

## **EPISTEMIC DESIDERATA AND EPISTEMIC PLURALISM**

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**ABSTRACT:** In this article I argue that Alston's recent meta-epistemological approach in terms of epistemic desiderata is not as epistemically plural as he claims it to be. After some preliminary remarks, I briefly recapitulate Alston's epistemic desiderata approach. Next, I distinguish two ways in which one might consider truth to be an epistemic desideratum. Subsequently, I argue that only one truth-conducive desideratum can count as an epistemic desideratum. After this, I attempt to show that none of the higher-order desiderata that are thought to be favorable to the discrimination and formation of true beliefs are genuinely epistemic desiderata. A strict interpretation of 'epistemic desideratum' leads to a rejection of all deontological desiderata as well. Finally, features of systems of beliefs, such as coherence and understanding, cannot count as epistemic desiderata either. In the end only two candidate-desiderata can count as epistemic, one of which is logically trivial. In the epilogue, I offer some suggestions as to how Alston's epistemic desiderata approach should be amended in order to make it epistemically plural.

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

**R**ecently, William Alston has argued that the attempt to show what it means for a belief to be epistemically justified and what the individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for this status are, are of the same order as the search for the Fountain of Youth: there is no unique property of being epistemically justified which confers a positive epistemic status on beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

He offers three considerations in support of this view. First, there is an astonishing variety of mutually exclusive interpretations of the nature of epistemic

justification and its necessary and sufficient conditions. Second, epistemologists do not have a successful theoretically neutral way to indicate which property they are talking about. Third, philosophers frequently disagree about examples that are brought up as paradigmatic instances of justified belief and they show radically different ways of extrapolating from those cases on which they agree to other instances of allegedly justified belief. According to Alston, these three considerations jointly provide a compelling case for abandoning the investigation of the nature and conditions of “epistemic justification.” There is no good reason to think that there is such an objective, unique, and epistemically crucial property of beliefs picked out by ‘justified’ in epistemic contexts. Epistemologists, in their attempt to understand epistemic justification, have concentrated on different epistemic desiderata, that is, different features of belief that are cognitively valuable. Therefore, Alston proposes to turn our attention to what he believes to be a plural spectrum of properties of beliefs that are valuable from the epistemic point of view, that is, the point of view defined by our basic cognitive goals.

Alston’s approach might give rise to different sorts of critique. For instance, one could construct an argument from analogy along the following lines. If these reasons were sufficient for disregarding the topic of epistemic justification, would not the same apply to many other thorny issues in philosophy? Take the issue of personal diachronical identity. There are many competing accounts of it; philosophers of mind disagree on what should be considered as paradigmatic instances of it, etc. Most philosophers, however, would not take this as a good reason to think that there is no such thing as personal identity over time.<sup>2</sup> Here, I will pursue a different line of critique by arguing that Alston’s meta-epistemological position in terms of epistemic desiderata is not significantly more plural than the traditional one in terms of epistemic justification.

After a brief sketch of Alston’s epistemic desiderata approach (§ II), I consider each of the desiderata from Alston’s five groups of desiderata and argue that only two of them can count as *epistemic* desiderata (§§ III–VII). In the epilogue (§ VIII) I offer some brief suggestions as to how Alston’s approach could be amended in order to make it genuinely epistemically plural.

## II. EPISTEMIC DESIDERATA

Alston’s alternative is based on what he calls *epistemic desiderata*, “features of belief that are desirable from the epistemic point of view, the point of view defined by the basic aims of cognition” (19). He goes on to argue that there is only one basic, central, or ultimate goal of cognition, viz., “to acquire true rather than false beliefs about matters that are of interest or importance to us” (29).<sup>3</sup> Henceforth, I will refer to this goal as the aim of *significant truth*.<sup>4</sup> People can be directed toward this goal without being consciously motivated to attain it, for instance, in perceptual belief formation. Alston acknowledges that there are other goals of cognition, but significant truth, so he argues, is the *basic* cognitive goal, for it is truth rather than knowledge or something else that is the aim of our most rudimentary cognitive

processes (Alston acknowledges that things might be different for some more sophisticated cognitive processes).<sup>5</sup>

This does not mean that a belief B's being true is the only epistemically valuable property of B, since there are several other properties that are favorable to the goal of significant truth (35–36). Nor does it mean that beliefs or systems of beliefs are the only entities that can be evaluated from the epistemic point of view. Not only beliefs, but also epistemic processes, the power and speed of cognitive mechanisms, and cognitive subjects can be subjected to epistemic evaluation. Their epistemic value, however, is derivable from that of the beliefs that these mechanisms and subjects produce (37–38).

Unfortunately, there is an important ambiguity in Alston's account of epistemic desiderata. He seems to think that some property P is an epistemic desideratum only if P *contributes* to the goal of significant truth, that is, renders it probable that one attains it. However, he also says that P can count as an epistemic desideratum if it is *essentially related* to the goal of significant truth, although he fails to explain this expression. The first interpretation is endorsed by what he says, for instance, on page 94: "Since being 'justified' or 'epistemically rational' as these philosophers construe them does not endow a belief with even a probability of being true, it cannot lay claim to being an epistemic desideratum, whether or not it is desirable in some other way." On page 46 Alston seems to favor the second interpretation: "why should we count these items [group V desiderata] as *epistemic* desiderata on the criteria I have been using for that? If we have a reason for doing so, it is that they also have an essential relation to true belief, though it differs from the relations we found for the desiderata in either Group II or Group III." I will return to this ambiguity below.

Alston distinguishes five groups of candidate-desiderata: truth, truth-conducive desiderata, desiderata that are thought to be favorable to the discrimination and formation of true beliefs, deontological desiderata, and features of systems of beliefs that are among the goals of cognition. Let us now consider each of the fifteen desiderata that these groups contain and see whether they can count as *epistemic* desiderata.

### III. TRUTH

The first group of candidates contains only one desideratum:

D0: Truth.

It is clear that D0 counts as an *epistemic* desideratum, for by having a true rather than false belief about something that is of interest or importance to the person in question, S, S attains the goal of significant truth. In this sense D0 is a *logically trivial* epistemic desideratum: it is, as Alston himself acknowledges, favorable to the goal of significant truth by being identical to that goal (see his treatment of this desideratum on 40–43).

However, something that Alston overlooks should be added to this. For, if S has certain true beliefs about some topic, X, then it seems possible that this will

positively contribute to S's chances of acquiring *more* true beliefs and *less* false beliefs about X or some related issue. That is, it seems that D0 can also be a *means* (in some sense of the word) to the goal of significant truth. Imagine that Gloria is an expert on the economical situation of Europe in the interbellum period. Is it not plausible to think that her knowledge (or her many true beliefs), renders it more probable that she will acquire true rather than false beliefs when reading, say, some newspaper article on the 1929 panic on the German stock exchange? Well, since she is familiar with many crucial concepts and since she is able to place data within a historical framework, she will unmask certain incorrect theses in the text. Therefore, she will be able to acquire true beliefs that the non-expert will not. On the other hand, however, there are also certain true beliefs that she will *not* acquire, e.g., beliefs she already has, that the non-expert *will* acquire upon reading the article. Therefore, it is not obvious that having true beliefs on some matter *always* or *necessarily* increases one's chances of reaching the goal of significant truth, although it seems true that it at least *sometimes* or perhaps even *usually* does so. D0 is favorable to the goal of significant truth in this sense (I will call it the *instrumental* sense) only if certain conditions are met and whether those conditions are met is a contingent matter.

Alston's treatment of certain desiderata at several junctures in the book implies that he takes the stronger view that a property can count as an epistemic desideratum only if it is (almost) *always* favorable to reaching the goal of significant truth. Thus, Alston rejects D5, B's being formed by the exercise of an intellectual virtue, as an epistemic desideratum, since it does not *guarantee* that B is likely to be true (cf. 157–161). He also rejects D11, the property of B's causal ancestry not containing any violations of intellectual obligations, as an epistemic desideratum, since there are certain (exceptional) situations in which some belief's exemplifying D11 does not raise the probability of one's reaching the goal of significant truth. I will return to this issue in my discussion of these desiderata below (cf. 79–80).

#### IV. TRUTH-CONDUCTIVE DESIDERATA

Group II consists of desiderata that might be thought to be directly related to the goal of significant truth in the sense that they raise the probability that a belief that has that particular desideratum is true:

- D1: Cognitive subject S has adequate evidence for her belief B.
- D2: B is based on adequate evidence.
- D3: B was formed by a sufficiently reliable belief-forming process.
- D4: B was formed by the proper functioning of S's cognitive faculties.
- D5: B was formed by the exercise of an intellectual virtue.

Let us start with D2. According to Alston, some ground G—whether doxastic or non-doxastic—of a belief B is adequate iff B's being based on G renders it sufficiently probable that B is true. Hence, if some belief B has D2 among its properties, it will

thereby count as an epistemic desideratum. What about D1? We should notice that on Alston's view some piece of evidence *e* is adequate *not* iff *e* renders B's truth probable, but iff B's *being based* on *e* renders B's truth probable: "the basing of the belief on the ground in question is the condition on which the probability of the belief is conditional" (98). Thus, it seems, we should interpret D1 as follows: S has evidence *e* such that if S were to base B on *e*, *e* would render B's truth probable. One might wonder whether it is indeed possible, as Alston's wording of D1 and D2 suggests, that one have evidence *e* such that *e* does not render one's belief B probable, although it *would* render B probable if one were to base B on *e*, but let us keep aloof from this issue and ask whether D1, as understood by Alston, can count as an epistemic desideratum. According to Alston, it can. Here is his argument:

The evidence S has for B, E, is said to be adequate. Assuming this implies that if S based B on that evidence, the belief would be rendered probably true, then there would be, in a sense, the same reason for regarding 1 as an epistemic desideratum as for so regarding 2. But 1, unlike 2, does not make explicit anything about the way B was formed that renders it probably true. But if all that is required beyond what is stated in 1 is for S to do something, something that is well within her capacity, then as far as the content of E and the content of B is concerned, there is, we might say, a guarantee of probable truth for B. It is just that S has not yet taken advantage of this guarantee. (90)

Now, this seems problematic to me. If one considers the mere *possibility* of the realization of some epistemic desideratum as an epistemic desideratum itself, many properties of beliefs will count as epistemic desiderata that clearly should not count as such. Take, for instance, the following desiderata:

D16: B is possibly true.

D17: B could be based on adequate grounds.

Why would we not consider these properties as *epistemic* desiderata? After all, D16 and D17 contain respectively D0 and D2 potentially. Alston's thesis that D1 is an epistemic desideratum seems to have an implausible consequence and that is a good reason to reject his thesis. One might object, however, that D16 and D17 are epistemic desiderata in another possible world, namely in those worlds in which B is respectively true and based on adequate grounds, rather than in the actual world, since in our world they do not contribute to the goal of significant truth. This is true, but the same applies to D1. As long as S does not base B or other beliefs on the adequate evidence she has, her having this piece of evidence does not contribute to S's reaching significant truth. In response to this criticism, one could construe the adequacy of a ground G in such a way that it renders a belief B probably true, whether B is based on G or not. Then, D1 *would* count as an epistemic desideratum. The problem is that in that case D2 would not add anything of epistemic value to it: whether S bases B on G or not does not make a difference to the probability of B's being true.

Let us now turn to the remaining desiderata of this group. Unfortunately, Alston is not very precise on the relation between D2 and D3, but it is clear from what he

says that on his understanding of these desiderata they are (virtually) identical to each other.<sup>6</sup> On p. 134, for example, he states that a ground for a belief with content M is adequate iff “in a large range of (actual and possible) cases of beliefs with content M being based on grounds with experiential content VA [a certain visual experience], these being in situations of the sort we typically encounter, the beliefs would be mostly true.” On Alston’s accounts of a belief’s being based on adequate evidence and a belief’s being produced by a reliable cognitive mechanism, they cannot count as distinct epistemic desiderata.

What about D4, i.e., B’s being formed by the proper functioning of S’s cognitive faculties? Here, Alston takes Alvin Plantinga’s account of warrant as a paradigmatic statement of proper cognitive functioning. According to Plantinga, a belief has warrant iff (i) it has been produced by cognitive faculties that are functioning properly in an appropriate cognitive environment, (ii) the segment of the design plan that governs the production of that belief is aimed at truth, and (iii) the statistical probability of a belief produced under those circumstances being true is high (see Plantinga 1993, 3–47). Alston rightly notices that both (iii) and the conjunction of (i) and (ii) seem to ensure a high likelihood of truth, which implies that D4 is a proper epistemic desideratum. As with D2 and D3, however, it is its direct truth-conduciveness, that is, its rendering it probable that S reaches the goal of significant truth, that makes D4 an epistemic desideratum. It is only by implying D2/3 that D4 can count as an epistemic desideratum and anything about this desideratum that makes it different from D2/3 does not add to its being an *epistemic* desideratum. Hence, we have to conclude that D4 does not add to the epistemic diversity in any way.

Finally, can D5, a belief’s being formed by the exercise of an intellectual virtue, count as an epistemic desideratum? Here, Alston distinguishes between, on the one hand, Ernest Sosa’s and Alvin Goldman’s accounts of intellectual virtues as competences or abilities and, on the other, Linda Zagzebski’s account of intellectual virtues as types of cognitive behavior. As to the former, Alston rightly argues that these intellectual virtues only differ from the cognitive mechanisms that play a crucial role in D2/3 in that they are relatively stable. It is to the extent that they are reliable that the beliefs that are formed by their exercise can count as epistemic desiderata. D5, therefore, collapses into D2/3. With Zagzebski’s intellectual virtues, such as courage and open-mindedness, things are different. First, these virtues are cognitive traits or types of epistemic behavior rather than cognitive faculties. Second, these faculties are acquired in the course of time rather than innate. Third, and finally, a particular motivation to bring about a certain end is essential to these virtues. The proximate defining ends essential to these virtues are, for example, to have intellectual integrity, to be thorough, or to persevere. But it is clear that being successful in these things does not guarantee that one’s belief is likely to be true. For instance, “it is clear that one could persevere as long and as assiduously as you like without forming a belief that is likely to be true” (160). Therefore, D5 cannot count as an epistemic desideratum.

Is Alston right about this? According to Zagzebski, an (intellectual) virtue can be defined as “a deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person, involving a characteristic motivation to produce a certain desired end and *reliable success* in bringing about that end” (Zagzebski 1996, 137, italics mine). Thus, one exemplifies the virtue of open-mindedness only if one is generally successful in being open-minded or generally successful in truly believing propositions that somehow require open-mindedness in order to be considered or believed (which of these two disjuncts one deems most accurate depends on what one believes to be the motivation involved in the intellectual virtue of open-mindedness). On both motivations, however, there will be situations in which one is intellectually open-minded and still fails to reach the goal of significant truth, for instance, because one’s cognitive capacities are too limited to grasp certain propositions or to find out the truth about them. It is clear, however, that there will be many situations in which having certain intellectual virtues raises one’s chances of acquiring true rather than false beliefs (this seems one of the main reasons why we value epistemic virtues in the first place). In this regard, D5 is similar to D0 in its instrumental sense: it can count as an epistemic desideratum if one counts as epistemic desiderata all those things that are at least sometimes favorable to reaching the goal of significant truth. Here, however, Alston takes a stronger view: the relevant property should always or usually be truth-conducive and being formed by the exercise of Zagzebski’s virtues does not satisfy that condition. But this implies that Alston cannot accept D0 in its instrumental sense as an epistemic desideratum either. And this means that the only epistemic desiderata that we have found so far are D0 in its logically trivial sense and the directly truth-conducive desideratum D2/3.

## V. DESIDERATA THAT ARE THOUGHT TO BE FAVORABLE TO THE DISCRIMINATION AND FORMATION OF TRUE BELIEFS

Group III contains the following three desiderata:

- D6: S has some high-grade cognitive access to the evidence, and so on, for B.
- D7: S has higher-level knowledge, or well-grounded belief, that B has a certain positive epistemic status (PES) and/or that such-and-such is responsible for that.
- D8: S can carry out a successful defense of the probability of truth for B.

Although Alston does not give a definition of what it means for some belief to have a PES, it is clear that this notion is radically externalist: it implies that B is probably true and one need not have some sort of cognitive access to B or B’s PES in order for B to have a PES. Alston’s treatment of these desiderata strongly suggests that these desiderata have to be understood in such a way that B has a PES (cf. 163). This implies that D6–D8 all count as epistemic desiderata. However, the same applies to the following desiderata:

D18: B has PES and B is formed on a Wednesday afternoon.

D19: S has no idea of the fact that B has a PES.

These desiderata count as epistemic desiderata, for the fact that B has a PES renders B probably true and, thereby, contributes to the realization of the basic aim of cognition. It is obvious, though, that these desiderata, to the extent that they are *epistemic* desiderata, are reducible to D2/3. Alston is aware of this problem and, therefore, claims that the fact that S has cognitive access to the evidence in favor of B, the fact that S's meta-belief that B has a PES, or the fact that S is able to offer a successful defense of B's having a PES, is epistemically desirable in a way that *adds* some value to the fact that B has a PES. For, according to Alston, these desiderata contribute to S's being in a position in which she can organize things in a way that is favorable to the realization of S's basic cognitive goal. D6–D8 enlarge S's capability to distinguish between beliefs that are probably true and beliefs that are probably false. In this way, S is in a better position to see to it that the beliefs she forms are probably true (cf. 43–45, and 163).

Unfortunately, Alston's treatment of these higher-order desiderata is not free from a serious problem. Let us start with D7. It seems true that if S has higher-level knowledge or an adequately grounded belief that her belief has a PES, she, in general at least, will increase her chances of reaching the goal of significant truth. The problem is that this is because S's meta-belief B\*—the belief that B has a PES—itself is an instance of higher-level knowledge or a well-grounded belief. If B\* lacks this property, D7 will be worthless from the epistemic point of view. And this means that D7 is just an instance of either D0 or D2/3: it is because of B\*'s being an instance of knowledge and, hence, having the property of being true, or because of B\*'s being adequately grounded (based on adequate evidence) that it contributes to reaching the goal of significant truth.

Let me illustrate this point. Imagine that Ludwig, a graduate student in philosophy, has the adequately grounded belief B that p, where p stands for the proposition that William Alston was born in 1921. Imagine also that he has the additional belief B\* that B has a PES because one of his fellow students whom Ludwig believes to be highly reliable told him that p. Now, assume finally that B\* is false, say, because Ludwig holds B merely because he read that p in a recent book on Alston's philosophy, or that B\* lacks a PES, say, because Ludwig is usually mistaken about the sources of his belief. Then, B\* will not contribute to his reaching the goal of significant truth—or, at least not any more than B by itself will. If B\* is false, then Ludwig will form all sorts of false beliefs about the origin of B, and if B\* is true but not adequately grounded, Ludwig will often be mistaken—read: form false beliefs—about what confers a PES on his beliefs. If, however, B\* is an instance of knowledge or adequately grounded belief, then B\* *will* contribute to Ludwig's attaining the goal of significant truth, since Ludwig thereby has another true or adequately grounded belief.<sup>7</sup>

The same has to be said about D8: if S's capacity to successfully defend B's being probably true involves true beliefs or adequately grounded beliefs about B,

then D8 can be reduced to D2/D0. If this is not the case, then it is hard to see how D8 could offer a successful defense of B's probably being true.

As regards D6, Alston does not spell out what it means for someone to have (high-grade) *cognitive access* to B's PES, but what he seems to have in mind is that S is capable of forming true beliefs about B's PES. It is hard to see, however, how this is favorable to the discrimination and formation of true beliefs. If S does not make use of her high-grade cognitive access to B's PES, D6's exemplification will not make an important difference to her cognitive situation. It will do so only if S actually uses her cognitive access, but that turns D6 into D7, which, as we have seen, is reducible to D0 or D2/3. In this regard, D6 resembles D1 and, accordingly, cannot be considered as an additional epistemic desideratum.

## VI. DEONTOLOGICAL DESIDERATA

The fourth package consists of the following desiderata:

D9: B is held permissibly.

D10: B is formed and held responsibly.

D11: The causal ancestry of B does not contain violations of intellectual obligations.

According to Alston, D10 does not require a separate treatment, since it is ambiguous between D9 and D11. Not everyone would agree with this, though. Richard Foley, for instance, has made a conceptual distinction between *justifiably* (responsibly) and *non-negligently* (permissibly) believing a proposition, where both of these desiderata are different from D11 (see Foley 2006, 322). But let us assume that Alston is right. Then D9 has to be understood as stating that B itself is permitted, whereas D11 merely states that what led to the acquisition of B is permitted.

Alston proceeds to argue that as a matter of psychological fact we lack each of three sorts of voluntary control over our doxastic attitudes at least one of which we need to have in order for D9 to be a viable desideratum (cf. 58–80). We have *basic voluntary control* over some belief B iff we have an effective choice whether or not to have B by directly bringing about having B. We have *nonbasic voluntary control* over some belief B iff we have an effective choice whether or not to have B by doing something else in one uninterrupted intentional act. And we have *long-range voluntary control* over some belief B iff we have an effective choice whether or not to have B by performing a series of actions over a certain period of time.<sup>8</sup> If Alston is right that we lack these kinds of voluntary control and that one needs to have at least one of them in order for one to be responsible for one's belief, D9 is not a viable desideratum, let alone an epistemic desideratum.

I agree with Alston that we, usually at least, lack these kinds of voluntary doxastic control. However, the assumption—Alston's version of the Kantian dictum that "ought" implies "can"—that "[p]eople could properly be held responsible for their attitudes toward propositions in a certain range only if those who set out to intentionally produce a certain attitude toward such a proposition and made sufficient

efforts were frequently successful" (72) seems to me mistaken. If a judge finds himself with the belief that the suspect was at home at the time of the murder, but has no idea why he believes it—he has no clue as to what his belief is based on—he has the professional (if not moral) duty to gather more evidence as to whether the suspect was at home at that time or not. If he is lazy and, thereby, fails to do this, we can properly hold him responsible for his belief, even if he did not set out to intentionally produce a certain attitude toward the proposition in question at all.

But if D9 is a viable desideratum after all, can it count as an *epistemic* desideratum? Is believing responsibly favorable to reaching the goal of significant truth? In general this seems to be the case: if people meet their epistemic duties, they will normally thereby increase their chances of acquiring true rather than false beliefs. This might actually be one of the very reasons why we hold people responsible for their beliefs in the first place. But, of course, this will not *always* or *necessarily* hold. If someone lacks certain cognitive capacities, she will sometimes not raise the probability of her acquiring true beliefs by fulfilling, for instance, her evidence-gathering obligations. Again, whether this desideratum can count as an *epistemic* desideratum depends on how strict Alston's definition of the latter is.

Alston agrees that we have the kind of *indirect voluntary influence* on our beliefs implied by D11.<sup>9</sup> He describes this desideratum as an *intellectual* or *cognitive* desideratum (77), but argues that it fails to be an *epistemic* desideratum. Since Alston does not explain what he means by the former, let us focus on the latter. Alston admits that D11 is sometimes truth-conducive, but he also points to three sorts of cases in which D11 fails to be truth-conducive: cases in which S is cognitively deficient, cases of beliefs based on unreliable testimony, and irresistible beliefs and belief tendencies (79–80). True as this may be, it seems hard to deny that *usually* (in normal circumstances) not violating one's epistemic duties is favorable to reaching the goal of significant truth. As with D9, D11 cannot count as an epistemic desideratum, however, if one adheres to a strict interpretation of 'epistemic desideratum,' on which something counts as an epistemic desideratum only if it is *always* favorable to reaching the aim of significant truth.

## VII. FEATURES OF SYSTEMS OF BELIEFS THAT ARE AMONG THE GOALS OF COGNITION

The fifth and final category of desiderata consists of properties of *systems* of beliefs:

D12: Explanation.

D13: Understanding.

D14: Coherence.

D15: Systematicity.

Regrettably, Alston is not explicit on what these desiderata amount to. He seems to have something like the following in mind. D12 means that if S believes that

some event occurs, S is able to explain why this event occurs. D14 means that S's beliefs are (for the most part) logically coherent with each other. D15 means that to some considerable extent S is able to recognize the relations between (systems) of her beliefs. Explanation, coherence and systematicity are all subcategories of D13 (understanding). Unfortunately, Alston fails to explain what he means by 'understanding' (cf. 46 and 166).

According to Alston, all these desiderata are epistemic, not because they contribute to a favorable balance of as many true and as few false beliefs as possible (he is convinced that they do *not*), but because these desiderata are desirable only if the beliefs in question are (for the most part) true. Coherence, for instance, is cognitively worthless if it is a property of a system of false beliefs. If a system of (mostly) *true* beliefs, however, has one or more of D12–D15, then this *does* add intellectual value to the epistemic value of truth: "unless by and large truth can be assumed, these features of belief systems would fail to exhibit the intrinsic cognitive desirability that would otherwise attach to them" (46). Thus, although these desiderata are not favorable to the goal of significant truth, they have some cognitive value if the systems of beliefs they concern are mostly true. As he says, Alston does not want to be hardnosed on this issue and, therefore, counts D12–D15 as epistemic desiderata (cf. 47).

For at least three reasons this line of reasoning seems questionable to me. First, one may doubt whether truth is indeed a necessary condition for the desirability of these desiderata. Do we not in many situations strive after coherence as something of intrinsic intellectual value, that is, a value independent of truth? Would we not, from a cognitive point of view (whatever precisely that may be), value the situation of someone with coherent beliefs more than the situation of someone with radically incoherent beliefs, if in both cases (the majority) of their beliefs turn out to be false?<sup>10</sup> Of course, this claim is controversial and I cannot offer a defense of it here. We should notice, though, that if it is correct, desiderata like D14 seem to be in the same epistemological boat as, say, D11 (the causal ancestry of B does not contain violations of intellectual obligations) or D5 (B was formed by the exercise of an intellectual virtue). Although these desiderata are not always favorable to reaching our basic epistemic goal either, other things being equal, we value their exemplification more than their absence.

Second, it is only by changing his definition of 'epistemic desideratum' from 'some property's being *favorable* to reaching the goal of significant truth' to 'some property's being *essentially related* to the goal of significant truth' that Alston can reasonably claim that properties such as coherence are epistemic desiderata. But this raises all sorts of difficult issues. One of these is the following. What is so special about requiring truth in order to be cognitively valuable? Why would we especially value desiderata that stand in this relation to the goal of significant truth? Alston's new definition of an epistemic desideratum seems ad hoc: his alternative understanding of 'epistemic desideratum' seems to follow from his desire to include group V desiderata, in order to render his account epistemically plural.

Third and finally, desiderata such as D12, D13, and D15 *do* often contribute to the realization of the basic cognitive goal. This is because, normally, people have mostly true beliefs—the majority of people’s perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, beliefs based on introspection, etc. are true (assuming that radical skepticism is false). Someone’s having insight into the relations between (systems) of her beliefs will often dispose her to acquire true rather than false beliefs on certain issues. But, again, if it is required for desiderata *always* or *necessarily* to be favorable to acquiring true rather than false beliefs in order to count as epistemic desiderata, these desiderata cannot count as such.

However, one could respond to these objections along the following lines. According to Alston, the epistemic goal is to acquire true rather than false beliefs on matters that are of interest and/or importance to us. As we saw, group V desiderata do not, or at least do not always, contribute to reaching the truth-side of this goal, but they seem to contribute to the importance or significance side of the goal, for one might think that (a) they are properties that make the beliefs that have them particularly important to us, and that (b) only beliefs that are important or significant to us tend to exemplify these properties.

The first thing we need to notice about this response is that it gives up the strict definition of ‘epistemic desideratum’: group V desiderata are favorable not to acquiring true beliefs of a certain kind, but to acquiring significant or interesting beliefs, whether they are true or not. And, as Alston acknowledges, false beliefs exemplify group V desiderata just as well as true beliefs. Moreover, there are many propositions that I believe, that I understand, that cohere with other propositions that I believe, and whose truth I can perfectly well explain, but that are of no particular interest or importance to me. Thus, I can remember things that people said to me, although I do not think them to be interesting or important at all. Also, there are propositions concerning such things as my relationships with people, the existence of God, moral facts, the practice of philosophy, and the nature of scientific theories, and other things that are of significant interest and/or importance to me, but that I find hard to understand, that are often incoherent or at least seem hard to reconcile, and that I have no explanation of. It may be that beliefs that exemplify group V desiderata generally tend to be beliefs that are of interest and/or importance to us and vice versa. But even then D12–D15 could count as epistemic desiderata only if we broaden the original definition in such a way that properties count as epistemic desiderata if they are *sometimes* or *often* rather than *always* favorable to reaching *at least part* of the goal of significant truth.

## VIII. EPILOGUE

Several times Alston claims that his approach in terms of epistemic desiderata is radically pluralistic (42, 47, and 244). As we have seen, however, it can hardly be called pluralistic. Strictly speaking, the only genuinely epistemic desiderata are the logically trivial desideratum of truth (DO) and that of being produced by a reliable cognitive mechanism (D2/3). All other desiderata either fail to meet the

requirement of always contributing to reaching the goal of significant truth or can be reduced to D0 or D2/3.

Starting from here, Alston could do two things. On the one hand, he could stick with a strict definition of 'epistemic desideratum' and give up the desired epistemic plurality. That would amount to giving up an epistemological approach in terms of epistemic justification in favor of a radically externalist approach in terms of truth and truth-conduciveness. But what would we gain by abandoning justification if we replace it by just two other desiderata, one of which is logically trivial?<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Alston could broaden his definition of 'epistemic desideratum,' so that his approach leads to genuine epistemic plurality.

I think there are at least two promising complementary strategies for realizing the latter option. First, Alston could take different cognitive goals into account. It might be true that we usually aim at acquiring true rather than false beliefs on matters that are of interest or importance to us, but there also seem to be situations in which we (rightly) aim at understanding or knowledge rather than mere true belief. And, clearly, some deontological desiderata and certain features of systems of belief, such as coherence, often significantly contribute to our acquiring knowledge rather than mere true belief. Acknowledging a number of different cognitive goals will increase the plurality of epistemic desiderata.<sup>12</sup> Second, Alston could distinguish between weaker and stronger epistemic desiderata, proportioning the strength of a desideratum to the degree to which it contributes to reaching some specific cognitive goal. This means that a desideratum can count as an epistemic desideratum even if it only usually or perhaps even sometimes contributes to attaining some cognitive goal. This will enlarge the spectrum of epistemic desiderata as well.

I have not argued that we should give up the project of explaining the nature of epistemic justification or the search for its individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. What I *have* argued is that Alston's approach in terms of epistemic desiderata is an attractive alternative to the traditional debate about epistemic justification only if his definition of 'epistemic desideratum' is broadened in such a way that it refers to a plurality of properties of (systems of) beliefs that are cognitively valuable. A good strategy for doing this would involve acknowledging a plurality of cognitive goals and a broad spectrum of properties of (systems of) beliefs that contribute to different extents to reaching those cognitive goals.<sup>13</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. The first statement of this view can be found in Alston 1993. In what follows my references, unless indicated otherwise, will be to Alston 2005, which is the most recent and elaborate defense of his epistemic desiderata approach.
2. This strategy is adopted by Goldman in 2005.
3. Although Alston does not say this *expressis verbis*, I will assume that on Alston's view these matters should be of interest or importance to *the person who aims at acquiring those true rather than false beliefs* (cf. Pritchard 2006, 388).

4. This goal seems to be identical or at least highly similar to what Philip Kitcher means by the same expression (cf. Kitcher 1992, 102). Notice, though, that according to Kitcher significant truth is the aim of scientific practice, whereas Alston's claim is that significant truth is the aim of our daily life cognitive processes.
5. This suggests that on Alston's view a cognitive goal is basic if it is people's goal in the majority of their daily life cognitive processes, but he is not very precise on this. Others have suggested that a cognitive goal is basic if its epistemic value is intrinsic, that is, if reaching that goal is valuable by itself. Perhaps what Alston has in mind is that some cognitive goal is basic if both of these conditions are met.
6. According to Alston, "it can be seen that the difference is only in the degree of detail spelled out" (134). D2 and D3 are "intertranslatable" (136), the relation between them is one of "substantial identity" (138) and "virtual equivalence" (151).
7. Whether Ludwig thereby raises his chances of acquiring true rather than false beliefs on this and related issues is another problem, one that I will not deal with here.
8. For an elaborate statement of Alston's argument against doxastic voluntarism, see Alston 1988.
9. On 77 Alston offers a somewhat more precise version of this desideratum: "S is intellectually to blame for believing that *p* iff if 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*." My criticisms of D11 apply equally well to this version of this desideratum.
10. The idea that coherence has intrinsic value is, one might think, confirmed by the fact that some epistemologists consider coherence to be a sufficient condition for a belief's being justified: they think that coherence, independently of truth, confers a certain positive epistemic status on beliefs.
11. For a brief statement of a similar point, see Battaly 2005, 7–8; Fumerton 2006, 240.
12. The discussion about whether some specific epistemic goal can count as basic—whether by that one means the goal people most often aim at in their cognitive activities or a goal that has intrinsic cognitive value—can be continued within this revised version of Alston's approach.
13. I would like to thank Arianna Betti, Martijn Blaauw, Anthony Booth, Lieven Decock, Jeroen de Ridder, René van Woudenberg, and two anonymous referees for this journal for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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