

Non-Agential Permissibility in Epistemology*

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Abstract: Paul Silva has recently argued that doxastic justification does not have a basing requirement. An important part of his argument depends on the assumption that doxastic and moral permissibility have a parallel structure. I here reply to Silva's argument by challenging this assumption. I claim that moral permissibility is an agential notion, while doxastic permissibility is not. I then briefly explore the nature of these notions and briefly consider their implications for praise and blame.

Keywords: Justification, Basing Relation, Permissibility, Praise and Blame.

Introduction

There is a sense in which you are justified in believing a certain proposition p by simply having reasons that support it. Call this *propositional justification*. There is another sense in which you are justified in believing that p only if you base your belief that p on those very reasons you have that support it. Call this *doxastic justification*. So you can be propositionally justified in believing that the defendant is guilty after hearing all of the evidence, for example, while at the same time failing to be doxastically justified: perhaps you simply have not formed that belief in the first place; perhaps you have formed it on the basis of reasons that do not support it after all. Call all of this *the received wisdom*.

Some have recently disagreed. Specifically, some have claimed that the requirements for doxastic justification are not as strong as the received wisdom seems to suggest. I here argue that at least one instance of such disagreement is based on faulty grounds. Close examination of these grounds and faults, however, illuminates the nature of permissibility in epistemology.

Consider Paul Silva's argument against the received wisdom.¹ He begins with a plausible guiding assumption:

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¹Silva's argument has a positive and a negative stage. The positive stage consists in an argument against the received wisdom, while the negative stage consists in criticisms of alternative motivations for it. I here focus exclusively on the positive stage of his argument, and I take my criticisms as further motivation for the received wisdom.

A: Doxastic justification and moral justification are, essentially, the notions of doxastic permissibility and moral permissibility.

To judge that some act or doxastic attitude is justified, according to Silva (2014, 4), “is to judge that that act or attitude is permissible.” I here accept this guiding assumption (cf. Goldman 2009 and Wedgwood 2012). But talk of justification is in general ambiguous between what we can call a *bare* and a *rich* conception:

Bare Moral Justification (MJ_b): S is morally justified iff S does the right thing.

Rich Moral Justification (MJ_r): S is morally justified iff S does the right thing for the right moral reasons.

Bare Doxastic Justification (DJ_b): S is doxastically justified iff S believes the right thing.

Rich Doxastic Justification (DJ_r): S is doxastically justified iff S believes the right thing for the right doxastic reasons.

Each of these conceptions associates the notion of justification with a certain positive evaluative feature. Given (A), however, deciding between DJ_b and DJ_r requires determining which of the relevant features maps onto the specific notion of doxastic permissibility. Similarly, given (A), deciding between MJ_b and MJ_r requires determining which of the relevant features maps onto the specific notion of moral permissibility. The remaining features, those not associated with permissibility of either kind, should be conceptualized some other way.

Given (A) and a grasp of the alternative conceptions, we can state Silva’s argument against the received wisdom in this way:

Silva Against Wisdom (SAW):

1. MJ_b captures the notion of moral permissibility.
2. If MJ_b captures the notion of moral permissibility, then DJ_b captures the notion of doxastic permissibility.
3. So DJ_b captures the notion of doxastic permissibility.

Two defensive strategies come to mind almost immediately. One can reject premise 2 by denying (A), claiming that justification, in one or either case, is not essentially a notion of permissibility. Perhaps it is instead essentially the notion of requirement, or responsibility, or fittingness, or goodness, or something else. Alternatively, one

can reject premise 1 by denying that MJ_b captures the notion of moral permissibility, claiming instead that doing the right thing for the wrong moral reasons is always impermissible. SAW is defective if either of these defensive strategies works, though I here leave their details and plausibility to the side.

In what follows, I argue that premise 2 of SAW must be rejected for a different reason. First, I argue for a fundamental difference between moral and doxastic permissibility. Next, I argue that the corresponding notions of moral and doxastic justification reflect this difference in a way favorable to the received wisdom. Lastly, I argue that one of Silva’s key maneuvers in making plausible the rejection of the received wisdom falls apart.

1. Non-Agential Permissibility

Support for premise 2 comes from what I will call the *strong parity principle* (cf. Silva 2014, 6):

Strong Parity Principle: What is true of the structure of moral permissibility is true of the structure of doxastic permissibility.

If there is strong parity between the two notions of permissibility, then we have a good reason to accept that ‘ MJ_b iff DJ_b ’ and ‘ MJ_r iff DJ_r ’: if it is true that the moral notion has no basing requirement, then strong parity implies that the doxastic notion has no basing requirement either; conversely, if the doxastic notion has a basing requirement, then strong parity implies that the moral has a basing requirement as well. The strong parity principle is thus silent on what is characteristic of permissibility (on what *makes* an act or belief permissible), simply allowing us to infer the structure of one notion when having insight into the structure of the other—hence the need for premise 1.

But strong parity should be rejected. There is in fact a fundamental difference between the notions of moral and doxastic permissibility that removes our warrant for taking it that whatever goes for the moral notion also goes for the doxastic notion, and vice versa. The difference is this: one is a notion of *agential* permissibility, while the other is a notion of *non-agential* permissibility. We are agents with respect to our actions; that means that our actions are under our voluntary control. To say that certain actions are permitted, then, is to say that certain deployments of our agency do not violate the norms guiding our choice of available options. But we are not similarly agents with respect to our *beliefs*. That is, our beliefs are not similarly

under our voluntary control. To say that certain beliefs are permitted, then, cannot be to say that certain deployments of our agency do not violate the norms guiding our choice of available options: we have no relevant agency in the doxastic case, and there are no corresponding available choices to be made.²

This fundamental difference between moral and doxastic permissibility—between agential and non-agential permissibility—is in fact a reflection of the deeper distinction between the *prescriptive* and the *evaluative* senses of the English ‘ought’.³ In its prescriptive sense, the claim that ‘S ought to ϕ ’ expresses a requirement-relation between an agent and a course of action. This is the sense of ‘ought’ common from moral and prudential normativity. In its evaluative sense, however, the claim that ‘S ought to ϕ ’ expresses simply that, according to a relevant standard, the state of affairs of ‘S ϕ -ing’ is ideal. This is the sense of ‘ought’ familiar from claims such as ‘the world ought to be just’, where no agent and no action is involved. The agential notion of permissibility, then, is the notion of consistency with some relevant prescriptive ‘ought’: there is a requirement-relation between an agent and a course of action, and ϕ -ing does not violate that requirement-relation. A bit differently, the non-agential notion of permissibility is the notion of consistency with some relevant evaluative ‘ought’: there is a state of affairs that is ideal, according to a relevant standard, and ‘S ϕ -ing’ does not prevent that state of affairs from coming about.

The notion of moral permissibility is thus fundamentally different from the notion of doxastic permissibility. While the former is an agential notion, the latter is a non-agential notion; while the former is a claim about consistency with a certain requirement-relation, the latter is a claim about consistency with a relevant ideal. This is good reason to reject the strong parity principle: what is true of an agential notion about requirements may well differ from what is true about a non-agential notion about ideals.

²We must be careful to distinguish between having control over *the kind of believer one is* and having control over *a particular token belief*. The orthodoxy since Alston (1989) is that we sometimes have the former but never the latter, and that the former by itself is not enough for agency with respect to a particular token belief. Recently, however, some have suggested that (in some sense or another) we sometimes have the latter kind of control (cf. Weatherson (2008) and Peels (2014)). I do not have space to address these challenges here. My view, at any rate, is that the empirical facts about the extent of our reflective agency are bleaker than even what is supposed by the Alstonian orthodoxy (cf. Kornblith (2012, 73-107)).

³See Schroeder (2011) for detailed discussion and defense of this distinction, and see Chrisman (2008) for the view where ‘ought to believe’ always deploys the evaluative sense of the English ‘ought’.

2. Praise and Blame

Most will agree that ‘doing the right thing for the right reason’ is more ideal than simply ‘doing the right thing’. Both are positive evaluative features, but the former has an added good-making element. This suggests that the notion of doxastic permissibility, an evaluative notion about consistency with what is *ideal*, is best captured by DJ_r . At the same time, it seems plausible that what is required of us as agents often falls short of what is ideal. This suggests that the notion of moral permissibility, a prescriptive notion about consistency with a *requirement-relation*, is best captured by MJ_b . So we not only have reasons for rejecting the strong parity principle, we also have reasons for believing that something specific that is true of moral permissibility—no basing requirement—is not true of doxastic permissibility. This is just what the received wisdom would have us say.

In fact, the received wisdom gains even further support when we recognize that one of Silva’s (2014, 8-9) key maneuvers in making its rejection plausible falls apart. Since Silva accepts both MJ_b and DJ_b , and since he does not wish to deny that ‘doing the right thing for the right reason’ is a positive evaluative feature of some sort, he needs to tell a plausible story about which concept that happens to be. In the moral case, some such story seems readily available: cases of right actions based on bad moral reasons are naturally taken as cases of *blameworthy yet permissible* actions. Suppose you believe that pressing a certain button will cause incredible undeserved pain to thousands of people, when in fact it will only cause incredible deserved pleasure to them; suppose you press the button for that nasty reason; then it seems intuitive that you are blameworthy for so doing, while doing it was a permissible action nonetheless (cf. Haji 1997). So MJ_r , we can say, fails to distinguish between the concepts of permissibility and praiseworthiness, running them together as if two necessary features of the former. Isn’t there a similarly plausible doxastic story to be told? Just as in the moral case, perhaps cases of believing the right thing for the wrong doxastic reasons can be naturally taken as *blameworthy yet permissible* believing. Perhaps DJ_r also fails to distinguish between the concepts of permissibility and praiseworthiness, running them together as if two necessary features of the former.

Whatever we say about the plausibility of the moral story, clarity on the doxastic notion of permissibility reveals that the doxastic story is not at all forthcoming. This is because talk of praise and blame is appropriate only in the context of agents

and requirement-relations. If S is an agent who is required to ϕ , then S can be praiseworthy and blameworthy for ϕ -ing or not. There was a certain requirement, after all, a requirement which S's action could flaunt or satisfy, and we rightly praise or blame S according to her voluntary choice. But if S is not an agent with respect to ϕ -ing, and if, consequently, 'S ϕ -ing' is simply an ideal state of affairs instead of a requirement, then there is no sense in which S can be praised or blamed: there are no requirements in this context, after all, no alternative actions that can flaunt or satisfy them, and no agent to voluntarily choose between them.⁴ A clock ought to strike every hour on the hour, but there is no sense in claiming that a clock is blameworthy for being fast.

So while the notions of praise and blame may provide us a plausible story regarding the concept associated with the positive evaluative feature of 'doing the right thing for the right moral reasons', there is no correlative plausible story regarding 'believing the right thing for the right doxastic reasons'. Silva's key maneuver in support of DJ_b thus falls apart. But we have already undermined his positive reasons for accepting DJ_b over DJ_r anyway. And if we take DJ_r over DJ_b instead, as reflection on the non-agential nature of doxastic permissibility suggests we do, then we simply have no need for an alternative story mirroring the role of praise and blame in the moral case. This is also what the received wisdom would have us say.⁵

⁴Fischer (2006, 24-25), for example, uses precisely this principle—that S is blameworthy for ϕ -ing only if S prescriptively ought to ϕ —to argue from Frankfurt-style cases to a rejection of the ought-implies-can principle.

⁵The fact that we are not agents with respect to our beliefs has direct and indirect implications for several alternative notions of doxastic justification. Notions of justification as praiseworthiness or blamelessness are most directly affected. But notions of doxastic justification as responsible belief may be indirectly affected as well. I cannot pursue those implications here.

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