

Epistemic Accountability and Attributionism

This paper argues that interpreting epistemic deontology in terms of attributionism about responsibility allows us to make sense of epistemic accountability without having to accept doxastic voluntarism.

Epistemic deontology (ED) is roughly the view that epistemic practices are subject to deontological concepts such as blame, responsibility, or ought. A famous line of criticism against epistemic deontology is to point out that deontological concepts apply only when we have direct voluntary control, and beliefs are not under direct voluntary control (Alston 1988, 2005). The supporters of epistemic deontology have pursued roughly two different routes in answering the critique. First is to deny that beliefs are not under direct voluntary control, in other words, to endorse doxastic voluntarism (DV) (Steup 2000, 2001). The view has been widely criticized for misconstruing the role that will and choice play in forming beliefs, and many find the second line of argument more convincing. That is to deny that ought implies can in epistemic context (Feldman 2001, Kornblith 2001, Chrisman 2008).

The main insight within the No-Ought-Implies-Can strategy (hence on NOIC) is that in epistemic context 'ought' refers to standards of evaluation. This isn't a sufficient solution to the problem, however, because it's uncontroversial that standards of evaluation don't presuppose agency or voluntary control. Therefore it is open to both supporters of doxastic voluntarism and critics of epistemic deontology to concede that NOIC is right in epistemic context, while arguing that it still doesn't earn the right to use other deontological concepts such as duty, blame, or responsibility. They can then continue to hold their positions with respect to these concepts and the possibility of voluntary control.

Kauppinen (forthcoming) suggests a way to identify epistemic norms by the distinctive way that it's appropriate to hold others accountable for complying with or breaking them, which is by reducing epistemic trust. Kauppinen maintains that his analysis provides further support for NOIC. While I agree with his view of epistemic accountability, I claim that the view still leaves open the question of when exactly it's appropriate to hold others epistemically accountable, i.e. when someone is or isn't epistemically innocent. The competing interpretations come from two broad lines of reasoning about moral responsibility. The more traditional voluntarist account of moral responsibility holds, roughly, that one is morally responsible only for those acts or omissions that one has voluntary control over. This has been recently contested by a number of authors that hold a broadly attributionist view of moral responsibility (e.g. Arpaly 2003, Sher 2009, Smith 2008, 2015). The view is, roughly, that voluntarism offers a too limited view about responsibility, and that in reality we hold others accountable also for those acts and omissions that can in some way be attributed to the agent, or that somehow reflect who she is as a person. This includes character traits such as one's profound selfishness, which the agent may have only limited control over. The debate around attributionism is hot in the sphere of moral responsibility, but I argue that when applied to the question of epistemic accountability, it succeeds in accommodating the conflicting intuitions concerning deontological concepts.

To see this, I start by offering an account of epistemic innocence. When an individual mistaken belief has been acquired from a source the agent has all the reasons to trust, the agent is epistemically innocent. This is so insofar as there was nothing wrong with the epistemic practices of the agent, but she was merely unlucky to be confronted with mistaken information. Put differently: an agent is

epistemically innocent when the mistaken belief doesn't reflect her epistemic practices. By contrast, an agent is epistemically accountable when the mistake originates in her own epistemic system, and is the result of (and consistent with) her epistemic practices. For instance, if the agent is presented with evidence that contradicts her mistaken belief, whether or not her belief therefore changes to match the evidence allows us to assess the quality of her epistemic practices and thereby epistemic accountability.

Behavioral patterns and dispositions, unlike isolated actions, reveal something about one's personality. Parallel to a Strawsonian idea of moral responsibility that identifies moral responsibility with the quality of one's will (Strawson 1962), in epistemic context we can substitute the will with epistemic patterns and practices. In moral context the will serves to generate individual actions, and therefore it's the will we look to in responsibility attributions. In epistemic context, it's the patterns of reasoning, handling evidence, and forming beliefs that we look to when assessing epistemic accountability. (This is broadly consistent with Hieronymi (2008) and McHugh (2011), but McHugh seems to view his account as a descendant of NOIC, because he lacks a conception that links accountability with traits, patterns and practices, rather than individual epistemic actions.) With the help of attributionism we earn the right to use deontological concepts in epistemic context without having to accept doxastic voluntarism, but not being limited to standards of evaluation as with NOIC.

One reason for the appeal of doxastic voluntarism is that epistemic and moral norms sometimes get entangled. Consider someone with a cognitive disability that results in consistently faulty judgments in some given domain. We are justified in reducing our epistemic trust in her judgments on that domain, but there is no reason to think that she is a worse person for her disability. By contrast, when an agent displaying a pattern of consistently faulty judgments cannot be exculpated in such a way, our assessment of the agent's character may contain an element of moral reproach, too. This is what proponents of doxastic voluntarism get right: we lack control over individual beliefs, but we do have some control over our belief-forming habits. While this indirect control over our beliefs is not enough to support doxastic voluntarism, the more direct control over epistemic practices is subject to character assessment, which sometimes takes the form of moral assessment.