Externalism about Justification: Knowledge First
Virtue Epistemology and the
Deontological Challenge

Introduction

Goal (6) of Justified Belief: A Knowledge First Virtue Epistemological Account is to strengthen the case for externalist approaches to justified belief. The following research project will contribute to this goal. In particular, it will defend externalism about justification (more specifically, it will defend externalist virtue accounts of justification) against an important challenge from deontology.

One important objection to virtue-based accounts of justification (whether they are knowledge first accounts, or otherwise) comes from deontology about justification. Deontologists think that “justification” is a deontological concept. They claim that believing as one ought to believe is necessary for justification, where “ought” is understood in terms of obligations, permissions, requirements, or duties (Chuard and Southwood 2009; Ginet 1975; Kornblith 2001; McHugh 2012; Owens 2000; Pollock 1986). When epistemologists talk of the “normativity” of justification, it is not always clear what they mean. Deontologists want to restrict the notion of normativity to the realm of obligations, permissions, requirements, or duties. Deontologists claim, then, that virtue theorists (in particular, reliabilist or faculty-based virtue epistemologists, as opposed to virtue responsibilists) conflate or confuse normative concepts with evaluative concepts. Virtue theorists understand justification in terms of successes or achievements that result from an ability to believe truly, or to know (Greco 2010; Kelp 2011, forthcoming Sosa 2007). These are evaluative statuses. According to deontologists, they are not genuinely normative statuses (Chrisman 2012; Gibbons 2013; Williams 2008). As such, they are not adequate to the task of accounting for and illuminating the normativity of justification.

Virtue theorists reject challenges from deontology on the basis of a number of objections to deontology (Greco 2010; Sosa 2007). One important objection is the claim that deontology in some sense implies internalism, and that internalism is an untenable view about justification (it leads to various kinds of scepticism, for example) (Alston 1989; Plantinga 1993). Of immediate interest to virtue accounts of justification, then, is that a number of recent writings have attempted to put forward deontological conceptions of justification that explicitly divorce the view from internalism (Gibbons 2013; Leite 2008, 2011; Neta 2003; Pritchard 2012; Williams 2008; Williamson 2000). If deontology does not imply internalism, then it seems virtue epistemology and deontology are on a par when it comes to at least one very important desideratum for a theory of justification—namely, the ability to avoid internalism about justification (of the traditional, scepticism-inducing variety).

Two recent and interesting challenges on this score are due to Timothy Williamson and John Gibbons. Importantly, Williamson and Gibbons are knowledge first epistemologists. Thus, both Williamson and Gibbons offer deontological, knowledge first views about justification that are in direct competition with a knowledge first virtue epistemological account of justification. So, it is of considerable interest for knowledge first virtue epistemology to examine these views, and, if possible
to challenge them (thus undermining an interesting and important rival account). In particular, this is directly relevant to goal (6) of Justified Belief: A Knowledge First Virtue Epistemological Account.

I propose to meet this challenge in two stages. Stage One focuses on two specific externalist deontological accounts of justification and argues that they exemplify a problematic structure. Either they fail to capture the intuitions motivating deontology in the first place, or they fail to be externalist. I’ll use Williamson (2000) as an example of the former, and Gibbons (2013) as an example of the latter. Stage Two explores the issue more generally. It investigates the sense in which epistemic judgments are normative. The broader aim of Stage Two is to develop resources for knowledge first virtue epistemology to account for the nature of epistemic normativity. This will be explored specifically in the context of cases that elicit competing intuitions about responsibility and truth conduciveness (clairvoyance; new evil demon). Stage One will be undertaken in the first year of the fellowship, and Stage Two will be undertaken in the second year.

**Stage One: Gibbons and Williamson on Justification**

**Challenge for Williamson**

Williamson defends an externalist view about evidence. He says that one’s evidence just is what one knows. Another way of putting this idea is to say that, for Williamson, only knowledge can justify belief, or that beliefs are justified only to the extent that they are based on what one knows. One problem for this view is that it has “unsettling implications for the nature of rationality” (Williamson 2000). The implications arise given the normative principle: “you ought to proportion your beliefs to the evidence” (a principle that Williamson endorses). This evidentialist principle marks a key difference between his approach to justification and virtue-based approaches. On Williamson’s view about evidence, we are not always in a position to know what our evidence is (because we are not always in a position to know what we know). The unsettling implication for rationality is that we can be normatively required to Ø when we are not in a position to know that we ought to Ø. This is a complex and interesting issue. Williamson’s diagnosis relies heavily on the notion of an excuse (2000). I will argue that Williamson’s solution to this unsettling issue fails to capture the deontological motivation for going evidentialist in the first place. This will result in a paper suitable for publication in a leading academic journal, such as *Philosophical Studies*.

**Challenge for Gibbons**

Gibbons’ view is that our evidence is what we are in a position to know. He explicitly contrasts this view with Williamson’s thesis that our evidence is what we know (Gibbons 2006; 2013). His idea is that what we are in a position to know is to be understood in terms of what we are epistemically responsible for knowing. Nevertheless, he claims that this is an externalist view about evidence. As such, he claims that we are the legitimate subjects of normative requirements that tell us to proportion our beliefs to the evidence, but that what we are responsible for knowing (our evidence) “reaches all the way out to the world” (Gibbons 2006). A primary moving part of Gibbons’ view is that we have “privileged access” to our evidence. He intends to do two crucial things with this idea:
i) capture deontological intuitions; ii) be consistent with externalism about justification. I will look in detail at his argument and show that privileged access cannot do this work for Gibbons. On close examination, Gibbons cannot capture his notion of responsibility while remaining externalist about justification. This research will result in a paper suitable for publication in a leading academic journal.

**Stage Two: A Critical Examination of Deontology for Virtue Theorists**

A more general aim of the project will be to examine the nature of the challenge from deontological objections to virtue-based accounts of justification. What motivates them? One key idea is that there is an important difference between the normative and the evaluative. Is there really a difference between the normative and the evaluative? If so, what is it? These are important questions to answer for any theorist who wants to move beyond deontology. Stage Two aims to answer these questions in support of the idea that epistemic normativity can be adequately captured by knowledge first virtue epistemology. The investigation will be undertaken not only in the context of questions about justification, but also in the context of the clairvoyance cases and the new evil demon case—essentially, cases that elicit competing intuitions about competing epistemic desiderata (i.e. responsibility versus truth conduciveness). Stage Two is motivated by the idea that understanding the nature of the motivation for deontology will contribute to the development of resources for knowledge first virtue epistemologists to deal with these kinds of cases. This research will form the basis of a series of papers that positively defend knowledge first virtue epistemology in the context of central issues about epistemic normativity.

**Bibliography**


Kelp, C. *Forthcoming*. Extended Knowledge.


