

COMMENTS AND CRITICISM

WHY RESPONSIBLE BELIEF IS BLAMELESS BELIEF*

Let *Doxastic Deontologism* (DD) be the following thesis:
 (DD) *S* is justified in believing that *p* iff *S* believes that *p* responsibly.

The idea behind DD is that we are under certain doxastic obligations and that we should understand the justification of belief in terms of our compliance with them.

But what is it to believe responsibly? That is a difficult question. Let us consider a couple of conflicting proposals that have been put forward recently, in order to (at least partially) elucidate the concept of responsible belief. Let us formulate the thesis that responsible belief should be cashed out in terms of praiseworthiness, the thesis of *Doxastic Deontologism as Praiseworthiness* (DDP), as follows:

(DDP) *S* responsibly believes that *p* iff *S* is praiseworthy for believing that *p*.

And let us distinguish DDP from the more standard deontological view of doxastic responsibility, which is cashed out in terms of blamelessness, a view we call *Doxastic Deontologism as Blamelessness* (DDB):

(DDB) *S* responsibly believes that *p* iff *S* is blameless for believing that *p*.

We argue that if DD is true, then DDB rather than DDP is true. We also attempt to refute some arguments in favor of DDP, mainly those recently proposed (or at least inspired) by Brian Weatherson.¹

We will assume with Weatherson that DDP and DDB are mutually exclusive. It seems that if one is praiseworthy for believing that *p*, then one is also blameless for believing that *p*, but that if one is blameless for believing that *p*, one is not thereby praiseworthy for believing that

*We would like to thank Jeroen de Ridder, Herman Philipse, Brian Weatherson, and René van Woudenberg for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

¹Brian Weatherson, "Deontology and Descartes' Demon," this JOURNAL, CV, 9 (September 2008): 540–69. Page references will be to this article, unless otherwise indicated. Weatherson never gives a precise formulation of the view he advocates, but DDP seems to be a correct representation of his main thesis: "justification is a kind of praiseworthiness, and ... praise is more relevant to epistemic concepts than blame" (p. 540); "justification is a kind of praiseworthiness, not a kind of blamelessness" (p. 543); and "a belief's being justified is not a matter of it being blameless, but a matter of it being in a certain way praiseworthy" (p. 569).

p. That is, in certain circumstances one is responsible² for holding some belief *B*, while being neither blameworthy nor praiseworthy for holding *B*. On DDB, we believe responsibly in those circumstances, whereas on DDP we do not. The views do not only exclude each other, they also seem to be the only games in town. Any other option, such as the view that responsible belief is blameworthy belief, seems absurd.

This paper is organized as follows. In sections I–III, we discuss three arguments putatively in favor of DDP. In section I we respond to the idea that DDP enables us to deal with the familiar problem of doxastic involuntarism. In section II we discuss the claim that DDP is necessary to account for all our intuitions in the New Evil Demon case. And in section III we consider an argument to the effect that DDB, in conjunction with three principles a doxastic deontologist is bound to accept, leads to a contradiction. We show that none of these arguments stand up to scrutiny.

I. PRAISEWORTHINESS AND CONTROL

Let us first deal with the idea that DDP can handle the voluntarism problem for deontologism. The problem is that, since we do not have voluntary control over our beliefs, and ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, we cannot be said to bear doxastic responsibility. However, it may be that praiseworthiness “outruns” voluntary control, so that DDP solves the problem. Consider Weatherson’s cricket captain, who comes up with a particularly imaginative field placement during a match. While we may want to praise the captain, we do so despite the fact that he had no control over that. After all, claims Weatherson, coming up with the particular field placement is hardly something one can set out to do. And we deem this captain more praiseworthy than his colleague, who works equally hard, but does not come up with such an imaginative field placement. So if we can justly praise *S* for *φ*-ing, regardless of whether *φ*-ing is under *S*’s voluntary control, then DDP is immune from the voluntarism problem. However, for at least three reasons we do not think appealing to praiseworthiness helps deontologism here.

First, in order for the reply to succeed, being imaginative needs to be analogous to being in belief states, such that we have no *direct* voluntary control over either. However, we do seem to have *indirect* voluntary control over and indirect voluntary influence on our doxastic attitudes, and probably over our acts of imagination. We can train ourselves to be more critical of things like gossip. We might also train ourselves to be

²By ‘responsible’ we mean that one is the proper subject of praise, blame, or neutral appraisal.

more imaginative: perhaps by engaging with imaginative people and their work, or simply by trying to conceive of imaginative solutions to everyday problems. According to William Alston, because deontology needs to be “grounded” on our indirect control of indirect influence, it has to be a thesis about blamelessness. For, as Weatherston himself notes, in such a formulation what we are responsible for are not particular doxastic tokens, but rather certain actions such as training oneself to be less credulous. But of course, as Alston continues and Weatherston does not, this does not mean that we cannot be held to *blame* for particular doxastic tokens. This is because blame supervenes on requirement in two ways, as Alston puts it:

First, and most simply, one is to blame for failing to do something required. But second, one is to blame for the obtaining of some fact if that fact would not have obtained if one had not behaved in some manner for which one is to blame in the first sense, that is, for doing something forbidden or failing to do something required.³

Of course, the same can be said for praise. Thus, this point counts in favor of neither DDP nor DDB. What is important, however, is that we can talk of praise or blame for particular doxastic tokens without needing to “outrun” voluntary control, since we can base such judgments on our indirect doxastic control or indirect doxastic influence. So our first worry with this argument in favor of DDP is that it provides a solution to a problem that already has an equally plausible solution.

In bringing the notion of indirect voluntary control into play, we see Weatherston’s example in quite a different light. We can now wonder whether the praiseworthiness we ascribe to the cricket captain in fact is due to his ability to engage and train his imagination. It might also be that the endowment of such praise partly depends on whether the act of imagination yields a particular result or arrives at a propitious moment; would we still praise the captain if his field placement involved a strong element of risk in a close, tense game? The ability to engage one’s imagination at appropriate times may well be something over which we have indirect control. Our attribution of praise, when it comes to the imagination, may be determined by a variety of factors, many of which involve indirect voluntary control.

Second, there seem to be two different kinds of praise. On the one hand, we can praise some person *S* for φ -ing if we value *S*’s φ -ing, without holding *S* responsible for φ -ing. Thus, I might praise Miranda for her beauty without holding her responsible for it, and I may praise

³William P. Alston, *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1989), p. 140.

my recently bought Chevrolet for its speed. This sort of praise ought to be distinguished clearly from that usually classified as what Peter Strawson calls a “participant reactive attitude,”⁴ entailing that we hold the person in question responsible. In this sense, we can *in principle* also, say, blame or resent *S* for φ -ing.

Now, if the imaginative cricket captain did not exercise his capacity to train his imagination but happened to come up with imaginative field placements nonetheless, we would praise him only in the first sense of the word. But this sense has nothing to do with responsibility: we just value the captain’s imaginative field placements and admire him because of that. But this means that this example is irrelevant here.

Third and finally, if, contrary to what we have suggested, the captain *is* praiseworthy in the second sense, why would we think that all responsible believing is like the captain’s imaginative act? Surely, if praiseworthy beliefs are of that sort, they provide a poor model for deontological doxastic justification. On doxastic justification, so understood, the standards of justification are too high, since very few of our beliefs are justified.

II. DEONTOLOGICAL INTUITIONS AND DEMONIC DECEPTION

In his article, Weatherson discusses the so-called New Evil Demon (NED) problem, not in order to solve it, but as a means to show that the deontological intuitions that play a role in NED scenarios favor DDP over DDB. The NED problem usually is presented as a problem for reliabilist theories of doxastic justification. The thought is that I am equally justified in my beliefs as is my doxastic counterpart (who has exactly the same beliefs, memories, and intuitions I have and is disposed to reason as I do) even though, unlike me, he lives in a world governed by an evil demon who systematically deceives him, and so happens to have (at least mostly) false beliefs. Consider James Pryor’s way of thinking about the problem. Assume that there are three victims of equal demonic deception *A*, *B*, and *C*. Victim *A* frequently uses faulty reasoning procedures to arrive at her beliefs, and if she were a little more careful she would easily see that they are faulty. Victim *B* also often uses faulty procedures to arrive at her beliefs, but the faults in the procedures are the product of a bad upbringing, and the mistakes are so subtle that we cannot reasonably expect *B* to notice them. Victim *C* hardly ever uses faulty procedures to arrive at her beliefs; in fact, she displays the paradigm of

⁴Peter F. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row: 1974), pp. 1–25.

good reasoning but still has mostly false beliefs because she is the victim of devilish deception.⁵

Following Pryor, Weatherson claims that the notion of blameworthiness cannot capture the intuition that *C* is epistemically better than *B*. If both are blameless, then both are equally justified according to DDB. Weatherson's solution to Pryor's version of the NED problem is to claim that none of the victims are justified, but that that does not preclude us from attributing praise, and in this way we can accommodate all the intuitions at play in the scenario. Let us explain. According to Weatherson, *A*, *B*, and *C* are all bad *evidence collectors*: their evidence is misleading evidence. Therefore, the beliefs of these three victims are unjustified. However, there is an important distinction to be made between *A* and *B* on the one hand and *C* on the other, namely, that only *C* is a good *evidence processor*: she processes her evidential input excellently. Thus, *C* is epistemically praiseworthy in a way that *A* and *B* are not. Thus, according to Weatherson, the attribution of praise helps us make sense of the difference between *B* and *C*, since we can say that *C* is epistemically praiseworthy (though unjustified) in having the beliefs that she does in a way that *B* is not.⁶

In response to this argument, we first should notice that Weatherson departs from his original understanding of doxastic justification in terms of praiseworthiness, as expressed in DDP (in conjunction with DD). It now seems that one is justified only if one's evidence is not misleading, and whether one's evidence is misleading need not be up to oneself. On this alternative understanding of DDP, justification cannot be understood in deontological terms only. This means that, strictly speaking, we have to revise DDP and DDB as follows:

(DDP*) *S* responsibly (justifiedly) believes that *p* only if *S* is praiseworthy for believing that *p*,

and, presumably,

(DDB*) *S* responsibly (justifiedly) believes that *p* only if *S* is blameless for believing that *p*.

However, since all of our criticisms in this paper are directed against the view that praiseworthiness for believing that *p* is a *necessary* condition for responsibly believing that *p*, we can continue to work with DDP and DDB.

⁵ Cf. James Pryor, "Highlights of Recent Epistemology," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, LII, 1 (2001): 95–124, at p. 117.

⁶ Similarly, Weatherson argues that a person who displays the virtue of cosmopolitanism is praiseworthy in a way that someone who, albeit blamelessly, displays the vice of patriotism is not (p. 566).

Now, what about the difference between victims *A* and *B*? It seems impossible to articulate the difference between them if we only have the concept of praiseworthiness at hand, since neither is worthy of praise. Yet there is a difference between them, namely, that *B* is blameless while *A* is not. So in order to make sense of all the intuitions in this scenario, deontology must not merely be about praise; it has to be about blame, too. And now the question is how we determine when someone is a “good” doxastic agent, “good” such that it is necessary for doxastic justification. We can either draw the boundary between what counts as a good doxastic agent and what does not, high or low (that is, we can say that only a praiseworthy doxastic agent is a good one), or we can say that a doxastic agent need only be blameless to qualify as “good.” Either way, we will not be able to accommodate all the intuitions in the skeptical scenario above. So the ability to meet that constraint cannot help us decide between DDP and DDB. Since whichever way we take deontology leaves an intuition unaccounted for, this is also problematic for Weatherson’s overall solution to the NED problem. For what advantage is left to his solution?⁷

III. A CONTRADICTION FROM DDB?

Let us now turn to a third and final consideration in favor of DDP, as it is formulated by Weatherson. Here, the idea is that the conjunction of DDB (in contradistinction from DDP), DD, and the plausible premises

*A*₁: It is possible for *S* to have a justified but false belief that her belief that *p* is justified. (567)

*A*₂: If *S* blamelessly believes that she is justified in believing that *p*, and on the basis of that belief comes to believe that *p*,⁸ then she is blameless in believing that *p*. (568)

leads to the following contradiction:

- (1) *S* justifiedly, but falsely, believes that she is justified in believing that *p*. (*A*₁)
- (2) On the basis of this belief, *S* comes to believe that *p*. (Assumption)

⁷ Recall that Weatherson’s motivation for it is that “[a] fairly common response is to note that even according to externalist epistemology there will be some favorable property that the victim’s beliefs have, and this can explain the intuition that there is something epistemically praiseworthy about the victim’s beliefs. My approach is a version of this, one that is invulnerable to recent criticisms of the move” (p. 564).

⁸ We are not quite sure how to understand this. Does Weatherson mean that *S* comes to believe that *p* on the basis of thinking (a) that a belief that *p* is justified, (b) that her belief that *p* would be justified if she were to acquire it, or (c) that the belief that she already has is justified? It seems highly doubtful that one can come to believe something one already believes, so, for the sake of charity, we take Weatherson to have in mind either (a) or (b). We do not think anything hangs on which of the two one takes.

- (3) *S* blamelessly believes that she is justified in believing that *p*. (1, J=B [DDB])
- (4) *S* blamelessly believes that *p*. (2, 3, A₂)
- (5) *S* is justified in believing that *p*. (4, J=B [DDB])
- (6) It is false that *S* is justified in believing that *p*. (1) (Cf. 568–69)

Given that (5) and (6) are logically contradictory, so the argument goes, we have to reject DDB (Weatherson’s J=B), A₁, or A₂. A₂, says Weatherson, “is extremely plausible,” so either A₁ or DDB has to go. But to give up A₁ is to commit oneself to externalism, so if we want to be deontologists and internalists we had better give up DDB in favor of DDP.

Before responding to this argument against DDB, let us first consider whether DDP fares any better. On Weatherson’s proposal, this means, first, that we replace DDB with DDP, and second, that we say that the inference from *I am justified in believing that p* to *p* is itself praiseworthy only if the premise (that is, that *I am justified in believing that p*) is true. It is not entirely clear what this is supposed to mean (does it mean to say something merely about the epistemic status of the inference to *p* or the epistemic status of the belief that *p* itself?) The idea, however, seems to be that we should replace A₂ with A₃:

A₃: If *S* is praiseworthy for believing that she is justified in believing that *p*, and on the basis of that belief comes to believe that *p*, then she is praiseworthy for believing that *p* only if *S* is justified in believing that *p*.⁹

Now, what does the “argument” on Weatherson’s alternative look like? He fails to lay it out, but it seems that it would look as follows:

- (7) *S* justifiedly, but falsely, believes that she is justified in believing that *p*. (A₁)
- (8) On the basis of this belief, *S* comes to believe that *p*. (Assumption)
- (9) *S* is praiseworthy for believing that she is justified in believing that *p*. (7, J=P [DDP])
- (10) *S* is *not* praiseworthy for believing that *p*. (8, 9, A₃)
- (11) *S* is *not* justified in believing that *p*. (10, J=P [DDP])
- (12) It is false that *S* is justified in believing that *p*. (7)

And, clearly, there is no contradiction involved in this set of propositions. The problem with A₃, however, is that it seems trivially true. Given DDP (Weatherson’s J=P), A₃ could be rephrased as

A_{3*}: If *S* is praiseworthy for believing that she is praiseworthy for believing that *p*, and on the basis of that belief comes to believe that *p*, then

⁹ In Weatherson’s own words: “First, we say that a belief’s being justified is not a matter of it being blameless, but a matter of it being in a certain way praiseworthy. Second, we say that the inference from *I am justified in believing that p* to *p* is not praiseworthy if the premise is false” (p. 569).

she is praiseworthy for believing that p only if S is praiseworthy for believing that p .

A_3 is true by definition, in the same way as A_{2*} is true by definition:

A_{2*} : If S blamelessly believes that she is blameless for believing that p , and on the basis of that belief comes to believe that p , then she is blameless for believing that p only if she is blameless for believing that p .

The really important question that Weatherson should have addressed is whether the following genuinely informative principle is true:

A_4 : If S is praiseworthy for believing that she is justified in believing that p , and on the basis of that belief comes to believe that p , then she is praiseworthy for believing that p ,

or

A_{4*} : If S is praiseworthy for believing that she is praiseworthy for believing that p , and on the basis of that belief comes to believe that p , then she is praiseworthy for believing that p .

And the problem is that A_4/A_{4*} seems equally plausible as A_2/A_{2*} . If praiseworthiness is transferred from a meta-belief B^* to a belief B in virtue of B^* 's being about B in a specific way, then why would blamelessness not be transferred from a meta-belief B^* to a belief B in virtue of B^* 's being similarly about B ? Hence, Weatherson's reasoning at this point fails to favor DDP over DDB.

Second, this argument against DDB fails quite simply on the falsity of Weatherson's assumption that we need to be externalists in order to think that we have infallible knowledge about our beliefs about justification, since we could just stipulate an internalist condition on top of the infallibility condition. At most, the necessity of having infallible beliefs about justification implies a strong form of access internalism according to which only reasons that I have special, infallible access to (through introspection) can justify for me a belief that p . Further, one need only be committed to the claim that not all justified beliefs are true, or that justification does not *entail* truth, and this is quite consistent with thinking that justification entails truth when it comes to propositions about one's own reasons. So we have not eschewed the internalist idea that one can have justified but false beliefs. Weatherson seems to anticipate this objection:

Now some may think that the general principle [A_1 ; authors] is right, but that beliefs about what we are justified in believing are special, and if they are justified they are true. But such an exception seems intolerably ad hoc. If we can have false but justified beliefs about some things, then presumably we can have false but justified beliefs about our evidence,

since in principle our evidence could be practically anything. So the following situation seems possible; indeed it seems likely that something of this form happens frequently in real life. *S* has a false but justified belief that *e* is part of her evidence. *S* knows both that anyone with evidence *e* is justified in believing *p* in the absence of defeaters, and that there are no defeaters present. So *S* comes to believe, quite reasonably, that she is justified in believing that *p*. But *S* does not have this evidence, and in fact all of her evidence points toward $\sim p$. So it is false that she is justified in believing *p*. (567–68)

Here, Weatherson claims that there are situations in which (a) some person *S* has a false but justified belief that *e* is part of her evidence; (b) *S* knows that anyone with evidence *e* is justified in believing *p* in the absence of defeaters; (c) *S* knows that she has no defeaters for *e* (or for believing that *p*); (d) *S* thereby comes to believe that she is justified in believing that *p*; (e) *S* lacks *e*; (f) *S*'s evidence strongly points toward not-*p*; and, therefore, (g) *S* is not justified in believing *p*. Weatherson's argument, however, trades on the ambiguity of the word 'justification', which he uses purely deontologically and internalistically in (a), (b), and (d), but externalistically in (g). It is because of this ambiguity that we can imagine a situation along these lines. If, however, we understand all instances of 'justified' in this example purely internalistically and deontologically—as we ought to, if DDB is the thesis under investigation—we see that no such scenario is possible. It seems impossible that some person *S* (i) has a blameless belief that *e* is part of her evidence, (ii) knows that anyone with evidence *e* is blameless in believing that *p* in the absence of defeaters and that she has no defeaters for *e* (or for believing that *p*), (iii) on the basis of that comes to believe that *p*, and (iv) is blameworthy for believing that *p*. If conditions (i)–(iii), then for *S* to believe responsibly is clearly to believe that *p*, whether or not her believing that *p* is justified in any externalist sense of the word.

IV. CONCLUSION

For all Weatherson shows, there is no reason to prefer DDP to DDB. All three arguments against DDB fail at one or several junctures. Moreover, as we have seen in response to the voluntarism problem and the New Evil Demon problem, we should not set the standards of justification too high if we do not want to risk skepticism. DDB seems much more capable of meeting this demand than DDP. This provides us with sufficient reason to adhere to the standard account of responsible belief in terms of blamelessness rather than praiseworthiness.

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