

# Why There are no Epistemic Duties

(Forthcoming in *Dialogue: The Canadian Philosophical Review*)

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## Abstract

Epistemic duties would be duties to believe, disbelieve, or withhold judgment propositions, and they would be grounded in purely evidential considerations. I offer a new argument for the claim that there are no epistemic duties. Though people may have duties to believe, disbelieve, or withhold judgment from propositions, those duties are never grounded in purely epistemic considerations. Rather, allegedly epistemic duties are a species of moral duty.

## 1 Introduction

A person can be morally, legally, or prudentially obligated to do something. There are even cases in which a person might be morally, legally, or prudentially obligated to believe something. Maybe I cannot act rightly without believing in the fundamentally equal moral value of all persons, or maybe the law says I must know the expiration dates on the milk I sell, or maybe it is in my best interest to believe my doctors are competent. Such cases respectively impose moral, legal, and prudential obligations to have certain beliefs.

Can a person be *epistemically* obligated to believe, disbelieve, or withhold judgment

about something? An affirmative answer means that there are purely epistemic sources of duty, over and above such other sources as morality, prudence, and law. Usually, those who believe in epistemic duties see them as grounded in the evidence available to a person. I see, hear, and feel the falling rain. Because I have such excellent evidence it is raining, and I lack weightier evidence to the contrary, I *epistemically ought* to believe it is raining. To believe it is raining is my epistemic duty.

Putative epistemic duties might conflict with other duties. Suppose the law requires me to have true beliefs about when the milk I sell expires. Without my knowledge, pranksters have labeled the milk with the wrong dates. Consequently, I have excellent evidence my milk expires ten days from now, when in fact it expires in a week. My legal duty is to believe the milk expires in a week. My epistemic duty is to believe it expires in ten days. I cannot do both.

The idea of epistemic duty could be very useful. In particular, it might help us to understand in what sense a belief must be “justified” to count as knowledge. We often understand the notion of moral justification, for example, in terms of conformity to moral duty. It is thus natural to understand the epistemic justification necessary for knowledge in terms of conformity to epistemic duty (Alston 1988, p. 257).<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, some philosophers deny there can be any such thing as an epistemic duty. Ordinarily, their argument runs something like this: If it is truly one’s duty to X, one must have voluntary control over whether or not one X-es. People do not have voluntary control over whether or not they believe something. Therefore, it is never one’s duty (not) to believe something. Epistemic duties pertain to what one believes, and so there are no epistemic duties (Alston 1985, 1988; Plantinga 1988).

Responses to this standard line of argument have been predictable. Some have argued that epistemic duties are of a sort that does not require voluntary control (Feldman 1988, 2000, 2001). Others have argued that we do have the kind of control over our beliefs that epistemic duty would require (Chisholm 1991; Heil 1983; Heller 2000; Russell 2001;

Steup 2000).

I do not have settled opinions about free will, voluntary control, or their relationships to what kinds of duties there are. Therefore, I do not have a settled opinion about whether the standard objection to epistemic duty succeeds. In this paper, I offer a new line of argument for the claim that there are no epistemic duties.

The argument, in rough outline, is as follows: All the supposedly epistemic duties a situation imposes on one coincide with *moral* duties that situation also imposes. Thus there is no need to posit a category of epistemic duty over and above moral duty. Supposed epistemic duties are really just moral duties in disguise.

I try to make as much sense as I can of the idea of epistemic duty in Section 2. In Sections 3 and 4, I set out my argument against epistemic duties more carefully. I answer some likely objections in Section 5.

## **2 Epistemic Duty**

The basic idea of epistemic duty is straightforward. Let us use ‘doxastic attitude’ as a general term for the family of states typified by belief, disbelief and withholding judgment, and let us call any duty to have a certain doxastic attitude a “doxastic duty.” Epistemic duties are doxastic duties that are grounded in purely epistemic considerations, such as what evidence one has.

Epistemic duties are not the only doxastic duties. As the examples mentioned earlier indicate, there are also moral, legal, and prudential doxastic duties. Each of these kinds of duty is distinguished by its source. Moral duties arise from moral considerations, legal duties from the law, and prudential duties from what is in one’s interest.

It is not especially enlightening to say that epistemic duties are doxastic duties that arise from purely epistemic considerations. We still need to demarcate the purely epistemic considerations in some way. Roderick Chisholm attempts to do just that in his

account of epistemic requirement. On Chisholm's account, a state of affairs epistemically requires a doxastic attitude if and only if (i) it requires that attitude and (ii) everything it requires is either (a) a doxastic attitude or (b) something required trivially by all states of affairs that require anything at all (Chisholm 1991, p. 124).<sup>2</sup>

Chisholm distinguishes requirements from duties. Duties, for Chisholm, are requirements that are not overridden by more comprehensive considerations. An epistemic duty is an epistemic requirement not overridden by the epistemic requirements of more inclusive states of affairs (Chisholm 1991, p. 124). This distinction between requirement and duty, and thus the distinction between Chisholmian epistemic requirement and Chisholmian epistemic duty, will not matter to the points I make below.

Chisholm's aim is only to make sense of what a purely epistemic source of duty would be. He does not mean his account to address the standard objection that there can be no epistemic duties because we do not have voluntary control over our doxastic attitudes. Richard Feldman, however, has tried to develop an account of epistemic duty that avoids the standard objection (Feldman 1988, 2000, 2001).

For Feldman, epistemic duties are the duties we have in virtue of occupying a certain role, the role of *being a believer*. They are things one ought to do in order to do the job of being a believer correctly, and that amounts to believing in accord with one's evidence (Feldman 2000, p. 676; 2001, pp. 878).

On Feldman's account, epistemic duties are "role obligations," a type of obligation he contrasts with "responsibility obligations."<sup>3</sup> A responsibility obligation is something one ought to do, such that one would be blameworthy for failing to do it (Feldman 2001, p. 87). Because one can be blameworthy only for what is within one's voluntary control, says Feldman, one cannot have a responsibility obligation to do something that is beyond one's voluntary control. On his view, there are no epistemic responsibility obligations.

Role obligations are obligations "that result from one's playing a certain role or having a certain position" (Feldman 2001, p. 87). Examples Feldman gives include the

obligations of parents to care for their children, of teachers to explain things clearly, and of cyclists to move in certain ways. Unlike responsibility obligations, role obligations do not presuppose voluntary control. A teacher might be unable to explain things clearly, a parent might be unable to take care of her children, or a cyclist might be unable to move in the right ways. The fact that one is unable to discharge a role obligation, however, does not make the obligation itself disappear. Rather, it only makes one a bad occupant of the role in question—a bad parent, teacher, or cyclist, for example (Feldman 2001, pp. 87–8).

Feldman’s proposal, then, is just that epistemic duties are role obligations. Even if we lack voluntary control over our doxastic attitudes, there are certain things we ought to do in order correctly to fulfill the role of being a believer. “Forming beliefs,” he writes

is something that people do. That is, we form beliefs in response to our experiences in the world. Anyone engaged in this activity ought to do it right. In my view, what they ought to do is to follow their evidence (rather than their wishes or fears). I suggest that epistemic oughts are of this sort—they describe the right way to play a certain role. . . . They are based on what’s good performance. (Feldman 2001, p. 88)

For Feldman, then, we all occupy the role of being a believer, and we can discharge that role either correctly or incorrectly. Our epistemic duties are what we must do to discharge it correctly, even if we lack voluntary control over what we believe. I may, for example, be unable to apply *modus tollens* properly most of the time. Nevertheless, to do the job of being a believer right, I ought to believe that Not-p when I believe both that Not-q and that q if p.

Neither Chisholm’s account nor Feldman’s is fully satisfying. Chisholm’s account may be extensionally adequate, but it does not explain very much. It does not tell us *how* epistemic duties arise or why some states of affairs nontrivially require doxastic states and only doxastic states. The account sheds little light on the nature of epistemic duty.

Feldman's account avoids that problem. It explains the nature of epistemic duty by appeal to what constitutes good performance as a believer. But Feldman's account has problems of its own. If epistemic duties are what one must do to do the job of being a believer correctly, then we need an account of doing well as a believer that does not rely on the prior notion of epistemic duty. It would be circular to characterize epistemic duty as Feldman does and then to explain doing well as a believer as doing one's epistemic duty. Nor is Feldman's appeal to the notion of evidence much help here. Not all information is evidence, and the most obvious way to distinguish what is evidence from what is not is to note that evidence is information that imposes epistemic duties.<sup>4</sup>

Despite their problems, Chisholm and Feldman's accounts give a good sense of the general idea of epistemic duty. If they are right in spirit, at least, then there are two ways in which one might argue against the existence of epistemic duties.

The first way is to argue that there are no doxastic duties, and thus no epistemic duties either. This, I think, is the strategy of the standard objection from doxastic involuntarism. That objection concludes that we do not have doxastic duties from the claims that (a) we do not have duties to do what is beyond our voluntary control and (b) we do not have voluntary control over our doxastic attitudes.

The second, more neglected, way to deny there are epistemic duties is to deny any duties are grounded in purely epistemic considerations. For example, one might argue that the state of having certain evidence is just the wrong sort of thing to impose a duty. Or one might argue that no states of affairs nontrivially require doxastic attitudes and only doxastic attitudes. Or one might argue that there are no obligations attached to the role of "being a believer."

I pursue a version of the second strategy in this paper. In my view, there are no duties with purely epistemic grounds. There is a general method we can use for showing that a putative source of duty really does not impose duties after all. I describe that method in the following section, and I apply it the special case of epistemic duty in Section 4. The

upshot will be that what might have looked like epistemic duties are really just moral duties to do cognitive things, or else they are not duties at all.

### **3 Arguing Against Sources of Duty**

Imagine someone proposes a category of “parental duties,” which are supposed to be duties of parents qua parents, independently of any other possible sources of obligation such as morality, the law, prudence, and so on. In general, parental duties involve doing what is in the best interests of one’s children. For example, if medical care is in the best interest of one’s child, it might be one’s parental duty to see to that the child receives medical care. How might we argue that there are no parental duties?

Let us first be clear what it is to deny there are parental duties. It is not to deny that parents have special obligations pertaining to the welfare of their children. Rather, it is to deny that those obligations are non-moral obligations deriving from the biological fact of parenthood. We thus could argue against their existence by arguing that all putatively parental duties are really moral duties to do parental things.

Such an argument can be very straightforward. It is true that parents ought to do things that are in the best interests of their children, but the relevant sense of ‘ought’ is moral. It is the moral duty of parents to promote their children’s interests. If one’s child needs medical care and one does not see to it that she gets it, one is guilty of a *moral* failing (provided, of course, that further moral considerations do not override the duty in one’s particular case).

There is just no point in positing parental duties over and above moral duties. Positing them will lead us to attribute no new obligations—and no new sources of obligation—to people. Whenever a set of circumstances is supposed to obligate a person to do something parentally, those very same circumstances also *morally require* her to do that very thing. We can get all the same work done by sticking with morality alone, without

supposing any duties are purely parental.

We have a choice, then, between two attitudes about the existence of parental duties. We could hold that there are such duties, even though including them in our catalog of duties adds nothing to our understanding of the world. Or we could deny that they exist, explain them away by appeal to moral duties to do parental things, and thereby eliminate an unnecessary complication to our conceptual system. Theoretical economy favors the latter attitude. So long as there is no good reason to posit *sui generis* parental duties, it seems best to deny there are any.

Of course, one could maintain that parental duties do exist, but they are a species of moral duty. In particular, they might consist of those moral duties that derive from the facts about what is in the interests of one's children. Such a move would be perfectly reasonable, but it would abandon the original idea of parental duties set out above. That was the idea of duties of parents qua parents *independently* of their moral and other duties. If one grants that parental duties are a kind of moral duty, one has given up the claim that there is an autonomous realm of parental duty.

The above discussion suggests a general strategy. To argue against the existence of duties of kind K, we could argue that all putative K-duties coincide with moral duties. To do that, we could show that facts alleged to K-require something are morally significant and always morally require the very same thing. In the case of parental duties, that means showing that whatever circumstances allegedly impose a parental requirement to do something also impose a moral requirement to do that very thing, because parenthood is morally significant and entails moral obligations to look out for one's children's interests. When everything any state of affairs supposedly K-requires is already required morally by that very state of affairs, there is no point in positing an independent realm of K-duty. Our conceptual system would be more economical if it denied the existence of *sui generis* K-duties and instead treated them as special cases of moral duty. That, I take it, is a perfectly legitimate reason to deny that there are K-duties.

I do not claim that ‘It serves no purpose to posit K-duties, therefore there are no K-duties’ is a deductively valid form of inference. Nevertheless, I do think it exemplifies one of the most useful and successful forms of inductive inference in the sciences, an application of Occam’s Razor. We do not believe in vital forces, for example, because positing them would add nothing to our existing, biochemical understanding of the processes involved in being alive. We do not believe in vital forces because we do not need to believe in them, and they would unnecessarily complicate our conceptual system. Once we have seen that the idea of sui generis K-duties adds nothing to our understanding of what people ought to do, their status comes to be like that of vital forces. We do not need to posit them, and so we might as well just deny that there are any.

#### **4 There are no Epistemic Duties**

We can apply the above pattern of argument to supposedly epistemic duties. Every situation that imposes a supposedly epistemic duty, I will argue, morally requires the very same thing. Just as there are no parental duties—only moral duties to do parental things, there are no epistemic duties—only moral duties to do cognitive things.

Let us say that a body of evidence “favors” believing a proposition when the proposition is objectively much more likely on the evidence than its denial. It favors disbelieving the proposition in the converse case, and it favors withholding when it neither favors believing nor favors disbelieving. When a person considers a proposition, she has a supposedly epistemic duty to have the favored attitude (i.e., the attitude her evidence favors). I will argue for the following claim:

**(MD)** If a person S considers a proposition p, it is S’s pro tanto moral obligation to have the attitude toward p that S’s evidence favors.

Notice that (MD) does not ascribe an overriding obligation to have the favored

attitude. It does not say that one always ought, all things considered, to have whatever attitudes one's evidence favors. (MD) ascribes a pro tanto moral obligation, which might be outweighed by competing obligations in certain cases. Thus it is logically weaker than Clifford's similar dictum (Clifford 1876/1999), on its most natural, moral interpretation:

It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

(MD) is closer to the claim that it always morally *bad* to believe on insufficient evidence than to the claim that it is always morally *wrong*.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, (MD) is strong enough to support the argument against purely epistemic duty. If (MD) is true, whenever a person has a supposedly epistemic duty to have a given attitude, she also has a moral obligation to have that same attitude (although the moral obligation might be overridden in certain cases). Given (MD), there would be no point in positing an autonomous realm of epistemic duty.

The case for (MD) derives from the moral importance of people's ends and their efforts to realize them. Any reasonable moral theory will acknowledge that importance and endorse a principle such as this:

**(MP)** Whenever a person has a range of mutually incompatible options, she has a pro tanto moral obligation to take whatever option is best from the standpoint of promoting people's ends (or one of those options, if there is a tie).

The principle requires some unpacking, but its general idea is that, other things being equal, one ought to do whatever is most likely to help people the most. Additional considerations can override the pro tanto obligation (MP) describes. Suppose X is the option that best promotes people's ends. It still might be the case that X is wrong in itself, that the ends it promotes are evil, or that it would interfere with discharging more important moral obligations. In any of those cases, the pro tanto obligation to take X

would be overridden.

To promote an end is to make its realization more likely (or to realize it). The more an option raises the likelihood that more ends will be realized, the more *effective* the option is.<sup>6</sup> I call an option “best” when it is the option that is most objectively likely to be the most effective, given the information available to the agent.

One might suppose that we ought to take the most effective option, rather than the best one. To see why this is a mistake, consider the case in which the best option happens not to be the most effective. This is one of the rare cases in which the option most likely to be most effective is not most effective. Suppose a person in such a situation took the most effective option, even though it was not best. She would be subject to criticism. We would tell her that things worked out all right this time, but she was lucky. She took an unwarranted risk she ought not to have taken. On the other hand, if she had taken the best option, she would not be subject to criticism. She did the best she could on the information available to her, and she was unlucky. The option one ought to take, then, is the best option, even in cases when it is not the most effective.

Here is an example to illustrate the point. Jack has been kidnapped, and his captors have forced him to play a variety of Russian roulette. He must choose between two revolvers, each of which holds up to six bullets. Revolver A has a bullet in all chambers but chamber 5. Revolver B has a bullet in chamber 5 but not any of the others. Jack can see that this is how the revolvers are arranged. One shot will be fired at Jack from whichever revolver he chooses. Though Jack has no evidence of it, his captors have arranged that chamber 5 will be fired at him, whichever gun he chooses. So, Revolver A is Jack’s most effective option, and Revolver B is his best option. If Jack takes Revolver A, he will be lucky enough to survive his stupidity. If he takes Revolver B, he will be unlucky enough not to survive his wisdom. He ought to take Revolver B, and that is what makes his situation tragic.

As formulated, (MP) is perfectly impartial. The best option is what is most likely to

most effectively promote *people's ends*, and no one's ends receive any more weight than anyone else's. Some philosophers believe that this sort of impartiality is definitive of ethical principles (Singer 1993). Others think ethics should allow us to be partial in weighting the ends we promote, perhaps by giving our own ends greater weight than others' (Bennett 1978). For my purposes, it is unnecessary to take a side in this debate. If necessary, we could treat facts about whose ends an option promotes as possible overrides of the duty (MP) describes.

Different moral theories are apt to explain why (MP) is true differently. A broadly Kantian theory, for example, would explain that helping to promote people's ends is part of treating humanity as an end in itself (O'Neill 1986). Utilitarians are likely to point out that realizing their ends is what makes people happy, so we ought to do our best to bring about the realization of people's ends.

Despite its plausibility, one might object that (MP) attributes obligations that people do not in fact have.<sup>7</sup> It might be that I could best promote people's ends by getting rich and being generous. (MP) then seems to say that I have a moral obligation to get rich. Or maybe I would best promote people's ends by giving up philosophy and becoming a doctor. (MP) would then seem to say that I am morally obliged to give up philosophy and become a doctor. But it is counterintuitive that I would be morally obligated to get rich or to become a doctor, and so (MP) looks false.

The objection is plausible only if we treat (MP) as ascribing an overriding or all things considered moral obligation, rather than a pro tanto obligation. A person can have a pro tanto moral obligation even when further considerations override it. Although it is implausible that I have an all things considered moral obligation to get rich (if getting rich is one of my options), and it is implausible that I have an all things considered moral obligation to give up philosophy for medicine, (MP) does not entail that I have such obligations. It would entail those things only if we also assume that nothing is ever morally more important than promoting people's ends (and doing so in a perfectly

impartial way). (MP) itself is neutral on that assumption, and I suspect it is false.

Real counterexamples to (MP) would have to be cases in which a person does not even have a pro tanto obligation to take the best option. In these cases, no considerations would be morally relevant except the promotion of people's ends, and yet it would not be true that a person ought to take the option that is most likely to be most effective. I know of no such cases.

We can think of (MD) as a special case of (MP). When a person considers a proposition, her options are to believe it, to disbelieve it and to withhold judgment. I will argue that her best option is to take the favored attitude. Consequently, she has a pro tanto moral obligation to have the attitude her evidence favors.

To see that the favored attitude is the best option, consider the ways in which our beliefs guide and constrain our actions in pursuit of our ends. We choose and execute our actions not on the basis of how the world *is*, but how we *believe it to be*. Nevertheless, it is how the world is that determines whether our plans succeed or fail. Thus it is important for our beliefs to give us an accurate picture of how things stand in the world.

The importance of accurate beliefs is most evident when we face what Andy Clark has called "representation hungry" problems. These are problems that cannot be solved except by employing representations. Typical cases involve problems that require us to respond to absent, abstract or counterfactual states of affairs, or to respond to properties (such as monetary value) with no readily detectable physical manifestation (Clark and Toribio 1994; Clark 1997, 2001). To solve these problems we need accurate mental representations of information not available in our immediate environment. We need beliefs, but not just any old beliefs. We need accurate, relevant beliefs. Without them, we stand little chance of solving these problems except by blind luck.

In representation hungry problems, it is not possible to check the accuracy of our beliefs by comparing them directly with what they represent. If we could, the problems would not be representation hungry (see Clark and Toribio 1994; Clark 1997, 2001).<sup>8</sup>

That is why evidence is important. The attitudes one's evidence favors are objectively most likely to be accurate, so they are objectively most likely to help one solve one's representation hungry problems.

Often, we face problems exhibiting what I call "higher order" representation hunger. To solve these problems, we must rely on other people's solutions to representation hungry problems. In the simplest cases, one person faces a representation hungry problem and gets the required information from someone else. For example, I might need directions from you so that I can find the restaurant where we plan to meet for lunch. Other cases can be more complicated. If I plan to drive to the restaurant, I rely on the engineers who designed my car to have solved a host of representation hungry problems I know next to nothing about. Of course, our reliance on one another goes both ways. Not only do I depend on others, but *others depend on me* as a source of information, and they rely on me to have solved representation hungry problems as they pursue their ends.

To achieve our ends, we need our attitudes to be accurate, we need other people's attitudes to be accurate, and other people need our attitudes to be accurate. Thus we need ourselves and others to have the attitudes the evidence favors, and we have a pro tanto moral duty to take those attitudes. For example, suppose Frank is considering the proposition *p*. He might believe it, disbelieve it or withhold judgment. His evidence favors one of those attitudes. If he adopts the favored attitude, Frank puts himself into the best position to solve representation hungry problems to which *p* is relevant, and he will be a better source of information for others who face such problems. Thus, so long as *p* is relevant to people's representation hungry problems, the favored attitude is Frank's best option—his option that is most likely to do the most to promote people's ends.

But what if *p* is *not* relevant to any problems that anyone faces? There are still good reasons to think the favored attitude is Frank's best option. First, it is still *possible* that *p* would be relevant to some problem sometime, and that is a possibility Frank cannot rule out. By taking the favored attitude, Frank is in a better position to promote people's ends,

should p ever become relevant, than he would be otherwise. Frank ought to take the favored attitude for much the same reason that one should not run stop signs on dark country roads at 3:00 a.m. Even if no one else is around, they might be, and stopping is the safe thing to do. Similarly, even if p does not matter to anyone's projects, it could, and it might someday, so the safest thing to do is to take the favored attitude.

Second, it is plausible that Frank's mere consideration of p makes p relevant to *someone's* ends. For Frank to consider p is for him to consider whether p is true. In doing that, he necessarily adopts the ends of believing the truth about p and avoiding error as to p. At the very least, it best serves these ends of Frank's for him to adopt the favored attitude. If p is relevant to no other ends, then Frank's best option is take the attitude his evidence favors.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, one generally manifests deeply rooted habits of mind in the formation of one's doxastic attitudes. Those habits are not sensitive to any difference between propositions that are relevant to people's projects and propositions that are not. We do not first decide whether a proposition matters and then select what habits of mind to apply in forming an attitude toward that proposition. We just deploy our habits. If Frank adopts an unfavored attitude toward an irrelevant proposition, he might be manifesting a habit of mind that would also lead him away from adopting the favored attitude toward propositions that *do* matter. Even if he is not manifesting such a habit, his adoption of an unfavored attitude contributes to the development one. Either way, Frank ought not to adopt the unfavored attitude. Even if p is not relevant to anyone's projects, *the manner in which Frank settles on his attitude* is relevant, for he is apt to redeploy it. His best option, then, is to deploy habits of mind that lead to the attitudes his evidence favors.

This point merits reiteration. To settle for an unfavored attitude towards an irrelevant proposition is either to manifest or to cultivate a habit that will lead to unfavored attitudes on *relevant* propositions. To manifest or cultivate such habits impedes one's ability to

promote people's ends—both one's own and others'. Consequently, one ought not to do it.

When a person considers a proposition, it is her pro tanto moral duty to adopt the attitude her evidence favors. That is the option that best promotes people's ends. The guiding idea behind the notion of epistemic duty, however, is that having evidence that favors an attitude imposes a *non-moral* duty for one to do the very same thing. The posit of a purely epistemic type of duty, over and above one's moral duties, is supposed to explain why people ought to respond to evidence by believing what it favors. But the posit is unnecessary. People morally ought to believe what the evidence favors, and that is enough.<sup>9</sup>

This argument applies to Feldman and Chisholm's conceptions of epistemic duty as well as to the core conception. Feldman thinks it is one's epistemic duty to have the attitudes that constitute good performance as a believer. In Feldman's view, though, those are just the attitudes one's evidence favors. But we already have a pro tanto moral obligation to take the attitudes our evidence favors. If my evidence favors one attitude toward a proposition over the others, Feldman would say I ought to take that attitude because that is what being a good believer is all about. The notion of a "good believer," however, is entirely unnecessary. If my evidence favors one attitude over the others, then taking that attitude is my best option with regard to promoting people's ends. So, I have a pro tanto moral obligation to take that attitude, and there is no need to explain my duty in purely epistemic terms.

Chisholm's account of epistemic duty does not appeal directly to the notion of evidence. The account is plausible, however, only if what is epistemically required on that account coincides with what one's evidence favors. So, if there is a pro tanto moral duty to have the attitudes one's evidence favors, there is a pro tanto moral duty to have the attitudes Chisholm describes as epistemically required. On Chisholm's understanding of epistemic requirements, then, there is no need to posit a special, nonmoral kind of duty

to explain why we ought to believe what our evidence favors.<sup>10</sup>

## 5 Objections and Replies

### 5.1 Objection 1: Differences in Moral and Epistemic Requirements

If my argument so far has been correct, there is no point in talking about “epistemic” duties except as a species of moral duty. One might object that there are counterexamples to the claim that all supposedly epistemic duties are moral duties. We can expect any such counterexamples to be cases in which either (a) one is morally required to have an attitude one’s evidence does not favor, or (b) one is epistemically but not morally required to have an attitude toward a certain proposition.

Consider the first kind of counterexample. It is hard to tell a plausible story that supports an intuitive judgment that someone morally ought to have an attitude her evidence does not support. I take the difficulty of telling such a story to count in favor of the view I am defending here. The most plausible cases, it seems, are cases in which we think there is great moral value in remaining loyal to someone and trusting that person, despite very powerful evidence that one’s trust is misplaced.

Suppose, then, that Jack’s best friend has been arrested for a serious crime and insists that he is innocent. Jack has seen the evidence, though, and it is compelling. Some people might judge that Jack *morally* ought to believe his friend is innocent but *epistemically* ought to believe he is guilty.<sup>11</sup> Does this sort of case not show that epistemic duty is one thing and moral duty quite another?

It does not. Though we *could* interpret it as a case in which epistemic and moral requirements pull in different directions, we could just as easily interpret it as highlighting the fact that our various pro tanto moral obligations sometimes pull us in different directions. This is a case in which one sort of pro tanto moral requirement (the

requirements of loyalty) conflicts with another sort of pro tanto moral requirement (the requirement to have the attitudes one's evidence favors). What Jack ought to do all things moral considered will depend on which is more important in this case: loyalty or conformity to one's evidence. If we contrast what Jack epistemically ought to do with what he morally ought to do, we are really either contrasting one sort of moral consideration (the sort that depends on what evidence Jack has) with another (the sort that depends on loyalty), or we are contrasting Jack's pro tanto, evidence-dependent moral duty with his moral duty all things considered.

Cases like Jack's are thus very similar to cases in which the requirements of justice and mercy conflict. Those cases do not show that either sort of requirement is non-moral, and cases like Jack's do not show that supposedly epistemic requirements are non-moral either.

In the second kind of supposed counterexample, one is epistemically but not morally required to have an attitude toward a certain proposition. The best candidates are cases in which it appears that a person has no moral duties at all, but has epistemic duties anyway. Alternatively, since the moral duty to follow your evidence derives from the moral duty to do what best promotes people's ends, we could look for cases in which a person cannot do *anything* to promote people's ends but has epistemic duties all the same.

One might think people suffering from "locked in" syndrome represent such cases.<sup>12</sup> These are people who are totally paralyzed and incapable of communicating with the outside world but remain conscious. We can even imagine unfortunate cases in which a person is not only locked in, but also "cut off"—incapable of sensory perception. Such a person would be completely alone with her thoughts, and it is easy to suppose she would not have any moral obligations.

But imagine that Sue is locked in and cut off, and also considering Goldbach's Conjecture. If she comes across a proof of the conjecture, is it not the case that she epistemically ought to believe it? And if she discovers a disproof, is it not the case that

she ought to disbelieve it? It appears that Sue has epistemic duties even though she has no moral duties. And so, it appears, epistemic duties are not moral duties after all.

There are two responses to this line of objection. First, the objection turns on the claim that Sue has no moral obligations. Taken literally, the claim is obviously false. Sue does have some moral obligations. She ought not to murder anyone, for example, no matter how much she wants to. Lucky for her, no matter how much she wants to, she cannot murder anyone anyway. The fact that she could not murder anyone, however, is not enough to make murder *permissible* for her.

The most charitable interpretation of the claim that Sue has no moral obligations is this: All things considered, all or almost all of Sue's positive, other-directed, pro tanto moral obligations are overridden. Being locked in and cut off gives Sue a perfect excuse for not fulfilling those obligations. On that interpretation, however, note that the moral obligations do still exist. She has the obligations, but she also has a very good excuse for not fulfilling them. So, the claim that Sue has epistemic duties in her condition does not support the conclusion that epistemic duties are non-moral.

Still, one might point out that Sue's epistemic duties are not overridden when she is locked in and cut off, even though her other-directed pro tanto moral duties are overridden. That only means that epistemic duties are not other-directed pro tanto moral obligations, but I have not claimed that epistemic duties are other-directed at all. I have claimed that they derive from the moral obligation to promote *people's ends*, not from a moral obligation to promote *other people's ends*. So, exemption from other-directed moral obligations is not necessarily enough to provide exemption from epistemic moral obligations.

This leads to a second line of response to the case of Sue. To consider a proposition is to consider whether it is true. So, if Sue is considering Goldbach's Conjecture, she is considering whether Goldbach's Conjecture is true. She is adopting the ends of believing the truth and avoiding error on the Conjecture. Believing in accord with her evidence is

her best option with regard to *her* ends, and her ends are the only ends she is in any position to promote. So, even if it makes no difference to anyone *else's* ends what Sue thinks, the option that best promotes people's ends in her case is the attitude her evidence favors.<sup>13</sup>

Some people might prefer to reserve 'moral' to describe one's duties to promote others' ends, rather than one's duties to promote ends as such, including one's own. Sue's duty in this case would then not qualify as moral, because it has nothing to do with promoting others' ends. Though I think it is inadvisable to identify morality with altruism, it appears to be a merely verbal question whether moral duties are duties to promote *ends as such* or duties to promote *others' ends*. If we opt for the more restrictive notion of which duties to call "moral," it does not affect the argument I have been making. Being locked in and cut off, Sue ought to do whatever best promotes her ends. That means she ought to adopt the attitudes her evidence favors. There is no need to posit an additional, purely epistemic source of duty to explain why Sue ought to have the attitudes she ought to have.

Still, one might stipulate a case of Sue\*, who is locked in and cut off and does not care about believing what is true. Some people will maintain that even Sue\* ought to have just the attitudes her evidence favors. I am not one of them. If she does not care about truth, then it makes no difference to anyone, including Sue\*, whether she has the attitudes her evidence favors. But if it makes no difference to anyone whether she has those attitudes, I cannot see any reason to insist that she ought to have them anyway. They do neither her nor anyone else any good.<sup>14</sup>

## **5.2 Objection 2: "Epistemology is Prior to Ethics"**

An act's moral status often depends on what one would be epistemically justified in believing. Suppose I think you are a deranged killer. If my belief is epistemically

justified, then it might be morally permissible (or even obligatory) for me to confine you against your will and summon the police. If my belief is not epistemically justified, though, such an action would probably be immoral. The morality of my action depends partly on the epistemic justification of my beliefs about the situation in which I act.

Also, according to a plausible version of consequentialism, an act's *actual* consequences do not determine its moral status. Instead, an act's moral status depends on what the agent was epistemically justified in believing its consequences would be. Thus, an act with bad actual consequences can be morally in the clear when the agent was justified in expecting good consequences, and an act with good consequences can be morally wrong if the agent was justified in expecting bad consequences (Fumerton 2001).

Epistemic justification thus appears to make a difference to morality. That might make it seem that epistemic duty cannot be a special case of moral duty. Instead, epistemic duty might appear to be prior to and independent of moral duty. It would be a mistake to draw that conclusion, however.

If an act's morality *can* depend on what the agent is justified in believing, we should ask why that is so. There are at least two initially plausible explanations. One is that epistemic duty is indeed independent of and prior to moral duty. In that case, the very idea of moral duty would depend on the idea of epistemic duty, and moral duties would arise only from within the preexisting context of one's epistemic duties. The moral relevance of epistemic justification derives from the fact that one has a prior duty to have epistemically justified beliefs, and the substance of one's moral duties is fixed only on the assumption one has discharged the prior, non-moral, epistemic duties. We might say that it makes no sense to ask what one morally ought to *do* until it is settled what one epistemically ought to *believe*.<sup>15</sup>

That is not the only possible explanation. A second possibility begins with the observation that we must always act on the information we have; no one can act on information she lacks. So, we do not usually hold agents morally responsible to the actual

facts of their situations, but to how things probably would have been, given the available information. The morality of what I do, then, is often a function of how things would probably be, given the information I have or could reasonably be expected to acquire. Morality's dependence on how things probably would be, given my information, manifests itself as dependence on what I would be epistemically justified in believing. After all, the beliefs I would be justified in holding are those that would probably be true, given the information available to me. It is probable truth, not epistemic justification, that explains the relevance of these beliefs to morality.

We can summarize these two possibilities as follows. The first is the possibility that epistemic justification matters to morality because our beliefs non-morally ought to be justified. The second is the possibility that epistemic justification matters to morality because of its connection to truth.

I find the second explanation preferable on the grounds of economy and power. It is more economical because it requires us to posit no new, unexplained kinds of duty. It is more powerful because it explains not only why epistemically justified beliefs (rather than facts or epistemically unjustified beliefs) matter to the morality of actions, but also the sense in which we "ought" to have justified beliefs: The morality of our actions depends on what is probably so, given our information, and hence on the justification of our beliefs. To act morally then, we *need* justified beliefs; lacking them or having epistemically unjustified beliefs would impede one's ability to do what is morally right.

Even apart from these explanatory considerations, there is a further problem with the inference from 'epistemic justification is relevant to morality' to 'epistemic duty is prior to moral duty'. We can morally evaluate not only actions, but their outcomes and their agents in so acting. It is perfectly sensible to call an *act* morally better or worse depending on the moral worth of its outcome, regardless of the agent's epistemic situation. The epistemic situation of the agent is relevant not to the evaluation of her actions but to the evaluation of *her* in so acting. But we evaluate agents along a variety of

moral dimensions. One dimension pertains to actual consequences: An agent is right or wrong in acting as she does accordingly as the actual consequences of her actions are good or bad. A second sense takes the agent's doxastic situation into account: She is right or wrong in acting as she does accordingly as she *believes* the consequences would be good or bad, regardless of the actual consequences. A third dimension takes her conative situation into account: An agent acts rightly or wrongly accordingly as she *intends* her action to have good or bad consequences. Yet a fourth dimension takes her epistemic situation into account: She acts rightly or wrongly accordingly as she would be *justified* in thinking her actions would have good or bad consequences.

The fact that an agent's epistemic situation is relevant to one sort of moral appraisal of her is far from enough to show that epistemic duty is prior to moral duty. In general, lots of things that are not conceptually prior to morality can be relevant to moral appraisals. In the biblical story of the widow's mites (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:14), a person's *economic* situation is taken to be relevant to a moral appraisal of her in acting as she does. That is no indication that poverty is conceptually prior to morality. The relevance of epistemic justification to moral appraisals shows only that we sometimes take a person's epistemic situation into account when we make moral appraisals of her. It does not show that the concept of epistemic duty is prior to that of moral duty.

### **5.3 Objection 3: The Constitutive Normativity of Belief**

Many philosophers have claimed that the concept of belief is "normative" (Davidson 1984; Kim 2000; McDowell 1994; Brandom 1994). By this they mean that part of what it is to be a believer is to be bound by the rules specifying the conditions of *rational* belief. The basic idea is that we cannot attribute beliefs to things without assuming that the beliefs we attribute tend to conform to the standards of epistemic justification and the correct use of evidence. This, according to Jaegwon Kim (for example), entails that

“belief attribution requires belief evaluation” (2000, p. 307). Nothing can have the status of “believer” unless it also has the duty to believe in proper accord with its evidence.

This line of thought suggests an objection to my claim that, if we can always redescribe putative epistemic duties as moral duties, there is no need to posit an independent realm of purely epistemic duty. The duty to believe in proper accord with one’s evidence is partly constitutive of having beliefs at all; nothing can have beliefs without having such duties. Now, one might go on, it is only contingently true that we face representation hungry problems and rely on one another’s beliefs. Even if we did not rely on one another or face such problems, however, we would still be believers, and we would still have epistemic duties. We need to posit epistemic duties, then, to explain why it is *necessary* that anything with beliefs ought use its evidence in certain ways and ought not to use it in others.<sup>16</sup>

To see why this objection fails, consider the following example of a statement about putatively epistemic duties:

**MT** If (a) S believes that Not-q, (b) S believes that q if p, and (c) S lacks evidence that p that outweighs S’s evidence that Not-q, then S ought to believe that Not-p.

According to the view I have been defending, MT attributes a pro tanto moral duty if it attributes any duty at all. According to the view that the concept of belief is normative, there is another sense in which MT, if true, attributes a duty. It describes a duty that binds any creature that has beliefs, necessarily, merely in virtue of the fact that it has beliefs. A possible believer who, unlike us, is not part of a community whose members are cognitively dependent on one another, still ought to do what the consequent says to do if it satisfies the antecedent. If that were not so, on this view, the creature just would not count as having beliefs at all.

For argument’s sake, I am willing to grant that there is a sense in which any believer—in virtue of being a believer alone and independently of moral

considerations—ought to believe that Not-p if it satisfies conditions (a), (b), and (c) above. The relevant sense of ‘ought’, however, does not express the attribution of a duty. MT uses ‘ought’ to describe what a non-malfunctioning believer will do, or to describe paradigmatic behavior of a believer, or to describe (part of) the so-called “proper functioning” of a belief-forming mechanism. It is the same sense of ‘ought’ in which we might say:

**T** If (a) the thermostat is set to 75 degrees, and (b) the temperature is 70 degrees, then the thermostat ought to activate the heater.

When a thermostat violates T, we are apt to say that it is malfunctioning. If something routinely enough violates T and similar principles, we are apt to say that it is no thermostat at all. But under no circumstances would we say that T describes the *duty* of a thermostat. Similarly, if a believer violates MT, she has done what she ought not in the sense of failing to do something that is partly constitutive of being a believer. She has “malfunctioned” as a believer. And if she routinely enough violates MT and similar principles, we are apt to say that she is no believer at all.

We need not see principles such as MT, then, as attributing *duties*. They just describe the kind of cognitive behavior that is involved in having beliefs. But there is no reason to suppose that such behavior is *obligatory* for believers unless we also assume that it is the duty of thermostats to activate heaters in certain circumstances.

The objection from the constitutive normativity of belief thus fails. The sense in which believers qua believers ought to believe in certain ways is just the sense in which thermostats qua thermostats ought to function in certain ways. It is not a sense of ‘ought’ that expresses duty. To read the ‘ought’ of a principle such as MT as an ascription of duty, we need to take into account more than just the fact that believers are believers. According to the view I am suggesting, we need to take into account that believers are moral agents mutually cognitively dependent on other moral agents.

## 6 Conclusion

In “The Ethics of Belief,” W. K. Clifford expresses a view similar to my own. He writes:

And no one man’s belief is in any case a private matter which concerns himself alone. Our lives are guided by that general conception of the course of things which has been created by society for social purposes. Our words, our phrases, our forms and processes and modes of thought, are common property, fashioned and perfected from age to age; an heirloom which every succeeding generation inherits as a precious deposit and a sacred trust to be handed on to the next one, not unchanged but enlarged and purified, with some clear marks of its proper handiwork. Into this, for good or ill, is woven every belief of every man who has speech of his fellows. An awful privilege, and an awful responsibility, that we should help to create the world in which posterity will live. (Clifford 1876/1999, p. 73)

Clifford probably has an exaggerated view of the importance of all of everyone’s beliefs to the whole of posterity. Nevertheless, I think he has his finger on a very important point about human life: We guide our lives by what we believe, and we rely on ourselves and one another to have properly justified beliefs as we do so. That, in my view and perhaps Clifford’s, is the source of a moral obligation to have justified beliefs. The existence of such an obligation, it so happens, screens out the need to posit an independent realm of purely epistemic duty. Unless we recognize them as a special case of moral duty, we are better off saying there are no epistemic duties.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alston thinks the analysis of epistemic justification in terms of duty is natural, but he does not endorse it.

<sup>2</sup> This is actually Chisholm's definition of *purely doxastic requirement*, and he defines epistemic requirement as a species of purely doxastic requirement. I have not been able to see how any purely doxastic requirement could fail to be epistemic on Chisholm's view, and so I employ the simpler definition here.

<sup>3</sup> Feldman borrows this distinction from Wolterstorff (1997).

<sup>4</sup> There is room to challenge the idea that we cannot understand the idea of evidence apart from the idea of epistemic duty. For example, Timothy Williamson (2000) argues that one's evidence is one's knowledge, and his account of knowledge does not turn on the idea of epistemic duty.

<sup>5</sup> Moral badness does not imply moral wrongness. If all one's options are morally bad, it is not morally wrong to take the least bad option.

<sup>6</sup> Here is one way to make this characterization more precise. Let  $E$  be a set of ends,  $\{e_1, e_2, \dots, e_n\}$ . The effectiveness of an option  $O$  relative to  $E$  is  $\sum_i \Pr(e_i | O) - \Pr(e_i | \sim O)$ , where  $\Pr(e_n | O)$  is the objective probability that  $e_n$  will be realized conditional on one's taking the option  $O$ , and  $\Pr(e_n | \sim O)$  is the probability  $e_n$  will be realized conditional on one's not taking  $O$ . Other ways of making the characterization precise might take into account the relative importance of the ends in  $E$  or modify the way  $O$ 's influence on an end's probability is measured.

<sup>7</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for stressing the importance of this objection.

<sup>8</sup> Unless some form of direct realism is true, we can never directly compare our beliefs with the world.

<sup>9</sup> None of this implies a moral requirement to have attitudes that are true. Suppose Frank considers the proposition  $p$ . I have assumed that Frank's most *effective* option is to believe whichever is true,  $p$  or Not- $p$ . His best option is the one that is most likely to be most effective, given the information available to him. It is whatever attitude his evidence favors. Frank's pro tanto moral duty is to take the best option, not the most effective one. So, his pro tanto moral duty is have the attitude his evidence favors, which is usually but not always the true attitude.

<sup>10</sup> I should note that Chisholm never claims that epistemic duties are non-moral. In his view, a duty is moral if no further considerations override it; moral duties are duties all things considered. Indeed, Chisholm takes it as primitive that some states impose what he calls epistemic requirements, and he does not pursue the question of how those requirements come about. It could turn out that the view I am offering

is ultimately compatible with Chisholm's.

<sup>11</sup> Not everyone has this intuition. I do not have it. Some people do, though. George W. Bush's tendency to stick by his friends even in the face of evidence of their misdeeds (e.g., Rafael Palmeiro's steroid use) is sometimes lauded as a manifestation of *good* moral character.

<sup>12</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for mentioning these cases to me.

<sup>13</sup> This is why it is false in Sue's case that there is nothing she can do to promote people's ends. She may be unable to promote other people's ends, but that does not mean she cannot promote anyone's ends at all.

<sup>14</sup> It might turn out that Sue\* ought to care about truth, and so she ought to follow her evidence for that reason. The relevant question would then be, "Why ought Sue\* to care about truth?" There are only four plausible answers. (1) Truth is intrinsically valuable. (2) Caring about truth is intrinsically valuable. (3) Truth is useful. And (4) caring about truth is useful. (1) and (2) seem to provide moral reasons to care about truth, and (3) and (4) give practical reasons. Thus, if Sue\* ought to follow her evidence because she ought to care about truth, the relevant sense of 'ought' remains moral or practical, not purely epistemic.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Fumerton argues from the claim that epistemic justification is relevant to morality to the claim that the epistemic 'ought' is prior to the moral 'ought' (better, the moral 'ought to do'). He does not argue, though, that epistemic duty is prior to moral duty. Fumerton takes the priority of the epistemic 'ought' as evidence that it is a non-normative ought. A non-normative 'ought', whatever else it might be, is an 'ought' that does not attribute duties, so I do not think there is substantive disagreement between Fumerton and myself.

<sup>16</sup> It may be that Feldman has these sorts of considerations in mind when he contends that our epistemic duties are what we ought to do if we are to do the job of being a believer "correctly." Jonathan Adler also argues that the idea of epistemic duty is intrinsic to the idea of belief, but for non-Davidsonian reasons (Adler 2002).

<sup>17</sup> This paper was written with the support of a grant from the University of Alabama Research Advisory Committee. I would like to thank Scott Aikin, Torin Alter, Erin Murphy, Stuart Rachels, Michelle Wrenn, and an anonymous referee for very helpful comments, suggestions and criticisms.

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