#endnote-5)

To recap, I have submitted that the predominant early modern conception of justification has the following two features:

Deontologism – S’s belief is unjustified if and only if it is impermissible for S.

Strictness – If S’s (non-exempt) belief is unjustified, then S can be blamed for it.

I’ve also proposed that the early modern conception of justification is the original one and, as such, serves as the default for our own. That being said, if the original conception turns out to be deeply confused, then perhaps we would be warranted in moving away from it towards something more tenable. And this is no idle threat. There are serious reasons for thinking that the classical deontological conception of justification *is* confused. Some argue that we cannot be blamed for violating epistemic norms at all; and others that, even if we can be blamed in select instances, we cannot be blamed for all of our non-exempt beliefs. We will look at these objections more closely in the next section, and I will attempt to rebut them in the sections after that.

2. Objections to the Classical Deontological Conception

The most well-known objection to the classical deontological conception of justification is that it requires *doxastic voluntarism*. William Alston writes,

By the time honored principle that “Ought implies can”, one can be obliged to do A only if one has an effective choice as to whether to do A. It is equally obvious that it makes no sense to speak of S’s being permitted or forbidden to do A if S lacks an effective choice as to whether to do A. And it seems even more obvious, if possible, that S cannot be rightly blamed for doing (or not doing) A if S is incapable of effectively deciding whether or not to do A. (Alston 1988, p. 259)

In short, a deontological conception of justification “is viable only if beliefs are sufficiently under voluntary control to render such concepts as *requirement*, *permission*, *obligation*, *reproach*, and *blame* applicable to them” (Alston 1988, p. 259). While many throughout history have endorsed some form of doxastic voluntarism—including (arguably) Augustine, Aquinas, Pascal, Descartes, Locke, and William James—most today reject it, and understandably so. We seem to have direct voluntary control over few if any of our beliefs. We may have indirect voluntary control over many more, but this control does not seem extensive enough to sustain a general duty to believe in a particular manner (Alston 1988). There may be ways to defend voluntarism (e.g., Steup 2000), but for the purposes of this paper let us grant its demise.

This first objection is directed at the deontologism. The second objection we will consider is directed at the strictness. The accusation is that strictness requires the norms of justification to be *normatively transparent*, meaning that we are always in a position to know (or justifiably believe) what we should or should not believe according to those norms.[[6]](#endnote-6) The idea is that a belief cannot subject us to blame if we are non-culpably ignorant of whether that belief accords with the relevant norm. Notice the issue here is not that our rational belief-forming dispositions are deprived of an opportunity to run their course (which would make the belief exempt), but that even our full efforts may leave us ignorant of what duty requires of us. In short, our ignorance provides us with an excuse.

This line of thought offers insight into the tight connection, both theoretically and historically, between classical deontologism and internalism (Plantinga 1993; Goldman 1999). For normative transparency is possible only if all of the normatively relevant conditions are transparent—that is, we are always in a position to know (or justifiably believe) whether or not such conditions obtain. On externalism, however, it is obvious that the normatively relevant conditions are nottransparent since they involve conditions external to the subject’s mind. We can *often* tell whether such external conditions obtain, but we cannot *always* do so. Thus, externalists friendly to deontologism allow for blameless violations of the norms of justification (e.g., Littlejohn, forthcoming; Williamson, forthcoming) and so reject deontologism in its classical form.[[7]](#endnote-7) On internalism, however, the normatively relevant conditions are limited to (1) the presence or absence of various internal mental states and (2) what those states indicate to be true—both of which have traditionally been thought of as transparent.

Today, however, the transparency of these domains is commonly rejected. Perhaps the most prominent objection to the transparency of the mental is Williamson’s anti-luminosity argument (Williamson 2000, Ch. 4). Beyond this, it is increasingly common to see empirical critiques of mental transparency (e.g., Gopnik 1983; Carruthers 2011; Schwitzgebel 2006, 2011) as well as intuitive counterexamples (e.g., Huemer 2007, p. 35; Srinivasan 2015, p. 275). Also under fire is the transparency of support relations. Why think we are *always* in a position to know or justifiably believe what our mental states indicate to be true? There is no reason to expect such guarantees, as an increasing number of epistemologists have come to admit (e.g., Kvanvig 2014, Ch. 2, § 5). Thus, there are reasons for thinking that normative transparency is unattainable. There are plausible defenses of transparency in one form or another (e.g., Smithies 2019), but we will cede that normative transparency is false if only for the sake of argument.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The upshot is that the traditional, deontological conception of justification seems to rely on two questionable assumptions—doxastic voluntarism and normative transparency—threatening to render that conception untenable. Thus, Alston writes:

The most fundamental issue raised by the claim of [believing permissibly] to be an epistemic desideratum is whether believings are under effective voluntary control. If they are not and hence if deontological terms do not apply to them, alleged epistemic desiderata like [believing permissibly] do not get so far as to be a candidate for an epistemic desideratum. It suffers shipwreck before leaving port. (Alston 2005, p. 60)

And Amia Srinivasan adds:

Without privileged access to our own minds, there are no norms that can invariably guide our actions, and no norms that are immune from blameless violation. This will come as bad news to those normative theorists who think that certain central normative notions—e.g. the ethical ought or epistemic justification—should be cashed out in terms of subjects’ mental states precisely in order to generate norms that are action-guiding and immune from blameless violation. ... More generally, once we have accepted that our relationship to our own minds lacks the perfect intimacy promised by Cartesianism, we are, for better or worse, left with the view that the normative realm is suffused with ignorance and bad luck. (Srinivasan 2015, p. 273)

Must the classical deontological conception be relinquished as these philosophers maintain? I argue that it need not. In the next two sections, I will show how we can be blameworthy for all of our non-exempt unjustified beliefs without assuming voluntarism or transparency.

3. Making Sense of Epistemic Blame

Our first task must be to get clear on what it takes for deontological concepts like impermissibility or duty to have application within the epistemic sphere. I will then show how those conditions can be satisfied sans voluntarism and transparency. The focus in this section is on how *any* belief might be impermissible or blameworthy. (I will focus exclusively on negative evaluations for convenience.) The focus of the following section is on whether this model can be extended to all of our non-exempt beliefs as required by strictness.

There are different ways of characterizing epistemic deontologism, some more strenuous than others. To start, Feldman suggests that a theory may be an instance of deontologism so long as it meets the following minimal condition: “Sentences about what one ought to believe, and what is required or permissible, follow from distinctively epistemic evaluations” (Feldman 2008, pp. 354-355). We must then ask ourselves what the truth conditions are for sentences like, “It is impermissible for S to believe p.” Feldman himself seems to opt for a set of truth conditions that are easily satisfied, making deontologism fairly uncontroversial. For instance, what is thought to be the main *alternative* to deontologism for internalists conceives of justification in terms of fit with the evidence (Conee and Feldman 2004, Ch. 4), but Feldman himself classifies this theory as meeting the minimal characterization of deontologism (Feldman 2000; 2008, § 5). If we want to avoid the concern that our deontologism is insubstantial or trivially true, we can do so by requiring more for deontological sentences to come out true.

One might think that sentences like “It is impermissible for S to believe p” are true only if believing p entitles us to take certain negative reactive attitudes or actions either towards S or towards S’s belief that p. Such characterizations of deontologism come in many varieties, again some more strenuous than others, depending on the kindof reactive responses licensed by impermissible beliefs. With respect to reactive *attitudes*,an important question is whether we must be entitled to *blame* the subject for impermissible beliefs (sans an excuse)? And if so, what is blame and when is it appropriate? (Blame is far more severe, and blameworthiness harder to assign, on some views than on others.) With respect to reactive *actions*, an important question is whether we must be entitled to sanction or punish blameworthy subjects and in what ways? Or are lesser reactive actions sufficient?

Rather than trying to answer all of these questions, I will simply propose a characterization of epistemic deontologism that is plainly substantial. It will require that the subject be blameworthy for impermissible beliefs in the absence of an excuse, and that impermissible beliefs open one up, not to sanction or punishment, but at least to some minimal reactive actions.

As we begin, remember that our account of epistemic impermissibility and blame cannot suppose that we have any substantial direct, or even indirect, voluntary control over what we believe. We are looking for whether deontologism can be preserved in the absence of doxastic voluntarism. But in ruling out voluntarism, Alston’s worry looms large: *how can we be blamed for our beliefs if we do not have a choice about them?* This worry has at least three components. The first concerns the idea that “ought implies can.” We must be *able* to believe as we should to be blamed for not doing so, but presumably I can’t believe other than I do unless belief is voluntary. The second worry, related to the first, is that I must have *control* over what I believe in order to be blamed for believing in a particular manner. But what could that control consist in except voluntarily choosing what to believe? The third and final worry is that even if there are some non-voluntarist ways of understanding the required kind of ability and control, those won’t be sufficient to allow us to be truly *blameworthy* for our beliefs (where the term is uttered with great emphasis).

Regarding the first worry, let us imagine that a certain belief of ours, one which breaks a norm, is causally determined—roughly, the conditions leading up to the belief (including my set of cognitive dispositions) in conjunction with the laws of nature entail that I form that belief. The charge is that I can’t believe as I ought to (the violating belief is determined after all) and so I cannot be blamed for it. The intuition here is similar to the one driving the principle of alternate possibilities with respect to moral responsibility. We might look, then, to compatibilist treatments of this principle for guidance. We could, of course, follow certain philosophers in simply denying the need for alternate possibilities (as does Ryan 2003, § 4), but we needn’t. For there is a legitimate sense in which we can believe differently even if that belief is determined: that is, if we were to possess different intellectual constitutions, then we would believe differently. Thus, so long as it is possible for us to possess an intellectual constitution that would result in the normatively appropriate attitude, then we can believe as we ought to in the required sense. Since compatibilism is the predominant position on freedom and moral responsibility, it seems these philosophers at least should concede that the determination of our beliefs does not in and of itself preclude our being blameworthy for them (Ryan 2003; Steup 2008).

The second worry says that I can only be blamed for things that are under my control, but beliefs are not things under my control. They happen apart from my will and so I have no say in the matter. Beliefs do happen apart from our wills (we are granting), but that does not mean we have no say in the matter. The objection assumes that I do not really control my beliefs unless I am able to determine what to believe in some extrinsic way: by coming to reflect on what my epistemic norms require of me and then choosing which attitude to take. On such extrinsic models of control, “I exercise [agential control over my beliefs], not in believing itself, but in doing certain other things that affect my beliefs” (Boyle 2009, p. 126). Assuming that real control is extrinsic control, David Owens argues that we needn’t have control over our beliefs to maintain responsibility for them (Owens 2000), and he is right given that assumption. But I think we would do better to reject that assumption. We ought instead to think about control over beliefs in a more intrinsic way. Matthew Boyle explains, “On this view, we exercise our capacity for cognitive self-determination, not primarily in doing things that affect our beliefs, but in *holding* whatever beliefs we hold” (Boyle 2009, p. 127). In defense of this view, Boyle draws a comparison to actions:

If I have agential control over anything, I certainly have it over the things I do intentionally. Whether to perform these actions is up to me. But the control I exercise over my intentional actions is surely not an extrinsic form of control. I do not control them by acting *on* them. Rather, my intentional actions are themselves my acts: they are not extrinsically but intrinsically under my control. (Boyle 2009, p. 142)

On this approach, when an action arises out of the rational dispositions constituting my character, that action is under my control, not because I am able to change that action through reflection or will that I will differently, but simply because it arises from those rational dispositions which are my own. I perform *that* action *because* I am the way that I am—because certain reasons for acting that way are compelling to me. Such actions are under my control in a significant way (and this remains true even if there are other, more robust forms of control over those actions that I lack). The same is true of doxastic attitudes. If a belief is the manifestation of my own rational dispositions—and so is to that degree not exempt—then that belief is under my control in an important sense. I believe it *because* my intellect is the way that it is—because certain reasons for believing that way are compelling to me.[[9]](#endnote-9) This is sufficient control to sustain blame.

If this seems like cheating, might I suggest that this is really the third worry: that blame is something severe and altogether too harsh to be appropriately directed at intellectual agents for violating the norms of belief—not unless we could pick and choose what we believe in, which we can’t. If this is the heart of the matter (and I suspect that for most people it is), then may I suggest that this is simply too strong a view of blame. Blame *can* be especially harsh, but it needn’t be. Here it may be helpful to introduce Angela Smith’s distinction between the *depth* of an appraisal, “which concerns whether the person can legitimately be asked to justify that for which he is being appraised,” and its *significance*, “which concerns the kind of importance that attaches to his failing to meet the normative standards that apply in the particular case” (Smith 2008, p. 384). To say that someone deserves blame for a performance is only to note the depth of an appraisal to which the performing agent is thereby subject; it does not entail that the failure of this performance is of grave significance. Relatedly, the severity of the reactive attitudes and actions that constitute or accompany blame can differ dramatically from case to case. Even within the moral sphere, the manner in which we blame agents for serious moral failings is much more severe than for minor peccadillos. The former might license strong reactive attitudes (condemnation; scorn; abhorrence) and actions (rebuke; social ostracization; imprisonment), but not the latter. And when we consider what blame looks like in the less severe cases, it becomes increasingly clear that deviant beliefs can make us blameworthy in this milder way.

To illustrate the point, consider one of the more prominent theories of moral blame from Gary Watson (Watson 1996). On Watson’s view, there is a certain kind of blame in which “to blame (morally) is to attribute something to a (moral) fault in the agent” (Watson 1996, p. 230-231). Blame is thus, for Watson, a kind of negative evaluation in which one judges there to be some deficiency within the agent. An action can make one blameworthy, then, if it fails with respect to some standard of excellence andthe explanation for the failure traces back to some deficiency within one’s moral character. Now, it is possible for there to be failings for which we are not blameworthy that trace back to some deficiency within us. For instance, we may fail to meet certain standards of health because of a defect within one of our organs, but we are not necessarily blameworthy for that failing. It matters, then, that our actions are based on *reasons*, or at least formed through rational dispositions, in which case they disclose something about our moral agency in ways that meeting or not meeting the standards of health do not. Watson says,

But if what I do flows from my values and ends, there is a stronger sense in which my activities are inescapably my own: I am committed to them. As declarations of my adopted ends, they express what I’m about, my identity as an agent. They can be evaluated in distinctive ways (not just as welcome or unwelcome) because they themselves are exercises of my evaluative capacities. (Watson 1996, p. 233)

Pamela Hieronymi makes a similar point in arguing that performances for which one is “answerable for an account of one’s reasons” are ones that “reveal one’s take on what is true or important or worthwhile, and so can help to determine the quality of one’s will. But the quality of one’s will just is the object of moral assessment and the reactive attitudes” (Hieronymi 2008, p. 362). Watson calls this “the self-disclosure view” of responsibility (see also “real self views” in Wolf 1990).

Let’s apply all of this to belief. Beliefs too are based on reasons and are thus performances for which we are answerable for an account of our reasons. Accordingly, our beliefs can disclose who we are as intellectual agents. They can reveal the quality of our intellects. Thus, if a belief fails with respect to some epistemic standard of excellence (a genuine epistemic norm) and that failure is attributable to us, then that belief opens us up to a negative evaluative judgment. That is, one is thereby entitled to judge that we are intellectually deficient, or flawed intellectual agents, and that that is why we erred. But, mimicking Watson, “to blame (epistemically) is to attribute something to an (intellectual) fault in the agent.” Thus, we are in Watson’s sense *blameworthy* for such beliefs.

This is a plausible account of epistemic blame. Indeed, Watson’s view is an even more plausible view of epistemicblame than it is of moralblame, since the ways in which we morally blame are often much harsher, and this is a comparatively mild account of blame. Thus, even if one demands more for moral responsibility specifically, Watson’s account may nevertheless capture a significant sense in which we can be epistemically responsible for our beliefs.

Nevertheless, one may still sense that this simply isn’t a robust enough account of blame. Plausibly blame also consists in, or in some other way requires, additional negative reactive attitudes or actions. Let us grant that it is so. Notice that the recognition of a deficiency within one’s intellect would certainly license *disapproval* of that agent or his or her intellectual constitution. This is a negative reactive attitude called for by certain failed beliefs. As for reactive actions, failed beliefs at the very least open one up to the demand that one “explain or justify her rational activity” and “re-assess it if an adequate justification cannot be provided” (Smith 2008, p. 381). This alone may be enough of a reactive action to ground blame (as on Smith 2005; 2008). Regardless, failed beliefs may also permit one to encourage or pressure the offending agent to seek further evidence or intellectual development.

We therefore have a plausible account of epistemic blame that does not rely on doxastic voluntarism. Neither does it rely on normative transparency. A belief is blameworthy so long as it reveals a deficiency within my intellect, thereby subjecting me to a negative evaluation on that basis. This can be true even if I am completely unaware that my belief results from such a deficiency. What about the worry expressed in previous sections: that we cannot be fairly blamed for a violation that we do not know we’re committing? Once again, unless one is thinking about blame as something more severe, the answer to this question has already been made clear: we are exposed to blame by that belief because it testifies to some defect within us that others can legitimately disapprove of and encourage us to correct.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Putting all of this together results in a substantial account of epistemic blame and, subsequently, epistemic impermissibility. To review, impermissible beliefs are those that are blameworthy absent excuses, and we are blameworthy for those beliefs that reveal a defect within our intellects. This is because the revelation of this defect permits others to (1) form negative evaluative judgments about us as defective intellectual agents, (2) form negative emotional attitudes such as disapproval towards us or our intellectual constitutions on the basis of that defect, and (3) take reactive actions towards us such as enjoining us to defend our beliefs, to reassess them, to pursue further evidence, or to set about improving the quality of our intellects. If one cannot shake the sense that more severe attitudes or actions are required for genuine blame, then we must part ways as friends. Though I’m hopeful we can agree that using “epistemic blame” to describe this sort of negative posture is not a gross misuse of the term.

To resituate ourselves, we have just seen how epistemic deontologism can be maintained without supposing any kind of voluntary control over our beliefs or knowledge of their normative standing. This is an important first step in defending the classical deontological conception of justification, but it is not the last. It is one thing to admit that *some* of our unjustified beliefs are blameworthy in this way; it is another to allow that *all* of them are. But the latter, stronger claim is needed to maintain strictness. In short, I also need to show that the above account can be applied categorically to all unjustified beliefs.

4. Salvaging Strictness

As we begin, remember that our focus is on non-exempt beliefs, or those that result from our own rational belief-forming dispositions operating without obstruction or interference. Being fully under our (intrinsic) control, these beliefs reveal the true quality of our intellects and so always leave us eligible for blame. The question we must ask ourselves is whether it is possible that unjustified beliefs of this sort always result from some deficiency within our intellects, the revelation of such deficiencies warranting blame. If I can show how this is possible, without assuming transparency or voluntarism, then I will have shown how strictness can be maintained.

To avoid any whiff of voluntarism or transparency, I will limit myself here to a decidedly non-intellectualist model of belief formation (Pollock 1987). On this non-intellectualist model, beliefs are formed automatically by triggering rational cognitive dispositions. Importantly, the triggering conditions of these dispositions need not involve any kind of voluntary action, nor must they involve any reflective awareness of one’s own mental states. Instead, our rational belief-forming dispositions are triggered, if not by other beliefs, then by the possession of various experiential states in and of themselves. For example, I glance outside and enjoy the perceptual experience of a tree. I do not *reflect* on that experience (there is no second-order acknowledgement of its existence) nor do I choose to do anything in response to it. Rather, the mere existence of that perceptual experience directly triggers my rational belief-forming dispositions resulting in a belief that there is a tree. The possibility of such “unreflective causal sensitivity to the evidence” is widely recognized (Williamson 2000, p. 180; Owens 2000, p. 22). Any explanation of strictness relying on such unreflective sensitivity cannot be accused of assuming voluntarism or transparency.

Let us assume, then, that the norms of justification dictate: *Believe p if and only if X obtains*. On our non-intellectualist model of belief formation, all that is required for perfect adherence to that norm is that we possess a total set of rational belief-forming dispositions such that belief in p is occasioned if and only if X obtains. Now if two assumptions hold true—first, that this is in fact a genuine epistemic norm, and second, that it is possible for humans like us to be intellectually constituted in this way—then to lack one of the dispositions in that total set is an intellectual *deficiency*. All this adds up to the following: we can be blameworthy for every non-exempt belief that violates the norms of justification so long as there is a set of rational dispositions available to us that automatically unfold in all and only the beliefs called for by those norms. For then any non-exempt belief which fails to adhere to those norms necessarily results from an intellectual deficiency—the lack of some cognitive disposition that is possible and proper for humans like us to possess.

But is such a set of dispositions available to us? Indeed it is, at least insofar as we adopt a particular form of internalism about justification. Consider a form of internalism which defines internal states as those that are “directly accessible to our automatic processing systems” (Pollock 1987, p. 69)—that is, those whose presence or absence can directly trigger our rational belief-forming dispositions like the perceptual experience described above. On this form of internalism (defended in Pollock and Cruz 1999), all of the normatively relevant conditions on justification are directly causally accessible to us. This means it is possible for us to be disposed to form belief if and only if those conditions obtain. Indeed, agents so disposed are guaranteed (with respect to non-exempt beliefs) not only *conformance* to the norm of justification—believing when and only when X obtains—but also *compliance* with it—believing when and only when X obtains *because* X does or does not obtain. This is because the very same conditions that make permissible the belief are also the conditions that causally trigger the belief; and since these dispositions are *rational* (as opposed to mere reflexes), those causal triggers also serve as the rational basis of the resulting belief. Thus, the agents are not only permitted to believe (propositional justification) whenever they do, but in fact always form permissible beliefs (doxastic justification).[[11]](#endnote-11)

The upshot is that we can maintain strictness if we adopt a form of causal internalism on which all of the normatively relevant conditions are causally accessible to us in the aforementioned sense. There are reasons for thinking that causal internalism preserves many of the major motivations for internalism while avoiding its usual drawbacks, but we must leave that discussion for another forum.

5. Conclusion

In closing, we can draw the tentative conclusion that the classical deontological conception of justification is correct. It follows, first, that those thinking of justification as something else are in fact thinking of something other than justification; and, second, that efforts to reconceive of justification as something else should cease and the terminology of “justification” should be conceded.[[12]](#endnote-12) Such efforts are only appropriate if the original conception is deeply confused, but I’ve countered the most prominent reasons for thinking that it is.

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1. NOTES

   Thanks go to Jonathan Kvanvig, Kevin McCain, Ted Poston, Thomas Ruesser, and the audiences at the Alabama Philosophical Society and American Philosophical Association meetings, as well as two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments.

   Justification plausibly pertains to the full gamut of doxastic attitudes including beliefs, disbeliefs, and withholdings, as well as degrees of belief or credences or levels of confidence (however these are understood). Nevertheless, I will limit the discussion to the justification of beliefsfor convenience. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “Blame” and “excuses” will refer specifically to epistemic blame and epistemic excuses unless otherwise specified. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I must thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this distinction. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The importance of this will become more apparent after the account of epistemic blame in section 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Littlejohn forthcoming contrasts Strawson’s “trichotomous scheme” with J.L. Austin’s “dichotomous scheme” (from Austin 1957) in which there are only either justifications or excuses. In line with Austin’s scheme, some think of the situations I have described as excuses instead of exemptions (see, e.g., Steup 1988, p. 78). Nothing in my argument turns on this. Even if we opt for Austin’s scheme, it remains the case that different kinds of excuses operate in different ways. In particular, we can draw a distinction between exempting-excuses and defeating-excuses as I have done above. In which case we can say that the classical deontologism of the early moderns allows for exempting-excuses but not defeating ones. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The definition of transparency comes from Williamson (2000) and Berker (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Evil demon victims provide a clear example of what externalists consider blameless violations. According to Williamson and others, while these victims violate the norms of justification, and so initially invite blame, their violations are fully excused (Williamson, forthcoming). Just to be clear, I would add that their blamelessness cannot be attributed to any exemption. The evil demon does not work by *bypassing* the subject’s belief-forming dispositions but by turning those dispositions against him. That is, the demon feeds experiences to the subject, which trigger the subject’s own belief-forming dispositions, which then result in belief. Thus, these beliefs represent the subject’s settled take on the issues, and so are not exempt from blame. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Notice that if normative transparency isn’t false, then this is decidedly *good news* for classical deontologism—it becomes that much easier to defend. What I am arguing is just that defending classical deontologism doesn’t *require* normative transparency as many have thought. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. What is essential here is that the beliefs result from my own rational dispositions, not that they be based on reasons per se. For instance, if one’s rational dispositions were to produce a belief that is not based on reasons, then such a belief would still be under one’s intrinsic control in the relevant sense. (Though I’m not confident this is possible. Perhaps what makes a disposition rational *just is* that it is responsive to reasons, in which case no beliefs formed by our rational dispositions are entirely baseless.) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Note that the negative evaluations, attitudes, and actions must be prompted by the revealed defect specifically. There can be situations where we react negatively, but where these reactions are not prompted by the revelation of any intellectual vice within the agent per se. This would not count as blame. To give an example, a reviewer points out that we may react negatively to a flat-earther who was indoctrinated by an insular community to believe the earth is flat. It is certainly fair to react negatively to this situation in many ways—we might judge the situation to be tragic, or feel anger towards the community, or encourage the flat-earther to seek further evidence—but this would not constitute blame. Blame only enters the picture if we take his belief to result from some defect within the agent himself—say he had access to strong counterarguments but dismissed them out of fear of losing his family and friends. Here the source of his belief is not that his evidence was misleading but that it was mishandled. The negative reactions that result from recognizing this mishandling, and the intellectual dispositions underlying it, are the ones that constitute blame. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Thanks go to an anonymous reviewer for the distinction between conformance and compliance. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Plantinga (1993) provides an example of how to continue inquiring into externalist norms while ceding the language of justification. He calls the positive epistemic status under investigation “warrant” instead.

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