Defending Epistemic Responsibility

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Abstract

The claim that we have epistemic responsibilities, and that we can be blameworthy for failing to meet those responsibilities, has recently been challenged by a number of theorists on the grounds of non-volunteerism: the claim that we do not have control over our beliefs. I argue that previous responses to this challenge fail to adequately address the problem and, furthermore, provide ancillary reasons to desire a proper defense of epistemic responsibility. I then argue that, despite earlier challenges, we can be responsible and blameworthy for our beliefs, and that this responsibility is properly considered to be epistemic in nature.

Introduction

My concern in this paper is to argue for the claim that we are epistemically responsible for at least some of our beliefs. As a consequence of this, I will also be arguing that we are appropriately blameworthy for, at least, some of our beliefs and that such blame is properly epistemic blame much in the way that, for certain actions, I am morally blameworthy. Such a view has most recently been argued against by William Alston (2005)¹. Since then, various epistemologists have attempted to defend some of our deontic concepts (like the use of “oughts”) by sidestepping the important challenge of doxastic non-volunteerism. I will argue that these theories either ignore or fail to accommodate the concept of responsibility in their deontic framework.

There are at least two reasons, I believe, to desire a defense of
epistemic responsibility and epistemic blameworthiness. The first, which has been acknowledged even by philosophers arguing against epistemic responsibility, is that talk of epistemic responsibilities, duties, and blameworthiness is indeed a widespread phenomenon. This is true not only of our locutions concerning the word “ought” such as “you ought not believe such a thing!” or “you shouldn’t jump to conclusions!” but also of our attitudes and expectations of each other as believers. Consider the two following scenarios (which I will continue to use throughout the essay):

(1) I go to the grocery store and form the false belief that my partner does not mind if I buy us non-organic meat for dinner. I have no idea that she had just read a new article about the health hazards associated with purchasing non-organic meat and had thus changed her mind from her usual, ambivalent preferences.

(2) I speak with my partner right before leaving for the grocery store and she informs me of her preferences. In the meat aisle, I nevertheless form the belief that my partner does not mind if I buy us non-organic meat for dinner.

When I return home with meat in (1) my partner may be upset that I purchased meat that she doesn’t want and so, among other things, it was an unfortunate waste of money. However, in scenario (2) she will likely be upset at me. When I explain to her that I thought that she didn’t mind which meat I bought she will tell me that I did something wrong.

These kinds of judgments and expectations permeate our everyday lives. Furthermore, we seem to have special kinds of words and concepts for people who are notoriously irresponsible or bad believers versus when their poor beliefs are ‘not their fault’. An innocent believer may be dull-witted, unaware, uninformed, just plain dumb, or unintelligent. However, we also freely recognize those who are ignorant, inconsiderate, and neglectful. These different concepts, and their varied synonyms, rely on and are informed by the idea that we can be responsibly and blameworthy believers.

The second motivation relates to the everyday proliferation of deontic judgments noted above, but is especially concerned with
judging each other as moral agents. I take it to be a very good excuse, when someone has done something wrong, to reply that they didn’t believe it was wrong and therefore should not be punished/rebuked/or so on. Of course, often times will retort that one should have believed that doing x was wrong. However, we only appropriately blame people and punish or chastise others when they are responsible for the negative outcomes of their behavior. If we are never responsible (or cannot be responsible) then our claims that people should have believed certain things, especially in the moral domain, lose much of their potency.

Some philosophers, including Alston, argue that there is a sense in which we can be responsible for some of our beliefs but that it is not epistemic responsibility. Is there a reason to think that, given the concern above, we should prefer to conceptualize our responsibility as epistemic? Traditionally, philosophers associate the goal of truth as being the defining feature of the realm of the epistemic. Furthermore, it seems that when a person is forming beliefs about what is right or wrong, their primary goal is discovering and believing the truth (as opposed to fulfilling some other set of goals or duties that could also apply to belief formation). Our duties concerning belief formation may be derivative of broader moral duties or responsibilities, but it seems to me that they are nevertheless epistemic.

The Challenge of Doxastic Non-Volunteerism

In the face of these two motivations, the claim that we are responsible for our beliefs suffers from an apparent critical problem: we do not seem to have any voluntary control over what we believe. Generic responsibility, that is as it may apply morally, prudentially, or epistemically, seems to require that the agent in question have some control over the outcome or their actions in any scenario before they can be held responsible or blameworthy for what happens. This challenge is related to, but importantly different from, the long-standing principle of ought-implies-can.

For the range of deontological concepts we employ, we can distinguish between those in which something good or bad happened,
and those for which we are responsible or blameworthy for. Concerning
the former, we may claim something like “he should have gone to an
all-boys prep school”. This seems true only if there is a way in which
they actually can (or cannot). That is, it makes sense to make these
kinds of claims because the boy could have easily been enrolled in a
different school by his parents or that the salt actually does dissolve.
Traditionally, it does not seem true, or make sense to say things like
the boy “ought to have been a Martian” or “ought to have been born to
different parents”. This is true of moral “oughts” as well. It seems true
to say that “she should be nice to her new classmate” but not of any
action that the girl could not possibly perform.

For a subset of these deontic ideals or claims, the agent has effective
control over whether the ideal realized. Only for these do we claim
that a person was responsible for that outcome (or, in the case of a bad
outcome, at least, blameworthy). For instance, we certainly would not
blame or hold the boy responsible for not going to a different school –
he had no control over which school he went to. However, the girl had
control over how she acted toward her new classmate and, therefore,
can be blamed for being mean. The first kind of oughts can be true and
applicable even if they do not have voluntary control over whether
we fulfill them, as long as they are something we can fulfill, whereas
judgments of responsibility and blame necessitate voluntariness.

Given this background, we can understand Alston’s challenge (of
Doxastic Non-Volunteerism) as follows⁴:

(1) Generic responsibility or blameworthiness for an action or state
requires an agent have voluntary control over that action or state.

(2) People do not have voluntary control over their judgments
(actions) or beliefs (states).

(C) Therefore, people are not responsible for blameworthy for their
judgments or beliefs.

The first premise follows from our discussion of “ought-implies-can”
and voluntary action. This premise will be challenged later by several
philosophers but let us grant it for now. Premise (2) is the main part
of Alston’s attack and the one that concerns us now. What we will see
is that Alston, and a number of other philosophers (like Jonathan Bennett, 1990), claim that we do not have voluntary control over our beliefs because they are not properly responsive to our will.

Alston invites us to introspect about our experiences of performing certain kinds of voluntary actions and contrast them to our experiences of forming and holding beliefs. Alston notes that we have varying degrees of voluntary control. We have the kinds of actions that we can enact and complete just as soon as we can will ourselves to do them; turning one’s head or voluntarily blinking are good examples of these kinds of actions. Then there are more complicated actions, like opening a door or uttering a sentence, where it far more likely that we will somehow be interrupted and prevented from completing our action. It even seems like we have voluntary control over certain long-term goals and activities. For instance, I show a kind of long-range control over how clean my house is. I can sweep the floors, do the dishes and laundry, and so on, but it likely that I will have to stop in between these activities. I may get tired or need to eat or take a nap, but it is possible for me to return to my activity and eventually complete it.

Forming beliefs, or failing to form a certain belief, does not seem be under our control the way these simple activities are. Unlike blinking or closing a door, we cannot simply will to believe something. Similarly, judging a certain proposition to be true is not something we can accomplish simply by going about fulfilling certain sub-goals (like cleaning the dishes). In these examples the only necessary prerequisites to accomplishing something were willing it and a relatively stable environment (i.e. one that would not interfere with the activities set in motion by our will). Judgments of the truth or propositions, or states of belief and disbelief, are formed. Take, for instance, what I consider to be an absurd proposition:

(a) My television has the power to elongate its cords and strangle people while they are asleep.

It is obvious to me that I could never get myself to believe this proposition. It is also obvious to anyone who attempts to form that belief that it is impossible to do. There are many other kinds of attitudes
I may take toward this proposition. I may hold (a) as a hypothesis or factor it into my decision making or even hope, wish, or pretend that it is true, but the attitude of belief is impossible to willfully create.

Not only do we seem unable to willfully to form specific beliefs, but the beliefs that we do form are also outside our control. Alston writes:

> When I see a car coming down the street, I am not capable of believing or disbelieving this at will... when I look out my window and see rain falling, water dripping off the leaves of trees... I form the belief that rain is falling willy-nilly. There is no way I can inhibit this belief.

From this introspective exercise we conclude that beliefs are neither the kinds of things we can willfully induce in ourselves nor the kinds of things we can inhibit when they occur.

Alston concludes that, if we have any kind of control over our beliefs, it is indirect. Although my beliefs are not responsive to my will or agency, I can come up with a long term goal involving selective exposure to certain kinds of evidence and so to achieve a specific belief. Some long-term projects, if they were reliable, would entail some kind of effective control over our beliefs. However, the chances of success of such a plan, according to Alston, are likely very slim. Take the proposition (a), above. I may try to watch horror films about televisions, draw angry eyes above the screen and tell my friends to move our TV to my bedside while I sleep so that, when I wake up, I am (hopefully) startled. But even after all of this effort, my success is not guaranteed. Although I can attempt to influence my beliefs in those ways, I am not guaranteed to achieve my goal and, in fact, most likely will not succeed as a result of my willful actions. That is, I do not have an effective choice as to whether I believe something or not. Effective choice of the outcome of a judgment is, for Alston, what it takes to exhibit voluntary control and, therefore, to be responsible or blameworthy.

Some philosophers have appealed to a dichotomy between practical and epistemic reasons as an explanation for why we lack voluntary control over our beliefs. For instance, Jonathan Bennett argues that
our will, the source of voluntary action or the idea of actions/states originating from the agent, is the capacity to be responsive to practical reasons. Alternatively, beliefs are responsive to epistemic reasons, where epistemic reasons are those based solely on the truth or falsity of a proposition. The reason why the proposition that my television can strangle people is so strange is because there is so little evidence for it. These two kinds of reasons correspond to two different capacities, willing and believing, and normally they do not interact.

There are different ways in which our practical reasons, desires, or interests do influence beliefs. For instance, if I am highly interested in baseball, I will form beliefs about the game, various teams and players, and so on. In this sense, my beliefs are sensitive or responsive to my interests. The claim made by Bennett and Alston, however, is that even if we can influence generally what we form beliefs about, we still cannot control what we believe about those things. That is, we can influence the range of propositions we form judgments about, but not whether each individual proposition is true (or false). So, despite the fact that I can choose to form a series of beliefs (of undetermined content) about the inside of a room (by deciding to walk through it), I still have not exhibited the relevant voluntary control over my beliefs because I cannot decide to believe a specific proposition. There are plenty of times when the involuntariness of beliefs does limit what our beliefs are about (i.e. beliefs about rain or whether a car is speeding toward you), but the relevant limitation is on the specific content of the belief (whether it is raining or not raining, and so on).

Finally, there is one other way in which the dichotomy between “will” and “belief” seems to break down. Wishful thinking, and other forms of self-serving or delusional beliefs, are apparent counterexamples to the claim that our practical reasons do not influence our beliefs. Consider the case of a person who is in love with someone else and desperately desires that person to love them back. Upon being rebuked, that person might, instead of forming the belief that that person did not love them, believe that they really did love them and that the supposed rebuking was nothing other than a test. Such scenarios seem, prima facie, to be cases of our desires or practical interests influencing what we believe.
However the processes of rationalization and evidential appraisal operate, they nevertheless seem to be unresponsive to our will (even if they are things we do want). Let us suppose that our best explanation for the situation above is such that our agent treats the other’s behavior as evidence of his or her love much the same way we treat seeing a car as evidence of a car to us. In this way, we can see how the belief is still involuntary. Although our practical interests or desires may influence our beliefs in this indirect way, we can still see a division between the will and our practical reasons, and beliefs and evidential reasons. Our voluntary actions are still constrained by practical reasons and we are unable to will any indirect or direct influence on our beliefs (or how we appraise evidence for certain propositions) with any sort of effectiveness. From these limitations, and the premise that we must have effective choice/voluntary control over actions or states in order to be responsible for them, we maintain our conclusion that we cannot be responsible for our beliefs or judgments.

Various theorists, when faced with the challenge of doxastic non-volunteerism, have responded in one of two ways. They have claimed either that deontological judgments do not require voluntary control to be true, or they deny premise two, and claim that we actually do have voluntary control over our beliefs. The problem with the first kind of response is that, even if when it succeeds, it jettisons concepts of blame and responsibility, or at least declaws them. The problem with the second response is that it fails to address the actual challenged issued by doxastic non-volunteerism above.

**Rejecting Ought-Implies-Can**

Richard Feldman (2004)\textsuperscript{10}, Hilary Kornblith (2001)\textsuperscript{11}, and Matthew Chrisman (2008)\textsuperscript{12} provide accounts of epistemic deontologism on the basis of rejecting the first premise of Alston’s challenge as explicated above. They each neatly build on each other’s theories and I will present them in turn. Alston assumes that deontic terms like “should” and “ought” are necessarily intimately tied to their effectiveness as injunctions and our responsibility for responding to them. Feldman, Kornblith, and Chrisman (FKC) have responded by arguing that we
can still use plenty of our deontic terms without relying on the premise of voluntary control over belief.

To motivate rejecting the ought-implies-can principle, Richard Feldman shows us that, for plenty of our deontic locutions, we already do so. For instance, we frequently say things like “Teachers ought to explain things clearly. Parents ought to take care of their kids. Cyclists ought to move in various ways”\(^1\). That is, we apply standards to people all the time even when they are not able to do any better. Feldman refers to these standards as “role oughts”\(^2\). Importantly, these prescriptions seem true and appropriate even when the agents referred to would never be able to fulfill those demands – even if they did the best they could. A teacher may be incompetent, a parent incompetent, and a cyclist uncoordinated but, in virtue of their respective roles, there are standards that apply to them. Feldman grants that we do not hold them to standards at superhuman levels and that our prescriptions are, in some way, limited by their capacities. However, these standards are not limited to the point of having voluntary control over one’s behavior or outcome and may still outstrip the capacities of a particular individual.

Feldman argues that we should think of our epistemic oughts as role-oughts. These oughts apply simply because, as cognitive agents, we frequently take on the role of being believers\(^3\). In fact, we involuntarily “take on” the role of a being a believer but, according to Feldman, this does not undermine the appropriateness of the epistemic prescriptions. We are also involuntarily thrust into the role of being eaters and breathers for which we can rightly say there are ways one ought to eat and breathe. For any activity that we take on, voluntarily or involuntarily, there is a standard of performance (consistent with the goal of the role) that applies.

Feldman purposefully sets his sights short. He admits that “some terms, especially those associated with praise and blame, are to be reserved for voluntary behavior”\(^4\). His argument is limited to our use of requirements and permissions (that is, our use of the word ‘ought’). He rightly points out that Alston’s actual attack is against the notion of being “free from blame for believing”\(^5\) but dismisses the idea because he does not think that “this more narrowly defined notion of deontologism is so natural or common”\(^6\).
Whether Feldman has shown that we normally break the ought-implies-can principle, Feldman runs into trouble because role oughts only seem to apply in virtue of taking on a role. Kornblith and Chrisman object on the grounds that doxastic oughts seem to be categorical; that is, they seem to be appropriate and applicable even when we are not actively taking on a role (or no matter which role we are taking on). This may be true for certain moral beliefs: It seems true that I ought to form a belief about whether what I am doing is wrong even if I am not engaging with whether or not it is. We can also appeal to negative prescriptions. It seems true that, no matter what I am doing, I should never form the belief that I am an alien, a robot, a princess, or so on. Kornblith and Chrisman also point out that it would be true from a role-ought perspective that, should a kleptomaniac involuntarily take up the role of thief, it would still be true that she should steal\textsuperscript{19}. However, categorically, the opposite is true: No matter whether she adopts a certain role (or not), it seems true that she should not steal\textsuperscript{20}.

Kornblith offers an alternative approach. He argues that Feldman is right that some oughts are derived from an evaluation of good performance (and that they can reject the ought-implies-can principle) but, instead of evaluation of roles and their goals, they derive from human ideals. He agrees with Feldman that there is a large middle ground in between prescriptions beyond anyone’s capacities and those beyond merely a few individuals. However, he claims, because ideals apply to individuals regardless of whatever role they are taking on (as a thief, slave, etc.), they maintain a normative force that ‘role-oughts’ lack, namely, categoricity. Similar to Feldman, Kornblith’s treatment of epistemic oughts is orthogonal to the question of voluntary control. For instance, in developing his view, he considers some of our epistemic oughts deriving from our natural mental capacities. That is, he envisions certain ‘oughts’ about what kind of information we should believe (such as ‘if one sees rain, one ought to believe it is raining’) based on how effectively we can make valid inferences (e.g. the reliability of our visual-belief system). However, even if we grant that we should be sensitive to the reliability or capacity of our mental systems, it still doesn’t have any bearing about whether exercising those mental capacities is considered voluntary. The debate about ought-
implies-can, and arguing for oughts/ideals placed in some middle ground, does not yet engage with our original problem of epistemic responsibility or blame. This problem is more clearly seen in an account of epistemic deontologism provided by Matthew Chrisman.\(^{21}\)

Kornblith and Feldman have developed accounts based on treating our epistemic ideals as applying to our actions. Chrisman's argues that ideals, insofar as they apply to beliefs, operate a certain way based on the fact that beliefs are states. Chrisman's argues that ideals, when they apply directly to actions, should be action guiding. This action guiding requirement, argues Chrisman, is especially prominent in our moral ideals: moral ideals that fail to lead to action or engage with how we behave seem to be bad ideals. Chrisman worries that because beliefs are involuntary, any epistemic ideals, the way Kornblith understands them, will fail to engage our behavior. Instead, he points to many kinds of ideals that do not apply to actions but to states. For instance, our doctor may tell us that we ought to have a certain blood pressure or a mechanic might say that a bike ought to have a certain center of gravity and so on. These oughts can be true, like the kinds of oughts proposed by Feldman and Kornblith, even when our blood pressure or the balance of a bike are not within our (or someone else's) voluntary control – that is, nobody can choose to do anything to change it.

Chrisman, in developing his account, follows a distinction used by Wilfred Sellars between “ought-to-do”s and “ought-to-be”s.\(^{22}\) That is, oughts that govern actions are ‘ought-to-do’s, or rules of action, and oughts that govern states or, ways of being are ‘ought-to-be’s, or rules of criticism. Rules of action presuppose the ‘ought-implies-can’ principle whereas rules of criticism do not. Rules of criticism do not have to directly engage with our behavior. Because of this, Chrisman believes, we can maintain the categoricity of epistemic evaluations desired by Kornblith but avoid the worry of non-volunteerism because they apply to states instead of actions. However, according to Chrisman and Sellars, rules of criticism do indirectly engage with our behavior: they imply rules of action.

Chrisman highlights a few ways that rules of criticism imply rules of action: conditionally, universally, and existentially. Take the following rule of criticism: X ought to be φ. According to the conditional view,
the rule of action that is derived is:

If someone is responsible for X’s being φ, then that person ought to do what he/she can (ceteris paribus) to bring it about that X is φ.

According to the universal view:

Everyone ought to do what he/she can (ceteris paribus) to bring it about that X is φ.

And, finally, according the existential view:

Someone ought to do what he/she can (ceteris paribus) to bring it about that X is φ.

Ultimately, Chrisman does not endorse one of these methods over any other and leaves it an open question whether some or all of them are appropriate methods for deriving rules of action.

The problem discussed above in Feldman and Kornblith (and now Chrisman) becomes prominent in Chrisman’s analysis: Chrisman relies on the notion of responsibility in explicating this view. This is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it highlights the fact that the kinds of analyses being offered by Feldman, Kornblith, and Chrisman are inappropriate (or missing the goal of) developing a view of how we can, if we can, be responsible for our beliefs. Secondly, it highlights a need for an account of responsibility because, whether or not people can be responsible for their own beliefs or the beliefs of others will determine how effectively we can derive rules-of-action from rules of criticism. If Chrisman fails to be able to derive rules of actions from rules of criticism then he loses the supposed advantage he had over Kornblith concerning an analysis of human ideals.

From our critique of volunteerism above, we have reason to be suspicious both of whether we are responsible for own beliefs (which is the original charge) and also of whether we can effectively modify other people’s beliefs as well. The reasons we lack control over our own beliefs seem to apply to any scenario in which we were attempting to control or change someone else’s beliefs. That is, while we can do our best to provide evidential reasons for a certain belief, we cannot control or effectively influence how they appraise or respond to that evidence (just like we cannot control how we respond/appraise evidence we
are evaluating). Given this, it seems unlikely that the *universal* or *existential* methods of deriving rules-of-action would adhere either.

All three of these theories fail to address Alston’s primary challenge against epistemic responsibility and blame. Some, like Feldman’s, purposefully sidestep it or, as we saw, dismiss it as being unnatural or uncommon. Kornblith and Chrisman do not engage with the issue or, as we saw with Chrisman’s account, even attempt to build a theory presupposing some aspect of responsibility.

This failure mirrors an important question about moral oughts and responsibility. We might think that moral oughts are derived from human ideals and yet wonder if people are ever responsible for failing or succeeding their mandates. For example, before we reproach a teacher for failing to be an ideal teacher, we do not wonder *merely* if she had any sort of contractual obligation and whether or not she met the requirements. We inquire into how much effort she exerted, whether she knew she was doing a poor job and whether she had other courses of actions available to her (like finding another job). Once we have some understanding we begin to form a judgment about the character of the teacher. If we find out that she is a terrible teacher because she just doesn’t care, we will form negative judgments about her above and beyond the initial judgment that she is a bad teacher.

Before attempting to develop an account of epistemic blame and responsibility, it will helpful to review Alston’s challenge against it.

**Responsibility without Effective Voluntary Control**

One of the specific claims Alston was arguing against was the claim that we had control over our beliefs (and, therefore, epistemic responsibilities) because we had the ability to deliberate when forming a judgment. One of his opponents, Roderick Chisholm aptly describes the intuition motivating this claim:

> When a man deliberates and comes finally to a conclusion, his decision is as much within his control as is any other deed we attribute to him. If his conclusion was unreasonable, a conclusion he should not have accepted, we may plead with him: “But you needn’t have supposed that so-and-so was true. Why didn’t you take account of
these other facts?” We assume that his decision is one he could have avoided and that, had he only chosen to do so, he could have made a more reasonable inference. Or, if his conclusion is not the result of a deliberate inference, we may say, “But if you had only stopped to think”, implying that, had he chosen, he could have stopped to think. We suppose, as we do whenever we apply our ethical or moral predicates, that there was something else the agent could have done instead.24

Alston’s response to Chisholm is to show that, when we attempt to form specific proposals about how voluntary control figures in the practice of deliberation, they all turn out false. For instance, Chisholm could be suggesting that if we deliberate, we are able to gather new information or uncover new evidential reasons from which we may be able to will a judgment – essentially, exhibit immediate voluntary control over our beliefs. However, obtaining reasons, be they evidential or practical, does not allow us any control over which of those reasons will apply in the outcome of the belief. Our beliefs will still be outside our will, no matter how many new reasons we obtain to believe something. We can imagine that I may deliberate and call to mind many practical reasons why I should believe a certain proposition without gaining any ability to act on them.

Instead of relying on an implicit thesis of immediate voluntary control, Chisholm could be suggesting that such deliberation offers us “long range” control over our beliefs. This long range control be analogous to “indirect” voluntary control, discussed near the beginning of the essay. This is a more plausible, but ultimately misguided, thesis. This is because deliberation, as we’ve already discussed, is limited to the activity of mobilizing or discovering certain reasons (evidential or otherwise). While we can choose to engage a certain question, and engage in deliberation, all we are merely doing voluntarily is deciding to inquire into some proposition. Alston writes:

Claims like [Chisholm’s] . . . ignore the difference between doing A in order to bring about E, for some definite E, and doing A so that some effect within a certain range will ensue . . . At most it shows that I have long-range voluntary control over whether I take up some propositional attitude toward some proposition (Alston 2005, p. 71)
According to Alston, what we need in order to display effective voluntary control and, therefore, to be responsible for our beliefs/judgments is the ability to take up a specific attitude toward a specific proposition. Which, as discussed earlier in the essay, is something we cannot do.

Despite Alston’s critique, the intuition that we somehow have responsibility over (some) of our beliefs because of some fact about deliberation (or our ability to deliberate) still seems right to me. This is for the specific reason that deliberation does not merely entail the ability to take up some attitude toward a proposition but, rather, the ability to take up some propositional attitude of a certain quality toward some proposition. It would be meaningless if the only quality that could be applied to our beliefs after deliberation was the merely quality of having been extensively deliberated about. However, deliberation can give our beliefs many kinds of qualities, such as being evidentially rich, one-sided, narrow-minded, and so on, depending on how we deliberate.

Our deliberation (or lack thereof) will (at least some of the time) play a determining or necessary role in the eventual judgment we form. When we do have voluntary control over something that plays a determining role in a state then we can, sometimes, be held responsible (or blameworthy) for that state even when we do not have direct voluntary control over it. Alston introduces this option as an option for the epistemic deontologist:

Consider the general point that we can be blamed for a state of affairs F, provided something we voluntarily did (didn’t do) and should have not done (done) was a necessary condition (in the circumstances) of the realization of F. That is, F would not have obtained had we done (not done) something we should have done (not done). If my cholesterol buildup would have been prevented had I regulated my diet in the way I should have done, but didn’t, I can be blamed for that buildup, whether or not I have direct effective voluntary control of my cholesterol level. (Alston 2005, p. 74)

That is, occasionally the only reason a belief we have formed is defective (that is, not true) is specifically due to our activity of deliberation. The belief was only defective because we did not deliberate and, had we
deliberated, would not have been defective. Returning to the grocery store example from the beginning of the paper, I could have engaged with the question of whether buying non-organic food was appropriate and searched my memory for information or evidence. If I had done that I would have swiftly remembered the conversation I had with my partner and formed the true belief that buying non-organic food is inappropriate. My failure to deliberate was the only thing preventing my belief having a negative epistemic quality, namely, the quality of being false. Just as I would be blameworthy for my bad cholesterol level if my diet was really the only thing preventing its eventual deterioration, I would be blameworthy for my false belief.

The number of things we can voluntarily do that influence beliefs extends beyond deliberation. We can search for evidence, talk to our friends, consult experts, and so on. Alston is aware that our beliefs are affected in these ways; however, he claims these activities as constituting intellectual, instead of epistemic, obligations. He claims that:

\[
\text{S is intellectually to blame for believing that } p \text{ iff S had fulfilled all her intellectual obligations, then S's access to relevant considerations, or S's belief-forming habits or tendencies, would have changed in such a way that S would not have believed that } p. \text{ (Alston 2005, p. 77)}
\]

One of my intellectual obligations might be to search my memory for possible evidence of a proposition's falsity. If doing that would have given my belief-forming mechanisms or habits access to information that would have resulted in a different belief, then I am blameworthy.

Although Alston grants that we have intellectual duties, he maintains that they are not properly considered epistemic. His claim that they are not epistemic is strange since, as he himself claims, our intellectual responsibilities are “rooted in an obligation to seek the true and avoid the false in belief” (Alston 2005, p. 76) which strikes me as eminently epistemic in value. He is claiming that we have a responsibility to seek the truth and avoid falsity but it is not an epistemic responsibility. Given that epistemologists define the domain of epistemology as that governing truth, excluding our intellectual obligations from epistemic value seems inappropriate.
How, then, does Alston reconcile this oddity? Alston claims that we actually do not every have epistemic responsibilities because any apparent ones (such as the “intellectual” ones) do not actually yield epistemic value.

**Alston and Epistemic Value**

Like many epistemologists, Alston considers the domain of the “epistemic”, both in normative and descriptive theorizing, to govern processes or goals essentially related to truth (as opposed to ‘the good’ as in the domain of morality, for instance). He writes, “[Epistemic Desiderata] are those features of beliefs or bodies thereof are valuable from the epistemic point of view, defined in terms of the aim at acquiring true rather than false beliefs about matters that are of interest or importance to us” (Alston 2005, p. 47). BonJour provides a similar sentiment:

> If our standards of epistemic justification are appropriately chosen, bringing it about that our beliefs are epistemically justified will also tend to bring it about that they are true. If epistemic justification were not conducive to truth in this way… then epistemic justification would be irrelevant to our main cognitive goal and of dubious worth. (2005, p. 7-8)

The problem with the proposed model of intellectual obligations is that it does not sufficiently connect us (or, our beliefs/judgments) with the truth:

> It is prima facie conceivable that being formed in a way that does not depend on violations of intellectual obligations should be a way of rendering a belief probably true. Nevertheless . . . there are very many sorts of cases in which one does as much as could be reasonably expected of one in the way of voluntary acts leading up to a given belief without the belief’s thereby acquiring any considerable likelihood of truth. (Alston 2005, p. 78)

The analogous case for a potential moral obligation is establishing whether fulfilling that obligation yields something good. His argument is as follows:

(1) The fulfillment of our intellectual obligations be considered
epistemically desirable iff it is the case that it entails a “considerable likelihood of truth”.

(2) The fulfillment of our intellectual obligations does not entail a “considerable likelihood of truth”

(C) the fulfillment of our intellectual obligations is not epistemically desirable.

Before critiquing this argument, it is worthwhile to explore some other criteria that are epistemically desirable to understand why our intellectual obligations are restricted to truth-conduciveness. Besides truth-conduciveness, Alston acknowledges that something can also be epistemically desirable if it is “favorable to the discrimination and formation of true beliefs” (Alston, 2005, p. 43). Epistemically desirable features include:

(A) Having some high-grade cognitive access to the evidence, and so on, for a belief (B).

(B) Having higher-level knowledge, or a well-grounded belief, that B has a certain positive epistemic status, or

(C) That one can carry out a successful defense of the probability of truth for B.

As opposed to \textit{rendering} a belief likely to be true, these qualities already presuppose the truth of a belief. These constitute higher-level knowledge that indirectly leads to more true beliefs. That is, if I know that certain kinds of beliefs, like visual beliefs, are generally truth-conducive (or that a belief is true because it was a visual belief) I will be in a position later to form true beliefs about what I see. However, fulfilling our intellectual obligations does not yield these kinds of higher-level epistemic resources.

The last group of Alston’s epistemic desiderata includes features of \textit{systems} of beliefs that we typically hold as goals of cognition. These include having beliefs that are coherent, provide reinforcing explanations, result in an agent acquiring some kind of \textit{understanding}, and so on. Importantly, these desiderata are not valuable because they \textit{produce} true beliefs. They are valuable only when they rely on
true beliefs. Alston claims that “unless truth can be assumed, these features of belief systems would fail to exhibit the intrinsic cognitive desirability that would otherwise attach to them” (p. 46). Alston’s argument for including them on the list of epistemically desirable qualities is their otherwise intrinsic cognitive value and their relation to a system of true-beliefs. Our intellectual obligations fail to qualify for this category, according to Alston, because even if we established some intrinsic value independent of truth, “that value is in no way dependent on being associated with a preponderance of true beliefs” (Alston 2005, p. 78).

Returning to Alston’s primary argument, he admits that, prima facie, it seems like premise 2, the claim that fulfilling our intellectual obligations actually does yield a high-probability of true-beliefs is true (see the quote above). However, Alston points to scenarios in which it clear that not only have we fulfilled our intellectual obligations, but that belief still is not likely to be true. For instance, it is a common occurrence that people are too unintelligent to form the correct belief. No amount of deliberation will help a first-year student grasp the finer points of Descartes if they simply cannot understand it. In contrast, something like a “sufficiently reliable belief-forming process” is, by stipulation, truth-conducive so long as it is fulfilled. Alston also points to areas of our lives where it would be unreasonable to hold any such obligations even though our belief forming habits are notoriously unreliable. For instance, he claims accepting information from authorities is unreliable and, at the same time, unreasonable to keep people obligated to constantly check sources, follow-up on the information, and so on. Alston also points to frequent occurrences of when people are overcome by certain beliefs or certain ideas, like God. No deliberation (or other voluntary action) will make them attune to evidence or reasons that will yield a different (true) belief. I will return to this part of Alston’s argument later. For now I will concern myself primarily with the notion of epistemic value.

The first problem with Alston’s argument is that the requirement of “a considerable likelihood of truth” for epistemic value proves too much. There are many things I would take to qualify as an epistemic ideal (and on the basis of some conduciveness criterion) that would
not qualify under Alston's thesis. Take, for instance, the ability to reliably form accurate analyses of the validity of syllogisms. Those who can reliability do it are more ideal epistemic agents that those who are unreliable. The problem is that such ability does not guarantee any sort of reliability in the belief about the conclusion of the syllogism. This is for the simple reason that, as valid or invalid as many syllogisms are, so many of them are simply not sound. The premises rest on false conclusions; therefore, the vast majority of syllogisms are false, and our supposed ideal is rendered epistemically impotent. We might extend this to ideals about Bayesian belief updating. That it, it seems plausible to me that having our beliefs undergo perfect Bayesian updating (that is, the total incorporation of prior, likelihoods, and so on into our posteriors) is epistemically ideal. However, so many of our beliefs are false in so many domains that, even with perfect belief updating in light of evidence, our beliefs are not guaranteed likely to be true.

These two examples highlight an important class of epistemic activities not captured by Alston's taxonomy. Many of the constraints of rationality (with Bayesian inference being a controversial epitome) are, at least to, intuitively epistemically valuable. This is not because they guarantee a certain likelihood of truth but because they are the most sure-fire way of getting at truth. As such, they are heavily implicated in the aim of truth even if they do not guarantee its success (or a certain threshold likeliness of success). Their value then, is not an objective threshold (like the truth-conduciveness quality Alston defends) but a conditional truth-conduciveness. This leads to a strange picture. The fulfillment of these different rational or evidence-seeking obligations makes us ideal conduits for truth. Given the right environment (this includes aspects of our cognition outside our will) our will maximizes the likelihood of true belief. Alston is right to point out that many other parts of us fall prey to problems like sheer unintelligence or defunct belief-forming mechanisms. This leads the surprising disconnect between our otherwise great epistemic characters and our lousy beliefs. That is, we can do the very best we can to follow the aim of truth without thereby rendering it likely that our beliefs are true.

I will not argue for a conception of epistemology that is not tied
to the acquisition of true beliefs. Instead, I propose a more lenient criterion of when epistemic obligations can be induced. Instead of limiting epistemic desirability to only beliefs (or processes which guarantee a significant likelihood of truth), I propose that epistemic value is added to a process (or activity, function, etc.) whenever it makes the likelihood of truth in the resulting belief more likely. Now, instead of only having intellectual obligations which always guarantee a significant likelihood of belief (of which there are none), we have intellectual obligations whenever fulfilling them leaves our resulting belief more likely to be true than had we not.

This more lenient criterion has the benefit of applying to many of qualities of rationality that intuitively seemed to provide epistemic value. Additionally, many of the activities we envisioned as constituting our intellectual responsibilities qualify. Things like searching for more evidence, spending more time on an argument, and so on, make our resulting beliefs at least a little bit more reliable (even though there are times, as Alston has apparently pointed out, when they are not very effective). By accepting a more lenient version of the conduciveness criterion we are most likely limiting the role that epistemic blamelessness can play in other normative matters. BonJour and Alston’s emphasis on a robust connection or guarantee of truth is a popular notion and has played an important role in developing accounts of justification and knowledge. Given this, the epistemic deontologist may have to accept that being epistemically responsible or blameless does not entail being epistemically justified or having knowledge. If I am right about the importance that epistemic responsibility and blamelessness play at least in our social lives, then this fact is not disconcerting.

The account we have developed here posits the following: We have the epistemic goal of acquiring a true belief. From this epistemic goal, we have epistemic obligations to do what we can to increase the likelihood of acquiring a true belief. These obligations supervene only on behaviors we have voluntary control over, severely limiting the extent to which we actually do have responsibility (or can be blamed) for a belief. However, when we fail to fulfill those obligations we are epistemically irresponsible (and blameworthy) for our belief being less
likely to be true than it could be). When our irresponsible epistemic behavior is (at least significantly) implicated in the production of a bad belief (false, ill-grounded, etc.), we are blameworthy for that belief.

We can also understand how, when other kinds of obligations in other domains of value invoke the goal of truth they, in fact, are implicating epistemic value. When we have a moral duty to form true moral beliefs and we act epistemically irresponsible we are rightly thought of as both immoral and a bad epistemic agent. We are a person who not only fails to appropriately care about our ethical duties but also a person who does not care about truth. The failing of our intellectual responsibilities (which we now understand as epistemic responsibilities) can yield blame in more than one domain of value.

Whether or not our appeal to the more lenient value criterion is successful, it is important to engage with Alston’s second premise. There is at least one reason we should hope it is not true: mainly, if it is, that then those kinds of intellectual obligations would rarely, if ever, operate. If, even after all of our hard work, we are still incredibly unreliable, then those responsibilities are not appropriate for the goal of achieving true or false beliefs. Recall that such responsibilities are frequently co-opted by moral and practical obligations on the basis of acquiring true beliefs being relevant to those domains. It seems as though one crucial reason we have a moral obligation to discover the correct moral principles (or form the correct moral appraisals of actions and so on) is so that they increase our ability and tendency to do good. If it turns out that actually, all of the different ways we could have (indirectly) influenced our beliefs never helped achieve that goal then the goal of those moral obligations is lost and we lose those derived obligations (epistemic or not). The same problem applies in other domains of value.

For reasons I will get to in a moment, I do not find Alston’s evidence for Premise 2 to be very compelling. However, work in recent evolutionary and social psychology has threatened the idea that our deliberation and active reasoning play even a positive role in our goal for true beliefs. Psychologists, responding to years of research showing how common and robust certain ‘failures’ in reasoning are in human beings have proposed and defended a model that claims
that our tendency for rational error is built in to the very function of explicit reasoning (see, for instance, Mercier & Sperber, 2011). That is, our explicit deliberation and reasoning function to reinforce previously held beliefs and reject evidence against them. Instead of abiding by principles of rationality that increase the likelihood of getting our beliefs right, deliberation and explicit reasoning actually make us more dogmatic and closed-minded.

We can conceptualize the challenge as follows. If we leave our mental obligations too lenient, then they are easy to accomplish but they are susceptible to the biases we mentioned above. Alternatively, we can attempt to limit the effect of the biases by making our mental obligations specific (and balanced against these biases). For instance, we might say that we have an obligation not merely to seek out evidence but, rather, to specifically seek out evidence contrary to our beliefs. However, these are more difficult to fulfill, even when a person is trying to do so. If a person fails even when they were attempting to fulfill their obligation they are not blameworthy. On the one hand, we have a people succeeding their obligations but those obligations themselves not increasing the likelihood of truth. On the other, our obligations are well-formed but people are blamelessly failing to accomplish them. Either way, these mental obligations are ill-suited for epistemic value.

I focus on deliberation and explicit reasoning for two reasons. First, many of the obligations we were supposing actually applied involved things like “searching our memory for evidence,” “analyzing arguments”, and so on. If it turns out that these are subject to the bias mentioned above and that engaging in them does not actually help us get to the truth then many of our supposed obligations disappear. The significance of this point is related to the second reason. Recall from Chisholm’s long quotation above that many of the intuitions about the role we play in our epistemic lives is connected to our mental behavior. One of the supposed advantages of establishing a theory of epistemic deontology was its ability to capture many of these kinds of intuitions. So, although we could probably find other kinds of epistemic obligations (that deal more with non-mental behavior), if we lose the obligations over our mental lives, the victory is bittersweet.

The solution to this problem is just that we have not done a good
job specifying what our mental obligations are and, importantly, in what kinds of contexts they apply. While it is true that we cannot have obligations such as “update your beliefs according to Bayesian ideals” because people are generally not cognitively capable of that, we can highlight, in certain contexts, what kinds of mental activities tend to be the most conducive. So, when forming beliefs about subjects we are not familiar with, our epistemic goal is to defer to authority. When Alston gives the example of the student who is unable to understand Descartes, we can simple alter the obligation. No longer does that student have an epistemic obligation to deliberate to personally mull over the philosophical arguments but, rather, to ask his professor or T.A. or so on. Even if he still could not form the right beliefs, at least approaching authority in this case has made a true belief more likely to result.

We can respond to the challenge in part by admitting that sometimes we should not rely on our mental prowess alone. However, there are still plenty of times when what our obligation consists in is remembering certain pieces of relevant information. Remembering specific facts is, in plenty of relevant scenarios, not limited by the argumentative biases noted above. Recall the aforementioned example about forming the wrong belief because of my failure to remember what my partner said to me mere minutes earlier. Such obligations as searching for memory can greatly increase the likelihood of forming a true belief in these kinds of scenarios. Finally, we might consider that some people have far more intellectual obligations than others. A brilliant scientist is going to be held far more responsible for their beliefs than someone vastly undereducated. The epistemic deontologist can happily accept this development.

Alston’s challenge about the reliable of our voluntary behaviors, and the similar arguments developed from that, are serious worries. I have attempted to show that perhaps there is hope for finding the right kinds of rules and obligations that will tip the scale of truth-conduciveness in its favor. However, the challenge is fundamentally an empirical one and is dependent on the deontologist actually creating these systems of responsibilities, which I do not have the space to do here.
Conclusion

As we saw, Feldman, Kornblith, and Chrisman were primarily interested in the legitimacy of claims such as “you ought not believe x.” We came to favor an account based on epistemic ideals, with the various obligations falling in a large “middle ground” what people were capable of and what they were not. The middle ground is a balance between rejecting the “ought-implies-can” principle and the notion of engaging with, and guiding, our behavior. For instance, if a person is presented with a syllogism and they form the wrong belief about the validity of that syllogism, we might rightly say that they ought not have done that because it is within the human ideal to correctly interpret a syllogism, even if it is just beyond that particular individual’s capabilities.

Where all of these theories fell short, however, was in providing an explanation about when people were responsible for those failures and when they were not. It seemed that, because we have no will to believe and, therefore, no voluntary control over our beliefs, that we are never responsible for our beliefs. However, we found that we can be blamed for our beliefs when we fail any number of epistemic responsibilities we hold over our voluntary actions and those are significantly responsible for a defect in our belief. One challenge we dealt with was that of understanding how fulfilling those obligations was properly understood as epistemic in value.

As long as those responsibilities are epistemic, we have the tools to connect the projects of Feldman, Chrisman, and Kornblith, with an account of epistemic responsibility. Consider another case of someone being presented with a syllogism. We maintain our epistemic “ought” that they should believe that the syllogism is false. This person, however, forms the belief that it is in fact a valid syllogism but they do so because they didn’t actually read the entire thing (merely the first premise, say). In this case, they violated our epistemic ought and they are responsible and blameworthy for it.

Although we have established that we have epistemic responsibilities, and that we can be blamed for our bad beliefs, we must still understand that any kind of responsibility and blame we
have for our beliefs is derivative of our responsibility for the parts of
our epistemic lives we actually have control over. However, because
we do have control over certain epistemic parts of our lives, we can be
better or worse epistemic agents, much in the way we can be moral or
immoral. People’s expectations of the kinds of beliefs have are informed
by the way we lead our epistemic lives, that is, the voluntary parts we
have control over, and the epistemic situations we find ourselves in.

The author writes: I am grateful for the helpful comments suggested
by the editors of Arché. I have especially benefited from the many
stimulating conversations with and comments from Trevor Brothers,

Notes
1 William Alston, Beyond “Justification”: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation
2 We often make a distinction between when a person deserves blame or is
responsible for an action or state and when it will serve some instrumental
purpose or function to punish them or change them. For instance, the
first time a child draws on the dining room walls with crayons we may
be upset and punish them. Most likely, we will do this without making
any sort of evaluation about what kind of child they are. However, if, the
very next day, they go back and draw on the wall again, then we engage
in a different kind of judgment. Although they did something bad in
both circumstances, only in the latter would we say they are culpable or
blameworthy for that bad behavior. When we judge in terms of blame or
desert, the focus of our disapprobation moves from external features (like
an individual’s situation) to internal features (like a person’s character).
3 Alston, Beyond “Justification”: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation, 73-75.
4 Notice that this syllogism does not mention at all epistemic responsibility.
If we can show that we do have some kind of responsibility over our beliefs
then we still need to show that it is properly considered epistemic. This task
will be taken up later in the essay.
5 Of course, I can imagine a crazy world or an unlikely set of experiences (in
this world) which, if they occurred, I may form a belief this belief.
6 Alston, William. “The Deontological Conception of Epistemic
As noted by Feldman (2004), there are very rare circumstances in which we can control what we believe in virtue of controlling our environment. For instance, if I want to believe that the light is on I can go over to the switch and turn it on. However, as noted by Feldman, these examples are to disparate among the vast array of our beliefs to constitute an argument for belief volunteerism.

Feldman (2004) gives the example of controlling one’s belief about whether the light is on by simply controlling whether the light is on. He dismisses the example on the grounds that such influence over our beliefs is too rare to be relevant for arguing that we are responsible for our beliefs.


Using “should”/”ought” locutions when a person could not have done differently (or better) is not restricted to the domain of role oughts.

We might also consider the relevant role to be “a person trying to discover the truth” “a person attempting to deduce a conclusion” and so on. I think that these are wrapped up in the concept of a believer but I do not think that, should they be different, it matters to the dialectic of this essay.

Feldman, “The Ethics of Belief,” 676

Specifically, epistemic justification as freedom from blame from believing but my target is not whether blame is connected at all with justification, but rather if it is properly applied at all.


This example is taken directly from Chrisman (2008).

Feldman may have recourse against some of these objections. First, it is not clear that we are ever not in the role of an epistemic agent. One might claim that evaluating forming judgments about our environment (and a whole host of other topics) is an automatic function of our psychology. It cannot be the case that we are actually uninterested in the truth because being so is a necessary function of our psychology and therefore always subject to such a performance analysis. Because roles are the kinds of
things that can be ever present, Feldman may also respond to the case of
the unfortunate kleptomaniac arguing that she is still in the role of being a
moral citizen (or something akin to that).

22 Sellars, Wilfred. “Language as Thought and as Communication.”
23 See Chrisman (2008), p. 12-14 for a fuller description of deriving rules of
   action from rules of criticism.
24 Chisholm, Roderick. “Lewis’ Ethics of Belief.” In *The Philosophy of C.I.
   Lewis*, by ed. P. Schilpp. Salle, IL: Open Court, 1968, 244.
25 We might also weaken it to simply playing a “major” role. This way we can
   find someone partially responsible, partially blameworthy, and so on.
26 For such an attempt, see Foley, Richard. *The Theory of Epistemic
27 The mere fact of the frequency of these failures of cognition is enough of
   a challenge. The added fact that this may stem from *proper* function of
   cognition does not, on its own, mean we should or should not engage in
deliberation.