Abstract

Several philosophers think that we do not have duties to believe but that we can nevertheless sometimes be held to blame for our beliefs, since duties relevant to belief are exclusively duties to critical reflection. One important line of argument for this claim goes as follows: we at most have influence (not control) over our beliefs such that we are not responsible for belief, but responsible for the acts of critical reflection that influence them. We can be blameworthy not just for violating a duty but also for the obtaining of a state of affairs that would not have obtained had we not violated a duty. We can thus also be blameworthy for our beliefs even though we have no duties to believe. The chapter levies several objections to this argument, and then defends an alternative argument for the same conclusion. Roughly stated, the argument goes: (supposing, for reductio, that there are duties to believe) if S has a duty to believe that \(p\), then S has a duty to reflect on whether \(p\). But duties to reflect on whether \(p\) always undercut duties to believe that \(p\). Thus, the duties relevant to belief are always duties to critical reflection.

1. Introduction

Several philosophers think that we do not have duties or obligations to believe but that we can nevertheless be held to blame for having certain beliefs because our duties relevant to our doxastic attitudes are exclusively duties to critical reflection (broadly construed such as to include evidence gathering). One important line of argument (due to Alston 1989) for this claim begins with the following thought: we at most have influence (and not control) over our doxastic attitudes. We can influence, say, what are our beliefs regarding the War of the Roses, by typing <the Wars of the Roses> into Google. Before doing so, for
instance, I mistakenly believed that Richard III was not a Yorkist, but after my Google search, I believe differently. Thus, while we might not have control over our beliefs, we might be nevertheless blameworthy for our beliefs because of the control we have over our actions. I might not be able to just decide what to believe about Richard III’s allegiances, but I can nevertheless be blameworthy for believing false things about them given my ability to gather evidence and to critically reflect on such matters. For Alston, it is important that this has the corollary that we do not strictly speaking have doxastic obligations – that is, obligations to believe that p, disbelieve that p, or withhold judgement on whether p. For him, we can only have obligations with respect to things we can control (that is the point of ‘ought implies can’), and our ability to critically reflect on our beliefs, or to gather evidence, does not give us control, but at most doxastic influence. When I type <The Wars of the Roses> into Google, I do not antecedently know what the result of my search will be, and so consequently do not know what my ensuing doxastic attitude will be. So, claims Alston, my ability to perform things like a Google search merely gives me the power to influence my doxastic attitudes - it does not give me the power to control them. This does not mean that we are never blameworthy with respect to our doxastic attitudes, since blame supervenes on obligation in at least two ways: we can be blameworthy for breaking an obligation, but we can also be blameworthy when a state of affairs obtains that would not have obtained had we not violated an obligation. I am blameworthy for car accidents I cause while drunk-driving and out of control, for example, since I violated the
obligation not to get behind the wheel while drunk. If I have a duty to stay informed about the Wars of the Roses (say I am a History teacher, teaching a module on the subject) and I break that requirement, I am blameworthy for believing that Richard III was not a Yorkist King.

In this paper I want to defend the idea that we have only duties to critical reflection (where this includes evidence gathering and training oneself to be a better thinker, perhaps less prone to implicit bias and the like), and do not have duties to believe\(^1\). But I think that Alston’s argument, as roughly stated above, is problematic. In the next section §2, I levy several objections to Alston’s argument: that the distinction between doxastic control and influence is not a sharp as Alston needs (2.1) and that his claim about the supervenience relation between blameworthiness and obligation rules in the existence of ‘derivative’ obligations. I then thus propose a new argument to the same conclusion. Roughly stated, the argument goes: (supposing, for reductio, that there are duties to believe) if \(S\) has a duty to believe that \(p\), then \(S\) also has a duty to reflect on whether \(p\). But the existence of duties to reflect on whether \(p\) always undercut duties to believe that \(p\). Thus the duties relevant to whether our doxastic attitudes are blameworthy are always duties to critical reflection. In section 3, I defend the claim that if \(S\) has a duty to believe that \(p\),

\(^{1}\text{A related, but subtly different, thesis is defended by Stapleford 2012: that while we have no duties to belief, we do have duties to proportion our beliefs to the evidence. He argues that this is John Locke's position in Book IV of An Essay Concerning Human Understanding. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to assess whether his interesting arguments for this slightly different conclusion are compatible with mine in this paper.}\)
then $S$ also has a duty to reflect on whether $p$; in §4 I defend the claim that the existence of duties to reflect on whether $p$ always undercut duties to believe that $p$, and thus that the duties relevant to our doxastic attitudes are always duties to critical reflection.

2. *Indirect Doxastic Control vs. Doxastic Influence*

Alston’s main argument seems to go as follows:

(1) There are doxastic obligations only if we have control (indirect or direct) over our beliefs.

(2) We do not have any kind of control over our beliefs.

(3) Therefore, we do not have doxastic obligations.

He then defends premise 2 with a further sub-argument:

(4) If we have doxastic obligations in virtue of the control we have over actions such as evidence gathering, then such actions give us indirect doxastic control.

(5) Actions such as evidence gathering and critical reflection do not give us indirect doxastic control, but doxastic influence.

(6) We do not have doxastic obligations in virtue of the control we have over actions such as evidence gathering and critical reflection.

The first argument (1-3) has received extensive discussion (see Nottelmann 2007, Weatherson 2008, Chrisman 2008, Roeber 2019 among many, many others). The key premise (5) has not received comparative attention (Peels 2018 is an exception). This is a shame, since it is crucial in Alston’s argument. My
first objection to his overall case will be directed at premise 5. But there is an even further tacit argument in Alston, which has received even less attention:

[Background assumption. Blame-Obligation Supervenience Principle: blameworthiness supervenes on obligation in two ways. We can be blameworthy for violating an obligation, and we can be blameworthy for the obtaining of a state of affairs that would not have obtained had we not violated an obligation].

(7) The control we have over actions like evidence gathering makes it the case that we are sometimes blameworthy for our doxastic attitudes

[Blame-Obligation Supervenience].

(3) We do not have doxastic obligations.

(8) The obligations we transgress that make our doxastic attitudes blameworthy are not doxastic obligations.

The second objection I then levy is that premises (7) and (3) are contradictory, and argue that if we can be blameworthy for our beliefs then we must at least have ‘derivative’ doxastic obligations.

2.1 First Objection

Let us now return to my first objection, vis-à-vis premise (5). Having ruled out that we have direct doxastic control\(^2\), Alston thinks that whether we have

\(^2\) The control we have over raising our hand is the paradigmatic case of direct control, since we (typically) do not have to do anything else than will that our arm goes up for it to go up.
indirect doxastic control is settled by the question: (supposing you want to believe that \( p \)) is there something you can do to bring it about that you believe that \( p \)? Analogously: you cannot by a sheer act of will bring it about that the light bulb in this room switches on, but you do have indirect (or ‘non-basic’) control over whether it comes on, since you have direct control over whether or not you flick the working switch. But is there anything analogous we can do to bring it about that we believe that (say) it was not raining upon seeing it raining outside?

How would I do so? What button would I push? I could try asserting the contrary in a confident tone of voice. I could rehearse some sceptical arguments. I could invoke the Vedantic doctrine of *maya*. I could grit my teeth and command myself to withhold the proposition. But unless I am a very unusual person, none of these will have the least effect. It seems clear that nothing any normal human being can do during the uninterrupted operation of an intention to reject the proposition that it is raining will have any chance at all to succeed. (Alston 1989, p. 129).

According to Alston we can nonetheless *influence* what we believe. Examples: Go to the library, do a Google search, critically reflect, train one self to be a better reasoner (give your mind a ‘work out’ by doing puzzles etc.), take an implicit bias training workshop. For ease of exposition, for the rest of this paper I will refer to these kinds of activity collectively under the term ‘critical
reflection’. Our ability to embark on such ventures does not give us doxastic (indirect) control since when we embark on such ventures we do not antecedently know what our ensuing doxastic attitude will be.

These claims ignore the difference between doing A in order to bring about E, and doing A so that some effect within a certain range will ensue. In order that the “looking for more evidence” phenomenon would show that we have immediate voluntary control over propositional attitudes in basically the way we do over the positions of doors and light switches, it would have to be the case that the search for evidence was undertaken with the intention of taking up a certain particular attitude toward a particular proposition. For only in that case would the outcome show that we have exercised voluntary control over what propositional attitude we take up. Suppose that I can’t remember Al Kaline’s lifetime batting average and I look it up in the baseball almanac. I read there the figure .320, and I thereby accept it. Does that demonstrate my voluntary control over my belief that Kaline’s lifetime batting average was .320? Not at all. At most it shows that I have immediate voluntary control over whether I take up some propositional attitude toward some proposition ascribing a lifetime batting average to Kaline (Alston 1989, p. 131).
We could then only be blameworthy (or otherwise held to account) for our doxastic attitudes derivatively – whether we are to blame would depend on whether we have dispatched our duties to do certain things, like collect evidence\textsuperscript{3}. But it is extremely hard to give an account of what are our evidence-gathering duties (given that it is obviously not our duty to be permanently gathering evidence for all propositions, nor our duty to collect evidence for any given proposition considered until there was some infallible guarantee that our belief that $p$ was true)\textsuperscript{4}.

The underlying operative principle is (something like) the following:

\begin{align*}
\text{IndiControl:} & \quad S \text{ has (indirect) control over whether she } A\text{-s through } S'\text{s having direct control over } S'\text{s } B\text{-ing just in case } S \text{ knows that the outcome of } S'\text{s } B\text{-ing will result in } S \text{ } A\text{-ing}.
\end{align*}

Suppose I want to believe that Adam Curtis did not write *Blackadder* (I like *Blackadder* but I do not like Adam Curtis), but I do not know whether Adam Curtis wrote *Blackadder*\textsuperscript{5}. Do I have control over whether I believe that Curtis wrote *Blackadder* in virtue of my ability to use Google? If IndiControl is true,

\textsuperscript{3} I take the term ‘derivative blamelessness’ from Peels 2018.

\textsuperscript{4} Alston (wrongly!) thinks that a deontological account of epistemic justification underwritten by these duties falls prey to his ‘epistemic poverty’ objection. This depends on what the epistemic aim of deontological justification is: may be more to do with understanding than ‘consilience’ and deontological (epistemic) justification is not sui generis, in that it must be understood within a broader context of all things considered justification. I will return to this consideration in section 6.

\textsuperscript{5} Tony Curtis in fact wrote *Blackadder*. 

then I do not, since I will not know that the outcome of my Google-search will result in my believing that Adam Curtis did not write *Blackadder*.

However, IndiControl looks too strong. Consider:

I want to turn on the lights.

The building’s circuitry is faulty and gives me a 50% chance of success of turning on the lights by flicking the switch.

I flick the switch.

The lights go on.

I voluntarily switched on the lights.

This is paralleled in cases of direct control. Consider:

I want to raise my arm.

My neurology is damaged such that I have a 50% chance of raising my arm by willing myself to raise my arm.

I will my arm to raise.

My arm goes up.

I voluntarily raised my arm.

So let’s revise IndiControl to take this on board:

IndiControl’ S has indirect control over whether she A-s through S’s having direct control over S’s B-ing just in case
S knows that there is at least some (non-negligible) chance that the outcome of S’s B-ing be S A-ing.

But IndiControl’ is compatible with our having indirect control over several of our beliefs by critically reflecting on the evidence we have or by searching further evidence.

Consider:

I have an inking that Adam Curtis did not write Blackadder, but I would only assign a 20% probability to it being the case.

So I currently do not believe that Adam Curtis did not write Blackadder.

I want to believe it.

So I Google it.

I come to believe that Adam Curtis did not write Blackadder as a result of Googling.

I voluntarily came to believe that Adam Curtis did not write Blackadder. I satisfy the requirement that there is least some (non-negligible) chance that the outcome of my Googling will be my believing that Adam Curtis did not write Blackadder.

OBJECTION
This does not seem right, since my intention to believe makes no difference as to whether Adam Curtis actually wrote Blackadder. To illustrate:

I want ‘One for Arthur’ to win the race, and so want to believe it. Odds on One for Arthur are bad. I will find out whether One for Arthur wins the race if I switch on the TV and watch it. Suppose that One for Arthur defies the odds and wins the race. Have I voluntarily come to believe that One for Arthur won the race, via the control I have over switching on the TV? Seems not.

Put differently, the objection seems to be that I can only have indirect control over believing propositions that are true, or that will have a high subjective probability once I’ve done the evidence gathering action.

**REPLY**

First, I think it is important to disambiguate that we’re here talking about control of ‘beliefs’ qua belief states and not about ‘beliefs’ qua the propositional contents of those beliefs (it is clearly impossible for a non-deity to change what propositions are true by doing things that do not change the world). Once we have our attention set on whether a doxastic state has been wilfully brought about, it’s not so clear that the intuition above uniformly rules against believing at will that One For Arthur won the race – we’re not saying that I wilfully made the proposition that <One For Arthur wins the race> true, but that I brought about the state of belief with the content <One For Arthur wins the race>.

Second, I am here responding to Alston’s claim that it is solely because we do not antecedently know what our doxastic attitude will be before critical

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6 I owe the following case to Alex Greenberg.
reflection that critical reflection does not constitute control. The objection above introduces a new constraint on control: that we can come to believe something which is false/we subjectively assign a low probability to. Third, the objection relies on conflating the distinction between our ability to believe a proposition that is false and our ability to believe something that we simultaneously assign a low probability to. Google is not infallible. I could believe that Adam Curtis did not write Blackadder as a result of looking it up on Google, even if he did. So I can clearly come to believe false propositions via control I have over certain actions. Now, suppose there are lots of ways that I could find out about whether One For Arthur won the case. I could read about it in the newspaper, for instance; I could ask a Bookmaker; I could ring up my uncle who was at the race and ask him; I could watch it on the TV… and suppose that One For Arthur did not win the race, and that I would have come to believe that had I done any of the things except watch it on TV. There was an unusual error and Channel 4 were showing last years race where One for Arthur did win. Is it now so intuitively obvious that I do not come to believe that One for Arthur won the race via the indirect control I have over watching the TV? After all, my actions and beliefs here are compatible with a *mutatis mutandis* reading of the Principle of Alternative Possibilities, since I could have believed differently (and so we need not have to appeal to compatibilists accounts of freedom7).

2.2 Second Objection

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7 Note, however, that, interestingly, most doxastic compatibilists have been keen to use compatibilists criteria to show that we have direct doxastic freedom, or control – they have not typically aimed to show that we have indirect doxastic control over just doxastic influence. See for instance Steup 2008, 2012 and McHugh 2008.
Recall the Blame-Obligation Supervenience Principle endorsed by Alston, which has the putative upshot that we can be blameworthy for our beliefs even though we are not subject to doxastic obligations. Parallel things can be said about certain actions over which we have no control; consider the following case discussed in Peels 2018:

…imagine that I work in a hospital and that it is my task to fill the oxygen bottles that are used in the ambulance. I have an obligation to do so. Since I have control over whether or not I meet that obligation I am originally responsible for whether or not I do so. However, out of laziness I fail to do so. One day, the ambulance attendants arrive upon a scene in which someone desperately needs oxygen. Unfortunately, the bottle is now empty, so they cannot save him and he dies from a lack of oxygen. In this case, I have no control over whether or not the victim is saved, for I cannot intentionally set out to save him. I do not even know that he exists or that he is a victim. It is clear, therefore, that I have no obligation to save him. Nevertheless, it seems that I am blameworthy for his not being saved, because I had influence on that. For had I filled the oxygen bottles, as I should, he would not have died. Thus, I am not originally, but nevertheless derivatively, blameworthy for his death (Peels 2018, p. 118).

It seems clear that there is a difference in the way that the paramedic nurse is blameworthy for the fact that the patient did not get oxygen (given that the nurse could not have done otherwise) and the way in which the nurse is
blameworthy for not adequately equipping the ambulance. Peels tries to capture this difference by characterising the former as ‘derivative blame’ and the latter as ‘original blame’. Now, the trouble, it seems to me, is that if one accepts that this is a difference that needs to be captured, one should also accept that there can be a sub-class of obligations (‘derivative’ obligations) different from ‘original’ obligations. What seems to be adjudicating in favour of ruling that there is no correlative doxastic obligation for a derivatively blameworthy belief, is the principle that ought implies can (and we have no doxastic control, direct or indirect). But on a very natural reading of ought implies can, all blameworthy actions are ones where the agent could have acted otherwise. That is why we need a category of ‘derivative’ blameworthiness to explain how assigning blameworthiness can nonetheless be compatible with ought implies can. But we could make the exact same move via parity of reasoning, mutatis mutandis, with respect to obligation, and claim that the nurse in the case above has a derivative obligation to give the patient oxygen (despite the fact that she cannot) in virtue of the fact that he has an original obligation to properly equip the ambulance. Indeed, one could claim that it is the very fact that there are such derivative obligations that explain the Blame-Supervenience Principle. Thus, Alston either has a hard time explaining the Blame-Supervenience Principle, or else has to allow for a category of derivative doxastic obligation. As such, his case for the claim that there are no doxastic obligations, only duties to reflection, is inconclusive.
3. S has a duty to believe that p only if S has a duty to reflect on whether p

I now want to propose an alternative argument for Alston’s claim. Here is the ‘master’ argument.

(9) S has a duty to believe that p only if S has a duty to reflect on whether p.

(10) A duty to reflect on whether p always undercuts a duty to believe that p.

(11) There are no doxastic duties that render the holding of doxastic attitudes blameworthy, only duties to reflection.

In this section, I defend premise (9) (in the next, premise (10)). Here is my sub-argument for it:

(12) S ought to believe that p only if S ought to believe that S ought to believe that p. [Perspectival Internalism].

(13) S ought to believe that S ought to believe that p iff S ought to reflect on whether S ought to believe that p.

(14) S ought to reflect on whether S ought to believe that p iff S ought to reflect on whether p. [Transparency].

(15) S ought to believe that S ought to believe that p iff S ought to reflect on whether p. [from 13, 14].

(16) S ought to believe that p only if S should reflect on whether p.

Let me now go through premises 12, 13, 14.

(12) S ought to believe that p only if S ought to believe that S ought to believe that p.
I take premise 12 to be a commitment to ‘perspectival’ internalism, something like a commitment to the K-K thesis (see McHugh 2010 and Greco 2014 for defences of the K-K thesis, against the charge that it leads to infinite regress, for instance). ‘Perspectival’ internalism contrasts with ‘access’ internalism. Access internalism roughly says that a subject $S$ has some form of privileged access to whether or not her belief is justified than has any other subject $S'$. Perspectival internalism is the thesis that $S$ is justified in believing that $p$ only if $S$ is aware of what it is that is justifying her belief, and that it is justifying it for her (see Alston 1988). ‘Deontologism’ in epistemology is often taken to be the thesis that $S$ is justified in believing that $p$ iff $S$ is blameless in believing that $p$. I’ve argued elsewhere (Booth 2008) that Deontologism is compatible with the failure of Access but not Perspectival Internalism. I do not think a lot hinges on that here, however, since it is uncontroversial that Deontologism entails Perspectival Internalism (though controversial whether it entail Access Internalism as per Bergmann 2006). What is prima facie controversial about 12, assuming you think that there are such things as blameworthy/blameless beliefs, comes out by contrasting it to the following slightly different premise:

$(12')$ $S$ ought to believe that $p$ only if $S$ believes that $S$ ought to believe that $p$.

But I think that $12'$ is expressed in 12 by something like semantic ascent – that is, if we use something like a meta-language to describe $12'$, 12 is in effect
disambiguating that the ‘only if’ in 12’ is to be taken in a normative, and not merely descriptive, sense.

(13) S ought to believe that S ought to believe that p iff S ought to reflect on whether S ought to believe that p.

I take what is on the RHS of ‘iff’ in 13 to be analytic with what is on the LHS. The LHS of iff in 13 demands that take a second order attitude toward p that (given 12) is congruent with S’s first order doxastic attitude. Put differently, it is to demand that S has reflectively endorsed S’s belief that p (where reflective endorsement here can constitute the search for new evidence8). To demand reflective endorsement on S’s belief that p is simply to demand that S reflect on whether S ought to believe that p.

(14) S ought to reflect on whether S ought to believe that p iff S ought to reflect on whether p. [Transparency].

I take premise 14 to be an expression of a principle that has been called “transparency”. I take transparency simply to say that the question of whether to believe that p for all subjects gives way to the question of whether p (see Shah 2008). I take this then to deliberately conflate the distinction some have made between transparency and ‘exclusivity’ (McHugh 2015) and to be consistent with the idea that there can be non-epistemic reasons for belief (e.g. Leary 2017, Rinard 2017).

8 IMPORTANT: where ‘reflective on whether p’ has to culminate in an doxastic attitude. So the RHS does tacitly tell us that S has a belief. Thanks to Kevin McCain for raising this with me.
So I think it is a relatively uncontroversial principle – or at least one that has many proponents also committed to the idea that there are doxastic obligations, and blameworthy beliefs.

4. Obligations to reflect on whether \( p \) always undercut obligations to believe that \( p \).

Here is my sub-argument for the other central premise of my ‘master’ argument (premise 10):

(17) The obligation to believe can fail to be met by meeting an obligation to reflect only if the duty to believe and the duty to reflect can conflict.

(18) The duties cannot conflict.

(19) The obligation to reflect is not met by meeting the obligation to believe.

(20) The obligation to believe is always met by meeting an obligation to reflect.

[From 17, 18, 19].

(21) A duty \( D \) always undercuts another \( D^* \) iff (i) meeting \( D \) entails meeting \( D^* \) and (ii) meeting \( D^* \) does not entail meeting \( D \).

(10) The duty to reflect always undercuts the obligation to believe.

Let’s start by looking at premise 21. Here I merely stipulate what I mean when I say that one duty undercuts another. The obvious comparison to draw here is between ‘undercutting’ and ‘rebutting’ defeaters in epistemology (see Pollock 1974). ‘Rebutting defeaters’, roughly, give one reason not to believe a conclusion (which one seemed to have reason to believe) where undercutting
defeaters give one reason to doubt that the given reasons for a conclusion really do support the conclusion. The reason I think that my stipulative definition of ‘undercutting’ here is congruent how the term is used vis-à-vis ‘undercutting defeaters’ is that in my definition the duty D does not compete with D*, but rather shows how D and not D* is really doing the normative work.

The central premise that needs defending in this sub-argument, I think, is premise 18. To say that a duty to reflect and a duty to believe can conflict is to accept the logical possibility of such a scenario: that were you to reflect on whether \( p \), you would end up believing that you ought not believe that \( p \). And you ought believe that \( p \). The ought involved here is a deontic ought such that you would be blameworthy (non excused) whatever you did, reflect or believe – you would be in an epistemic dilemma.

Now, the following two principles seem intuitive and are widely endorsed, the weakest of the two almost to the point of seeming trivial.

**Epistemic Condition(strong):** \( S \) has a duty to believe that \( p \) only if \( S \) believes that \( S \) has a duty to believe that \( p \).

**Epistemic Condition(weak):** \( S \) is excused for violating a duty to believe that \( p \) only if \( S \) reasonably fails to believe that \( S \) has a duty to believe that \( p \). \(^9\)

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\(^9\) It is commonly accepted that ignorance is an excusing condition for responsibility, for discussion see (inter many alia) Van Woudenberg 2009, Smith 1983.
With these principles in mind suppose (for reductio) the relevant duties can conflict, and that S is in a situation such that if I despatches their obligation to critically reflect S would not believe that p but that S ought to believe that p. The key question to ask here I think is in such a case: could S reasonably fail to believe (in accord with Epistemic Condition(weak)) that S has an obligation to believe that p? Surely, it is almost analytic that the answer to this question is ‘yes’! S would have done all she could with respect to evidence gathering and critical reflection with respect to whether p, and would have come to the conclusion that she should not believe p. No more could reasonably be asked of her, so surely she is reasonable in failing to believe that she should believe p, and thereby excused if she fails to. Contradiction. The thought that the case is a genuine dilemma is in contradiction with the claim that S would be excused. So the duties cannot conflict in a way that would make you blameworthy (not excused) for failing to meet one if you met the other, aka premise 18.

Premise 19 is obvious, so the last premise that requires defending is premise 17: The obligation to believe can fail to be met by meeting an obligation to reflect only if the duty to believe and the duty to reflect can conflict. The most obvious way to resist this premise, it seems to me, is to appeal to the idea that perhaps the obligations have different objects: our doxastic obligations have doxastic attitudes as their object, and duties to reflection have certain kinds of action as their object (mental or otherwise). As such, it is a category mistake to expect the dispatching of an obligation to critical reflection to de facto also dispatch a doxastic obligation. However, this won’t do. This is because it is
trivial that genuine obligations cannot be too demanding, and the duty to reflect without end is surely too demanding. Thus, our duty to reflection must always ensue with S’s taking some doxastic attitude or other, even if it is suspension of judgement (see also footnote 7). Thus, there will always be a determinate doxastic attitude that it is right to have as a result of dispatching a duty of critical reflection, even though from a first personal point of view, S will not know what that is at the outset.

Objection: but what about simply stopping critical reflection and not taking any attitude at all, not even suspension of judgement?

Reply: if you just stop thinking about whether $p$, you have not properly dispatched your duty to critical reflection.

Objection: But doesn’t this mean that the duty to reflection and the duty to believe are identical?

Reply: no, as the duty to reflection is the duty to take some doxastic attitude as a result of reflection.

5. Conclusion & Why this matters

The central thing I have aimed to argue for in this paper is that once you have met your obligation towards reflection, it is impossible for you to have not met your doxastic obligation. This ultimately means that the only relevant duties towards beliefs are our duties to reflect. This is because only by reflecting you
will know both what you think you ought to believe and what you ought to believe/what you can non-culpably believe.

This matters because it enables us (deontologists) to evade Alston’s epistemic poverty objection. Philosophers working on epistemic duties have up to now focussed on Alston’s apposite points about doxastic voluntarism, but have not really paid enough attention to the fact that for Alston the points about doxastic voluntarism are just a step towards arguing for the claim that epistemic deontologists to have to cash out epistemic justification in terms of blamelessness and to accept that there are no doxastic obligations. And one can be blameless and be in a poor position vis-à-vis our epistemic ends, claims Alston. And it is this that for him sounds the death knell for the deontological conception. But, surely, are we not always in a better situation with respect to our epistemic ends after we have critically reflected and collected more evidence, than where we have not done so?

References.


----------. “Belief, Control and Intentionality” *Synthese* 188(2) pp. 145 – 163.