

Feldman on the Epistemic Value of Truth  
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*Abstract:* Most epistemologists maintain that true beliefs are of final epistemic value. However, Richard Feldman is a rare philosopher who is skeptical that true beliefs are of final epistemic value. The aim of this paper is to evaluate Feldman’s criticisms. I’ll argue that Feldman’s arguments ultimately turn on a view about the relation between epistemic duties and epistemic value that is implausible and underdeveloped.

Most epistemologists maintain that true beliefs are of final epistemic value. In fact, one of the main problems in value epistemology is to determine whether the final epistemic value of true beliefs can account for the value of other things standardly deemed to be of epistemic value like knowledge or understanding. However, Richard Feldman is a rare philosopher who is skeptical that true beliefs are of final epistemic value. The aim of this paper is to evaluate Feldman’s criticisms. I’ll argue that Feldman’s arguments ultimately turn on a view about the relation between epistemic duties and epistemic value that is implausible and underdeveloped.

**I. Feldman’s Main Arguments**

Our topic is final epistemic value. By ‘final value’ I have in mind something that is valuable in and of itself or for its own sake. (Other authors use other terms like ‘intrinsic goodness’ or ‘final goodness’ to denote the same thing.) The qualifier ‘epistemic’ is meant to denote that we are concerned with a specific kind or species of final value. What exactly separates final epistemic value from other kinds of final value is a difficult topic. I will not discuss it here except to say that it is commonly assumed that there is such a difference.

An important dispute in epistemology is what exactly is of final epistemic value. In a couple of papers (2000, 2002), Richard Feldman offers a (partial) theory of final epistemic value. In so doing, he criticizes two theses. The first is this:

*Necessary Thesis:* A doxastic attitude has some final epistemic value only if it is true.

The second is this:

*Sufficiency Thesis:* If a doxastic attitude is true, then it has some final epistemic value.

(By ‘doxastic attitudes,’ we have in mind beliefs, disbeliefs, and suspended beliefs/withholdings.)

Several comments about these principles. First, they refer to when a doxastic attitude “has some” final epistemic value. I will interpret this phrase to be neutral as to the *overall* final epistemic value of a doxastic attitude. On this usage, it is consistent to hold that a doxastic attitude has some final epistemic value but the *total* final epistemic value of that attitude is negative. If there are other things of final epistemic value—other things that might “confer” or “detract” epistemic value from doxastic attitudes—then perhaps the total final epistemic value of doxastic attitudes is not determined solely by the truth of such attitudes.

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How these principles relate to Truth Value Monism and Epistemic Value Pluralism is complicated. Proponents of Truth Value Monism maintain that the most basic things of final epistemic value are true beliefs. Perhaps other things—e.g., knowledge, outcomes of actions, possible worlds, etc.—are of final epistemic value. But insofar as they are it is only because of their connections to true beliefs. (For more on how to think about Truth Value Monism, see Perrine (2017).)

Now Truth Value Monists are likely to accept the *Necessary Thesis*. But they need not accept the *Sufficiency Thesis*. They might maintain that other conditions need to be met before a true belief is of final epistemic value. For instance, it might be required that an agent be interested in the truth of the proposition or that the agent belong to a community that is interested in the truth of the proposition. So even Truth Value Monists need not accept the *Sufficiency Thesis*.

Proponents of Epistemic Value Pluralism might accept or reject either thesis. For instance, some Epistemic Value Pluralists might think that the manifestation of epistemic virtue is of final epistemic value. But such a manifestation is not a doxastic attitude. So a proponent of this position, despite being an Epistemic Value Pluralist, might also accept the *Necessary Thesis*. Alternatively, an Epistemic Value Pluralist might accept the *Sufficiency Thesis* while rejecting the *Necessary Thesis*. For instance, she might think that being true is sufficient for a belief to be valuable, but so is being responsibly held. Since a belief can be responsibly held, without being true, the *Necessary Thesis* would be false on such a view, even while the *Sufficiency Thesis* is true.

So the *Necessary Thesis* and the *Sufficiency Thesis* do not neatly map onto Truth Value Monism or Epistemic Value Pluralism. Even so they do articulate more specific ways of finding truth important for final epistemic value. After all, they tell us that a pretty minimal fact about a doxastic attitude—is it true or false—has important consequences *vis-à-vis* its final epistemic value. If fact, endorsing one (or both) of these principles is probably an orthodox view in epistemology.<sup>2</sup>

Feldman's objections to these theses can be found in several papers. In his well-known (2000), he asserts:

...a person who irrationally believes a lot of truths is not doing well epistemically. In contrast, a person who forms a lot of rational but false beliefs is doing well epistemically. ... We avoid the problems associated with identifying epistemic value with true belief or with knowledge if instead we say that what has epistemic value are rational beliefs. To do well as a believer, to achieve a kind of epistemic excellence, one must form only rational beliefs. (2000: 685).

Elsewhere (2002: 378), he writes:

if the goal is to believe truths, then a person who stumbles into the truth through a blunder or confusion has achieved epistemological success. For example, suppose a person acquires strong evidence against a proposition he has long defended in public. Out of stubbornness, the person retains the old belief. And suppose that, contrary to the new evidence, the old belief is in fact true. If the goal is simply

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<sup>2</sup> For the *Necessary Thesis* see (e.g.) Ahlstrom-Vij (2013), David (2013), Pritchard (2014); for the *Sufficiency Thesis* see Goldman (1999); Swinburne (2001); Kvanvig (2008); Pritchard (2014). Instead of speaking of epistemic value, some authors speak of truth as being an "epistemic goal" or "epistemic aim" (see, e.g., Foley (1993), Alston (2005)). I would argue that their views are probably best explicated as endorsements of one or both of these theses.

truth, he's achieved the goal and is, in this case at least, an epistemological success.

But, Feldman writes, such a person “who reasons badly and stumbles onto a truth is not believing as he ought, is not achieving epistemological success” (2002: 378). Conversely: ...if we achieve epistemic success by believing truths, then a person is an epistemic failure when she carefully and correctly follows completely reasonable procedures yet unfortunately falls into error... the person who does follow the evidence, even if doing so happens to lead to a false belief, nevertheless does “not miss the reward” of doing his epistemological duties. That is, such a person achieves epistemological success. (2002: 378).

Both of these passages echo earlier work of Feldman's where he writes things like:

To be an objectively good believer is to follow one's evidence. It is to believe whatever one's evidence supports, no matter what the practical or personal consequences may be (1988: 410)

Now in these passages (and others), Feldman moves freely between speaking of agents as being rational/reasonable and believing in accordance with evidence. This is presumably because Feldman offers an analysis of reasonable/rational doxastic attitudes in terms of the “fit” such attitudes have with the evidence that agents possess (see Conee and Feldman (2004)). As it will make Feldman's arguments easier, I will assume that what is important in these cases is that the agents are adopting attitudes that are (not) in accordance with their evidence, leaving to one side whatever implications that has for the reasonableness of doxastic attitudes.

We can formalize Feldman's main arguments like this. In one case, an agent does not follow the evidence but blunders their way to a true belief nonetheless. Let's call that agent “Lucky Blunderer.” Feldman's first argument is:

- (1) If the *Sufficiency Thesis* is true, then Lucky Blunder's doxastic attitudes are of final epistemic value.
- (2) Lucky Blunder's doxastic attitudes are not of final epistemic value.
- (3) Therefore, the *Sufficiency Thesis* is false.

In the second case, an agent follows the evidence but is unlucky and does not get a true belief. Let's call that agent “Unlucky Inquirer.” His second argument is:

- (4) If the *Necessary Thesis* is true, then Unlucky Inquirer's doxastic attitudes are not of final epistemic value.
- (5) Unlucky Inquirer's doxastic attitudes are of final epistemic value.
- (6) Therefore, the *Necessary Thesis* is false.

The first premise of each of these arguments is trivially true. The key premises are the second ones. I'll turn to Feldman's defense of them next.

## **II. Feldman's Defense of his Key Premises**

At first blush, Feldman appears to be pulling on his intuitions in defending the key premises of these arguments. But many, myself included, lack those intuitions. However, a closer reading reveals a more principled argument. Recall the following two passages:

...the person who does follow the evidence, even if doing so happens to lead to a false belief, nevertheless does “not miss the reward” of doing his *epistemological duties*. That is, such a person achieves epistemological success. (2002: 378, italics mine)

Imagine a person who makes an unreasonable and unreliable inference that happens to lead to a true belief on some occasion. It might be fortunate that he's got this true belief, but I see nothing epistemologically meritorious about it. Nor can I see anything *epistemological dutiful* about it. (2002: 379, italics mine)

Here Feldman connects epistemic values with epistemic duties or obligations. But what is the exact connection between epistemic duties and values? In his (2002: 376), Feldman proposes: "epistemological duties are duties that one must carry out in order to be successful from an intellectual (or epistemological) perspective." Feldman recognizes that this principle is "not terribly informative" but is also "not entirely devoid of helpful content" (2002: 376).

I suggest we refine and clarify what Feldman says here in several ways. First, instead of speaking of "successful from an intellectual (or epistemological) perspective" we speak in terms of epistemic value (as Feldman does in his (2000)). Specifically, we speak in terms of final epistemic value. Since our focus here is on doxastic attitudes, we will focus on the final epistemic value of doxastic attitudes. Second, it might be said that we "carry out" a duty in a trivial way. Suppose I have the following duty: if someone asks me to help steal priceless art, I ought not agree. I may be said to have met or carried out this duty but only trivially because I have never met the conditions under which it applies: I've never been asked to steal priceless art. Presumably, when Feldman speaks of carrying out duties this is not what he has in mind. So let us say that a duty *applies* to one in a circumstance when, in that circumstance, it has implications about what one in particular is required to do. With these refinements, I propose that Feldman's idea can be captured with:

A subject can bring about something of final epistemic value in some circumstance only by following the epistemic duties or obligations that apply in that circumstance.<sup>3</sup>

I will call this the *Requirement Principle* in what follows. Now Feldman also intends to use the relationship between duties and epistemic value to explain what distinguishes epistemic duties from other kinds of duties. I understand that as a further, explanatory claim about the *Requirement Principle*. What *makes* an obligation an epistemic one is that following it when it applies is necessary for bringing about epistemic value. My arguments will not really turn on this further explanatory claim and so, for the most part, I will ignore it.

By itself, the *Requirement Principle* does not say what one's epistemic obligations or duties are. Feldman himself accepts the following principle:

*A Evidence Principle*: For any person S, time t, and proposition p, if S has any doxastic attitude at all toward p at t, then S epistemically ought to have the attitude toward p supported by S's evidence at t. (cf. 2000: 679; 2002: 368).

A fuller account of this principle will need to incorporate claims about what exactly it takes for evidence to support a proposition as well as what it takes for evidence to be "had" or "possessed" by S. Feldman has addressed these issues elsewhere (see, e.g., Conee and Feldman (2004, 2008)). I won't discuss his particular theory here because I have elsewhere (see Perrine (2018)). But given both the *Requirement Principle* and *A Evidence Principle* we get the result that adopting a doxastic attitude can bring about something of final epistemic value only if that attitude is the one supported by the evidence one has. As Feldman put it once, "To achieve epistemic value one must, in each case, follow one's evidence" (2000: 685).

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<sup>3</sup> I'm using 'bring about' in a wide way so that following a norm brings about something, namely, that one followed a norm. And, in keeping with an earlier point, I'll understand 'something of final epistemic value' to mean having at least some final epistemic value, whether or not that value is ultimately outweighed.

Given the *Requirement Principle* and *A Evidence Principle*, Feldman can provide an argument for his claim that Lucky Blunder's belief is not of any epistemic value, despite being true. For according to the *Requirement Principle*, Lucky Blunder's belief is of epistemic value only if in so believing Lucky Blunder is not violating any epistemic duties that apply in that circumstance. But *A Evidence Principle* applies and he is violating it. So Lucky Blunder's doxastic attitude is not of any final epistemic value—which is just the key premise of Feldman's first argument. Given that the first premise of that argument is trivially true, it follows that the *Sufficiency Thesis* is false.

The *Requirement Principle* and *A Evidence Principle* do not imply that Unlucky Inquirer's false belief is of any final epistemic value. However, consider the stronger principle:

*Stronger Requirement Principle*: A subject can bring about something of final epistemic value in some circumstance if and only if she follows the epistemic duties or obligations that apply in that circumstance.

Plausibly given this principle and *A Evidence Principle* it follows that Unlucky Inquirer's false belief is of final epistemic value. After all, Unlucky Inquirer is following *A Evidence Principle*. Thus, given *Strong Requirement Principle*, Unlucky Inquirer's doxastic attitude is of final epistemic value. But the doxastic attitude is not true. Therefore, the *Necessary Thesis* is false.<sup>4</sup>

These are Feldman's most promising sub-arguments and so I will spend the remainder of the paper evaluating them. However, two preliminary comments. First, Feldman's explanation for what distinguishes epistemic obligations from other obligations *assumes* the *Requirement Principle*. Thus, insofar as I'm criticizing that principle, I undermine his explanation. However, I will not spend time here developing an alternative account. I will note that there are a variety of accounts that are consistent with what I say here. (For instance, perhaps epistemic duties are those duties followed by moral exemplars, whereas ethical duties are those followed by ethical exemplars, etc. For a discussion of exemplars, see Zagzebski (2017). And there are more complicated proposals as well. See, e.g., Kornblith (1993).) Or one might try to understand epistemic obligations in terms of epistemic value but in a more complex way. For instance, perhaps epistemic obligations are those that, when followed, are very likely to bring about something of epistemic value even if following them is neither necessary nor sufficient for doing so. In any case, I won't discuss this at any length.

Second, Feldman's arguments assume *A Evidence Principle*. One way of criticizing his arguments would be to reject that principle (or, more modestly, the way that Feldman understands it). However, I have criticized that principle elsewhere (Perrine (Forthcoming)) and will not examine it here again. (For additional discussion of *A Evidence Principle*, see DeRose (2000), Aikin (2006), Shaffer (2013), McCormick (2015), Oliveira (2018).)

### III. *Against the Requirement Principle*

I will develop two criticisms of the *Requirement Principle*.

#### A. *Requirement Principle and the Voluntarist Conception of Responsibility*

One thing that distinguishes agents from non-agents is that agents can be responsible for various things, such as actions, attitudes, and outcomes. When an agent is responsible for something, they are open to distinctive kinds of evaluations including being appropriately targets of reactive attitudes such as praise, blame, resentment, etc. as well as being open to punishment and commendation (cf. e.g. Fischer (2006)). However, from the mere fact that an agent is open to

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<sup>4</sup> Strictly speaking, this argument is invalid. All that follows from the *Stronger Requirement Principle* is that Unlucky Inquirer has brought something of value about, not necessarily that the thing of value is Unlucky Inquirer's doxastic attitude. I'll set this aside here.

these kinds of evaluations, it does not follow what, if any, such evaluations are appropriate. To illustrate, I have just peeled an orange. I am responsible for the particular way I have peeled the orange. But (normally) it is not appropriate to praise, blame, or extol me because of the way I have peeled the orange. Additionally, even if I am responsible for something, it may not follow that *anyone* can thereby *hold* me responsible (cf. Smith (2007)). Perhaps only certain people can. But insofar as it is appropriate for a person to hold me responsible for something, it is only because I am responsible, in this more basic sense, for that thing.

Different philosophers give different accounts of the conditions for this basic kind of responsibility. A popular and traditional account is the voluntarist conception of responsibility. On it, crudely put, an agent is responsible for something only if that thing was, in some sense, under the agent's control. (Of course, saying exactly what is under an agent's control is difficult, and philosophers disagree about it.) Now if an agent has an obligation or requirement to do something, then the agent is responsible for fulfilling that duty or obligation (cf. Zimmerman (2016: 249)). Thus, on a voluntarist conception of responsibility, when an agent has an obligation or is required to do something, then doing that thing is under their control. Sometimes, this idea is put as "ought implies can." But that is not ideal for several reasons. First, an agent is responsible, in this basic sense, not just for what the agent ought to do, but also what she may do or ought not to do. Second, there might be many sense of 'can' that are not quite relevant to what an agent ought to do.<sup>5</sup>

However, it is widely thought that value is not so restricted to things under agents' control. Various things can be of value without it necessarily being the case that those things were brought about or otherwise under the control of persons. To take one example, many philosophers attribute final value to entire possible worlds even though no (human) person brought such worlds about. But there are other examples as well. To stick with an epistemological example, perhaps while going for a walk, I simply find myself with a certain true belief supported by the evidence. The belief might have just occurred to me; it may not even have been a belief I was trying to form. In such a situation, I may not have control over the formulation of the belief in any interesting sense; like many beliefs it simply pops into my head. Nonetheless, that does not keep the belief from being true or one supported by evidence and, thus (depending on one's views), of final epistemic value. Thus, the mere fact that I lacked control over the formation of the belief does not keep it from having some final epistemic value.

My first criticism is that the *Requirement Principle* sits poorly with a voluntarist conception of responsibility. The *Requirement Principle* implies that any situation in which an agent's doxastic attitude is of final epistemic value is a situation in which the agent was following the relevant epistemic duty or obligation that applied in that circumstance. Given a voluntarist conception of responsibility, it follows that any situation in which an agent's doxastic attitude is of final epistemic value is a situation in which the agent has control over whether she follows the relevant epistemic duty or obligation. However, that will not in general be true. If, as is widely thought, value is not restricted to what agents have control over, then it is not plausible that the only situations that agents can bring about something of final epistemic value will also be ones in which agents have some important degree of control.

To be sure, this does not refute the *Requirement Principle*. A proponent of the *Requirement Principle* might maintain that there are epistemic obligations that agents have such that in *every*

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<sup>5</sup> There might be other usages of the English word 'ought' or 'should' that do not refer to obligations or requirements or duties. Perhaps they refer to what would be ideal. Neither Feldman nor I are concerned with such usages here.

situation agents have control over whether they follow those epistemic obligations. But this kind of response is fairly dubious.

Besides, Feldman will presumably offer up a different response to this problem. Across the board (Feldman (2000, 2001, 2002, 2008)), Feldman rejects the idea that “ought implies can.” Thus, he would presumably reject the more general voluntarist conception of responsibility. Instead, Feldman maintains that there are things we ought to do—obligations we have—even if we are unable to fulfil them. His argument for this is by analogy. A teacher, as a teacher, might have a special obligation to explain an idea clearly even if he is unable. A person might have an obligation to repay a loan, even if she is unable. In these cases, he claims, these people exhibit certain roles—teacher, borrower of money—and people inhabiting those roles can be evaluated for how well or poorly they fulfil that role *even if* it is beyond their control to fulfil those obligations. Feldman call these obligations “role oughts.” Additionally, he claims that we inhabit the role of believers. Further, by analogy, such a role can be performed well or poorly in accordance with how well a person fulfils the obligations associated with that role *even if* the person is unable to control whether they fulfil those obligations.

A number of authors are suspicious of Feldman’s claims. They point out that Feldman’s analogies fail in a variety of ways. (For instance: being a teacher is a role we voluntarily accept, believing is not (cf. Peels (2014: 686-7)), those roles are usually special or unique roles, while believing is not (cf. Ryan (2003: 60-2)), many of the activities in those roles are voluntary, unlike believing (cf. Altschul (2014: 251-3)), etc.) Others point out that from mere the fact that an agent belongs to a role, it does not follow that the role-oughts associated with that role express genuine requirements (cf. Kornblith (2001: 237-8), Oliveira (2017: 497-503)). Though I find several of this criticisms compelling, for sake of argument, let us concede Feldman’s idea that there are role oughts associated with being a believer and that we are subject to the requirements of these role oughts even if we are unable to follow or not follow them. Even still, there is a problem for the *Requirement Principle*, or so I’ll now argue.

#### B. Requirement Principle and Role Oughts

Let us concede that we have epistemic duties or obligations that apply in a situation even if we are unable to follow them in that situation. This will mitigate the first problem for the *Requirement Principle*. However, there is a second more complex problem for the *Requirement Principle*.

The *Requirement Principle* has an unduly strong result, if there are several epistemic obligations that can conflict, that is, offer different recommendations in a situation.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, suppose there are two epistemic duties about what doxastic attitudes an agent is required to have. Call them  $D_1$  and  $D_2$ . Suppose, further, that there is some situation where both apply, that is, they each have implications for what doxastic attitudes the agent is required to have. But, finally, suppose that  $D_1$  and  $D_2$  offer conflicting recommendations so that the agent

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<sup>6</sup> Just because there are more than one epistemic obligations it does not follow that they necessarily conflict—they might only apply to different situations. For instance, as Feldman himself realizes (2000: 178), *A Evidence Principle* can be seen as a conjunction of three statements about distinct obligations. Additionally, even if several duties or obligations conflict, these leaves open further philosophical analysis about how to think about such cases. Specifically, it is natural to say that when they conflict, the agent will have some *overall* obligation or duty which may (or may not) agree with one of those duties or obligations. Thus, the existence of conflicting duties does not require us to say that there are moral dilemmas in the sense that there are several incompatible actions each of which is absolutely, unconditionally required. For arguments against the existence of moral dilemmas, understood in that way, see Conee (1982, 1989). Feldman himself seems sympathetic to the idea that there might in principle be conflicts of the kind I describe here (cf. (2002: 374)).

cannot follow both. In that situation, the *Requirement Principle* implies that even if the agent were to follow one of them—say,  $D_1$ —it is not the case the agent could bring about anything of final epistemic value. That is an implausibly strong result.

To see the force of this objection, compare the case with ethical obligations. Many of us hold that there are ethical obligations and that they can conflict. For instance, I have an obligation to keep my promises; but I also have an obligation to help others. But clearly these can conflict where, in some particular situation, they imply conflicting requirements about what I should do. Suppose, to illustrate, I've made a promise with you to meet for lunch at a certain time. But suddenly, in front of me, a bicyclist is seriously injured in a hit and run. I cannot help the bicyclist and keep my promise. But suppose I help the bicyclist. Most of us would reject as absurd the conclusion that I've not done anything of value in helping the bicyclist because, by helping him, I had to break my promise with you.

Many philosophers have formulated principles that conflict with *A Evidence Principle*. To sample a few:<sup>7</sup>

One ought to believe  $p$  only if  $p$  is true. (cf., e.g. Wedgwood (2002), Gibbard (2005))

One ought not believe  $p$  if  $p$  is false. (cf., e.g. Wedgwood (2002), Gibbard (2005)).

One ought not to adopt a doxastic attitude in an irresponsible way. (cf., e.g., BonJour (1985)).

One ought to believe  $p$  only if one can provide a justification for  $p$ . (cf., e.g., Leite (2004))

Each of these principles will conflict with *A Evidence Principle*. Evidence can support a false proposition; one can adopt an attitude that is supported by evidence in an irresponsible way; and one might have a belief that is supported by evidence which one cannot provide a justification for. And of course other principles could be elaborated like this. If *A Requirement Principle* is true, then any case in which these principles conflict will result in a situation where the agent cannot bring about anything of epistemic value. That's a surprising and implausible result.

There are several ways that Feldman might respond to this problem.

First, and most obviously, Feldman might simply deny that there are any other epistemic duties that could ever conflict with *A Evidence Principle*. While he has never explicitly defended such a strong claim, he has argued against other epistemic duties beyond *A Evidence Principle*. For instance, he criticizes (cf. Feldman (2000: 689; 2002: 370)):

*Gather Evidence*: One ought to seek evidence regarding propositions about which one will form beliefs.

And so it is natural to wonder whether Feldman's criticism of principles like *Gather Evidence* could be used to criticize other purported epistemic norms.

However, this rejoinder is fallacious because it is circular. Feldman's criticism of other norms like *Gather Evidence* turn on the *Requirement Principle*. Thus, to respond to my criticism of the *Requirement Principle* by giving arguments that turns on the *Requirement Principle* would be obviously problematic. To see that Feldman's criticism of *Gather Evidence* turns on the *Requirement Principle*, consider the following passage:

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<sup>7</sup> Some additional refinements can be added to these principles to make them more plausible. (E.g., for any proposition one considers, one ought to believe it only if it is true.) Such refinements won't matter for generating conflicts with *An Evidence Principle*.

On the current view, in any given situation there is a set of attitudes that are justified or reasonable. A person who has those attitudes is completely successful from an epistemological perspective. If one's evidence concerning *p* is neutral and one suspends judgement about *p*, then one is a success. If one then gets some evidence in favor of *p*, and comes to believe *p*, one is not thereby more justified in one's cognitive states. One is not doing a better job epistemically. In each case one is simply having the justified attitude. (2002: 380; cf. 2000: 689)

In this passage, Feldman is giving an argument against *Gather Evidence* that assumes the *Requirement Principle*. A consequence of the *Requirement Principle* is that if following a norm is unnecessary for bringing about something of epistemic value, then it does not state an *epistemic duty*. In the above passage, Feldman is arguing that one can bring about something of epistemic value, namely a justified doxastic attitude, *without* gathering more evidence. But then, given the *Requirement Principle*, *Gather Evidence* does not state an epistemic obligation. But notice that, since this response assumes the *Requirement Principle*, using this kind of response to defend against my criticism of the *Requirement Principle* would be circular.

An anonymous reviewer suggests a response for Feldman that need not be as fallacious as the one here. Perhaps if Feldman simply defended the *Requirement Principle* by appealing to a line of reasoning that assumed the *Requirement Principle*, then he would reason in a circle. But there is slightly different line of response open to him. The above argumentation shows that there is a conflict between the *Requirement Principle* and the claim that there are several epistemic duties that can conflict. Feldman might respond, not simply by assuming the *Requirement Principle* is true, and drawing the conclusion that there cannot be conflicting duties. He might claim that the reasons for accepting the *Requirement Principle* are stronger than the reasons for thinking there can be several epistemic duties that can conflict. Thus, given a conflict between the *Requirement Principle* and the claim that there are several epistemic duties that can conflict, it would be more reasonable to believe the *Requirement Principle*.

Feldman gives very little defense of the *Requirement Principle*. His main argument is comparative. He wants a way to distinguish epistemic obligations or duties from other kinds of obligations or duties. His argument is then comparative: he thinks that *Requirement Principle* does a better job of two other options he canvasses (2002: 377). (The particular options do not matter to us.) The strength of this argument depends upon how exhaustive the options he considers are. However, the range of options he considers is not very exhaustive at all. For instance, Feldman intends to distinguish between epistemic duties by appealing to some sort of claim about epistemic value. But, as pointed out, there are many ways of doing that which he does not consider. (For instance, epistemic duties are those that *maximize* epistemic value or, more weakly, are most likely to bring about epistemic value.) Further, these other ways will not have the same problematic consequences of the *Requirement Principle*. And, as pointed out earlier, there are even further ways of understanding epistemic duties independently of epistemic value. (For instance, perhaps epistemic duties are those duties followed by moral exemplars, whereas ethical duties are those followed by ethical exemplars, etc. For a discussion of exemplars, see Zagzebski (2017). And there are more complicated proposals as well. See, e.g., Kornblith (1993).) And Feldman does not consider these either. So Feldman's argument for the *Requirement Principle* is quite weak.

Are these reasons for thinking that there are epistemic duties or obligations that can conflict? One might defend this question by defending the existence of two epistemic duties and showing how they might conflict. That is a direct strategy. I will not follow it here. Instead, I'll

argue that given the way Feldman thinks about the conditions of responsibility for belief—the conditions that explain why beliefs are subject to appraisals of what agents ought to believe and the like—it is very plausible that there will be several epistemic duties that can conflict.

According to Feldman, what makes possible that we have epistemic obligations or duties is that we inhabit the role of believers. Further, as he is clear (2001: 89), this explanation for why we are subject to intellectual obligations does not, in and of itself, settle what those obligations are. Rather, because we inhabit the role of believers we can be appraised for whether our performances as believers are good ones or not (2000: 676; 2001: 89).

However, there is no reason for thinking that having a good performance as a believer never involves conflicts of epistemic duties or obligations. In fact, when we think about other kinds of performances, they frequently involve avoiding or navigating conflicts. Consider, to use one of Feldman's own examples, being a teacher. A teacher may have various obligations, such as teaching students, being fair, explaining things clearly, returning work in a timely fashion, crafting interesting assignments, etc. But there is no guarantee that there are no conflicts among these obligations even for teachers who perform well. In fact, there might very well be some: explaining things clearly on homework may require not returning it in a timely fashion and fairly giving every student the same amount of attention may keep certain students from learning as they need additional time and resources. In a similar fashion, if we have intellectual duties because we inhabit the role of believer—a role which can be performed well or poorly—there is no guarantee that whatever duties are associated with performing that role well will never conflict. For this reason, Feldman's own explanation for why we have epistemic obligations—his appeal to role oughts—may actually generate a problem for *Requirement Principle*.

To be sure, Feldman might just insist that performing the role of believer well requires forming attitudes that fit one's evidence and *nothing else*. Such insisting might leave the rest of us unpersuaded. But it is not even obvious that those sympathetic to evidentialism should find this response plausible. Consider, for instance, the following principle:

If an agent either bases a belief on some evidence or would base that belief on that evidence, and that evidence does not support that belief, then the agent ought not have that belief.

One can imagine evidentialists of various stripes being inclined towards this principle. (“If the only evidence you'll go on isn't good enough, you shouldn't go on it!”) However, there are situations where even this principle will conflict with *A Evidence Principle*. For instance, suppose S's evidence strongly supports believing *p*. (Perhaps a subset of it strongly supports *p* and that support is not defeated by the rest of S's evidence.) But suppose that the evidence S does and would base her belief on is a subset of her evidence that does *not* support believing *p*. In this situation, Feldman's *Evidence Principle* implies that she ought to have that belief since that is the doxastic attitude that fits; but this evidentialist principle implies that she should not have that belief, since she is not and would not base it on adequate evidence. So even those inclined towards evidentialism may need to recognize that there can be principles about evidence and what agents ought to believe that may conflict.<sup>8</sup>

Let's take stock of the dialectic. I argued that Feldman's *Requirement Principle* has implausible consequences if there are several epistemic duties that conflict. The first response I considered is that Feldman might argue against the existence of other purported duties. I illustrated one way Feldman might argue in this way by looking at his argument against *Gather*

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<sup>8</sup> The criticism in this paragraph utilizes a point raised by DeRose (2000), though he uses it in a different way than me.

*Evidence*. But, I showed, that argument actually assumed the *Requirement Principle*, and so using it to defend *Requirement Principle* would be to reason in a circle. I then considered a “fall back” response. Perhaps Feldman’s reasons for accepting the *Requirement Principle* are stronger than any reasons for claiming that there are several epistemic duties that can conflict. But, I argued, this is wrong: Feldman’s reasons for the *Requirement Principle* are quite weak and given Feldman’s own way of thinking about what makes epistemic duties possible it is quite plausible that there would be several that conflict.

Let us now move on and consider a second response. My criticism of the *Requirement Principle* applies only because it is formulated in terms of all of one’s epistemic duties or obligations. But, in light of this criticism, Feldman might embrace a weaker principle:

*Weaker Requirement Principle*: A subject can bring about something of final epistemic value in some circumstance by following an epistemic duty or obligation that applies in that circumstance.

This principle is immune from the previous criticism of the *Requirement Principle*. For it is consistent to hold the *Weaker Requirement Principle* while also maintaining that when epistemic obligations conflict one can still bring about something of epistemic value by following one of those obligations.

However, the *Weaker Requirement Principle* cannot be used in Feldman’s arguments. The *Requirement Principle* was not strong enough for Feldman’s argument against the *Necessary Thesis*; so unsurprisingly the *Weaker Requirement Principle* is not strong enough for Feldman’s argument against it as well. But the *Weaker Requirement Principle* is not strong enough for Feldman’s argument against the *Sufficiency Thesis* either. To use *Weaker Requirement Principle* to show that Lucky Blunder’s true belief is not of any epistemic value one would have to argue that Lucky Blunder failed to follow any epistemic obligation or duty. But Feldman has not argued that.

A final response. Feldman might distinguish between *prima facie* and *ultimate facie* obligations. Now drawing this distinction by itself will not help. For instance, suppose we interpret Feldman’s *Requirement Principle* in terms of *prima facie* obligations like:

A subject can bring about something of final epistemic value in some circumstance only by following her *prima facie* epistemic duties or obligations that apply in that circumstance.

This reformulation will not avoid the problem, since *prima facie* epistemic duties can conflict. And so when they conflict, this reformulation will also imply that the agent does not bring about anything of value. An alternative way of reformulating the principle using *prima facie* duties might be:

A subject can bring about something of final epistemic value in some circumstance only by following a *prima facie* epistemic duty or obligation that applies in that circumstance.

But this reformulation has the same problem as Feldman’s second response. This reformulation is too weak to be used in Feldman’s arguments against the *Necessary Thesis* and *Sufficiency Thesis*. A more promising reformulation would use an *ultimate facie* obligation, perhaps like:

A subject can bring about something of final epistemic value in some circumstance only by following her *ultimate facie* epistemic duties or obligations that apply in that circumstance.

This formulation has the best chance of avoiding some of the problems we’ve identified up to this point. However, it still has counterintuitive results. For suppose an agent is subject to several

conflicting duties. But she does not do what is *ultimate facie* required of her, but instead follows a *prima facie* duty that is overridden by some other duty. This principle would imply that such an agent could never bring anything of value by following an overridden *prima facie* epistemic duty. And that is implausible. Further, this principle, by itself, cannot be used in Feldman's criticisms of the *Necessity Thesis* and *Sufficiency Thesis*. Once the distinction between *prima facie/ultimate facie* duties has been drawn, Feldman needs to argue that Lucky Blunderer and Unlucky Inquirer have failed to follow their *ultimate facie* duties. He has not done that.<sup>9</sup>

Summing up. Richard Feldman has criticized an orthodoxy of contemporary epistemology—that either the *Necessary Thesis* or the *Sufficiency Thesis* is true. His argument turned on two principles: *A Evidence Principle* and *Requirement Principle*. In this paper, I've set aside *A Evidence Principle* to focus on the *Requirement Principle*. I've argued that the *Requirement Principle* links epistemic value and epistemic obligations in an implausible way. Given a voluntarist conception of responsibility, the *Requirement Principle* implies agent's attitudes are only of value when they have control over them, which is implausible. Given Feldman's preferred approach using role-oughts, the *Requirement Principle* also has implausible results. Further, several ways of revising the *Requirement Principle* either have implausible results or cannot be used in his current arguments against the *Necessary Thesis* and *Sufficiency Thesis*.

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<sup>9</sup> Further, doing so will presumably require him to say that the *Evidence Principle* is not only true but specifies an *ultimate facie* duty. However, as noted above, I think that principle is false and so if pressed would object to this line of reasoning.

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