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THE CONCEPT OF EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION

APSTRAKT: Predmet ovog rada je epistemičko opravdanje, tačnije teza da pojam epistemičkog opravdanja u sebi obuhvata dva različita pojma: to su deontološko opravdanje i redeontološko opravdanje, koja zajedno učestvuju u punom objašnjenju šta je nužno da bismo sebi ili drugima pripisali znanje. Ova dva pojma opravdanja se primenjuju na verovanja različite vrste. Redeontološko opravdanje se primjenjuje na verovanja prvog rede, dok se deontološko opravdanje primjenjuje na verovanja drugog rede, to jest metaverovanja. Naravno sa eksterne tače gledišta iako subjekat, S, ne mora da ima nikakva metaverovanja koja bi bila predmet deontološkog opravdanja, ipak kada god S tvrdi da zna nešto, ona pored posedovanja verovanja prvog rede izražava i metaverovanje koje je predmet deontološkog opravdanja. Stoga, pripisivanje znanja sebi ili drugima je uvek povezano sa metaverovanjima i time sa deontološkim opravdanjem. Ako je ova teza odbranjiva, onda bi ona imala uspeh u pogledu objašnjenja i pomirenja eksteralističkih i internalističkih intuitija u pogledu znanja i epistemičkog opravdanja.

KLIJUN Ć REC: epistemičko opravdanje, deontološko opravdanje, redeontološko opravdanje, verovanja prvog rede, metaverovanja.

1.

The notion of epistemic justification plays a central role in evaluating beliefs. Since epistemic justification is an evaluative concept, it must be normative in character. There is a difference, however, between the evaluation of one’s own beliefs and that of the beliefs of others. There are, so to speak, two perspectives we can take, external and internal, and there is the question whether the external perspective with respect to justification is sufficient for knowledge.

At this point intuitions with respect to the problem of justification start to diverge. More specifically, the intuitions I have in mind that clash are internalist and externalist, respectively, and also intuitions about deontological and non-deontological concepts of epistemic justification. The deontological notion of epistemic justification is typically internalist, whereas the non-deontological notion of epistemic justification can be either internalist or externalist.

The thesis of this paper is that there are two distinct notions of epistemic justification, namely, deontological and non-deontological, which are complementary, rather than mutually exclusive. These two notions operate on different levels of
belief. Non-deontological justification applies to first-order beliefs, while the deontological notion applies to our second-order beliefs, i.e., it applies to our meta-beliefs. One advantage of this proposal consists in its explanatory power with respect to the clash between externalist and internalist intuitions. It seems that these intuitions can be reconciled in one complex notion of epistemic justification the ingredients of which are jointly sufficient for knowledge.

The deontological notion of epistemic justification, as it applies to acts (\(J_{de}\) below) and to objects (\(J^o_{de}\) below), can be defined as follows:

\[(J_{de}) \text{ X's belief that P is justified}_{de} \text{ iff X does not violate any epistemic duties in believing that P,}\]

\[(J^o_{de}) \text{ Proposition P is justified}_{de} \text{ for X iff X could believe that P without violating any epistemic duties, where the notion of epistemic duty can be spelled out in terms of epistemic responsibility, which demands that one refrains from believing anything that she cannot rationally persuade herself and other members of the epistemic community to believe.}\]

However, although the deontological notion of epistemic justification is attractive because it appeals to those internal features of the epistemic agent that we intuitively think are necessary for knowledge, and in virtue of which we call her epistemically responsible, it has a problematic commitment to belief voluntarism. This is a problem because at least some, if not most of our beliefs are involuntary. Since we want the concept of epistemic justification to be universally applicable to all beliefs, if some of them or most of them are not subject to the type of justification that seems intuitively plausible, we might want to look for another type of justification which is appropriate for the class of beliefs in question. For if acquiring beliefs is not up to us, how we could be held epistemically responsible and hence blame- or praiseworthy for the beliefs that are not in our voluntary control?

Another worry is that deontological justification fails to capture the close relationship between epistemic justification and what is good from the epistemic point of view. Indeed, epistemic evaluations seem to be conducted relative to our epistemic goal, which can be spelled out in terms of achieving truth. The worry about the deontological notion of justification is that it severed the connection between epistemic justification and truth; in another words, the complaint is that the deontological notion of justification fails to capture the close relationship between justification and truth. The worry that underwrites this charge is that an epistemically responsible subject might do her best and never violate any intellectual (epistemic) duty and still fail to be even close to her epistemic goal; indeed, she can be completely off the track.

These intuitions are mainly responsible for the appeal of the non-deontological notion of epistemic justification. The non-deontological notion of epistemic justifi-
cation, as it applies to acts ($J^{a}_{nde}$ below) and to objects ($J^{0}_{nde}$ below), can be defined as follows:

($J^{a}_{nde}$) X's belief that P is justified iff believing that P is the product of the reliable cognitive process.

($J^{0}_{nde}$) Proposition P is justified for X iff S could believe it and be justified$^{a}_{nde}$ in doing so.

However, what the proponents of non-deontological notion of justification fail to notice is that $J_{de}$ and $J_{nde}$ are supposed to do different evaluative work. The universal character of epistemic justification must not be confused with the requirement that a single justification apply to all kinds of beliefs. Beliefs are not a single species. We can distinguish between two kinds of belief, namely, first-order beliefs and second-order beliefs, or meta-beliefs. Given that first order beliefs are not voluntary, the deontological notion of justification is indeed inapplicable to them. We do need a non-deontological notion of justification for first order beliefs. However, proponents of the non-deontological notion of epistemic justification illegitimately extend this notion of epistemic justification to our meta-beliefs, which are, prima facie, voluntary. So, when we ask what we are to believe, when we take a reflective stand towards our first order beliefs, the deontological notion seems to be fully appropriate and desirable. For if we extended the non-deontological notion of epistemic justification to meta-beliefs, we would get the implausible result that some beliefs that are de facto justified (from the external point of view), and which are not acquired in accordance with the standard procedure that epistemic rationality dictates (which is taking a reflective stand), are eo ipso justified in a sense sufficient for knowledge.

How does this shed the light on what underlies the complaint that the deontological notion of epistemic justification severs the connection between epistemic justification and truth? This complaint arises if we mistakenly think that the deontological notion of justification applies to first-order beliefs. Deontological justification applies only to our meta-beliefs, which are the beliefs about our first-order beliefs. Our first-order beliefs fall under non-deontological justification.

My proposal with respect to the problem of the non-truth-conduciveness of deontological justification is that it is not necessary for deontological justification to be truth-conducive. Deontological justification is not even, so to speak, in the business of truth-conduciveness. A diagnosis of what underlies the mistaken requirement that deontological justification be truth-conducive is that the requirement is a consequence of confusion concerning what deontological justification is supposed to do. That is, we apply the requirements for the justification of first-order beliefs to the justification of second-order beliefs. The notion of epistemic justification, however, is a complex, structured notion. Each ingredient in its structure has its specific assignment.
The foregoing discussion gives a reason to think that since the two concepts of
the justification are closely related, and since we apply the non-deontological justifi-
cation to the first-order beliefs and the meta-beliefs are about them and accompany
them whenever we are in the business of knowledge, i.e., whenever we make
knowledge claims, the notion of deontological justification involves truth-
conduciveness by preserving the link to the first-order beliefs and the justification
we have for them, but it is not in itself truth-conducive. Deontological justification
inherits truth-conduciveness from non-deontological justification. It turns out, then,
that the deontological/non-deontological dilemma about justification is in fact a
pseudo-dilemma, since each side of the dilemma stresses an aspect of justification
that has a role in a full account of the structured concept of justification. The
epistemic justification turns out to be a complex notion encompassing both deonto-
logical and non-deontological components.

There remain two further questions that need to be addressed in order to establish
what is needed for the possibility of a belief's being a subject of a deontological
notion of epistemic justification.

First, there is the question whether we can make a sharp distinction between
first-order beliefs as involuntary and second-order beliefs as voluntary.

Second, are second-order beliefs, or meta-beliefs, truly involuntary, or voluntary
in an epistemically relevant sense?

2.

First-order beliefs, which can be also thought of as spontaneous beliefs, are
indeed not voluntary. We are assailed by certain beliefs. So, for example, when I
see a bird flying in front of me, I form a belief that there is a bird in front of me,
and if the belief is the product of reliable cognitive process, I am non-deontologically
justified in believing so. But this intuitively does not seem to be enough. Something
is missing. It seems plausible to think that we engage in a process of deliberation
whether we should believe something or not—in other words, we are not bare
cognitive mechanisms that merely register inputs from our environment. On the
contrary, we are reflective beings who have the capacity to wonder whether our
spontaneous beliefs are justified. That is, I can ask whether I am justified in believing
that there is a bird. I think that it is intuitively plausible to think that we in fact
frequently engage in such a reflective process through which we form meta-beliefs
about our first-order beliefs. Suppose that I form the meta-belief to the effect that
my belief that there is a bird is justified. It seems that even if my meta-belief is the
product of reliable cognitive process, it is not justified in the epistemically relevant
sense if I have no reasons (or no adequate reasons) to support it. Now, there are
many different reasons I can offer to support my belief. That means that there is a
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choice to be made about what I count as evidence. Clearly, the voluntary element of meta-beliefs consist in this choice of what I count as evidence with respect to which I can be held praise- or blameworthy. Engaging in a process of deliberation or reflection, which amounts to forming meta-beliefs, is sufficient for their being voluntary. For to have a meta-belief I have to think about the evidence and to make a choice with respect to it.

Justification for first-order beliefs depends on external factors, but that is not enough. To illustrate this let us suppose that I am blind but have bird-detecting clairvoyant power. My belief that there is a bird in front of me can be non-deontologically justified just by virtue of its being the product of a reliable cognitive process. So, my belief could be justified without my having the faintest idea how I came to have it, or without being able to give any reason for it. That being de facto or non-deontologically justified, or justified merely in an externalist fashion, does not exhaust the notion of epistemic justification that is required for knowledge could be seen more clearly if we add more detail to the example.

Suppose that I am blind and am visiting the area I was told had no birds around in the diameter of 300 km. Relying on my bird-detecting clairvoyant power, I form a belief that there is a bird nearby. I can’t help it, the belief just pops into my head. It is, in fact, justified, since the story that there were no birds around was a hoax created by people who wanted me to demonstrate my bird-detecting clairvoyant power, which is, in fact, reliable. But knowing that people told me that there were no birds around, and given that the story they told was a good one, I would be epistemically irrational, or irresponsible in maintaining the meta-belief, i.e., in maintaining the belief that my belief that there is a bird is justified.

So, the belief about the bird pops into my head, and I believe involuntarily that there is a bird. However, I engage in the process of deliberation and reflection and decide not to assent to that belief, for there is counterevidence for it. That means that there is a series of conflicting evidence, E₁, E₂...Eₙ, and I need to make a choice about what counts as sufficient evidence for my belief. Given the principle that I ought not to believe anything that I cannot believe without violating any epistemic duties, it follows that I ought not to believe that there is a bird, since I cannot do so and still be epistemically responsible.

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that the criterion that can serve to demarcate between the first-order, involuntary, beliefs and the second-order, voluntary, beliefs, should involve deliberation or reflection. We engage in deliberation and reflection when we are making a choice concerning what to count as sufficient evidence.

The distinction between the first-order, involuntary, beliefs, and the second-order, voluntary, beliefs is underwritten by the distinction between two sources of belief. One source is experience, in which we are assailed by beliefs. Another important source of belief is reflection concerning our first-order beliefs. Further, it is our
epistemic duty to engage in deliberation—in other words, if I am to be an epistemically responsible member of the epistemic community, I ought to engage in deliberation. So, if I am just stubborn or lazy, and I form a meta-belief in a lazy fashion, or without sufficient reflection, it is still a voluntary belief. I am still making a choice, namely the choice to rest content with my first-order belief; hence I am blameworthy for doing so.

An example of involuntary belief would be clairvoyant beliefs, but not only that, but also belief that we say we know with ‘certainty’, such as that I have two hands, or that there is a trolleybus in front of me at the moment when I think that it is in front of me, and maybe even Descartes’ clear and distinct ideas the content of which one cannot but believe, according to Descartes.

Voluntary beliefs, however, are not a single species. There are pragmatic voluntary beliefs, heuristic voluntary beliefs, etc. The class of voluntary beliefs to which deontological notion justification applies is a subclass of voluntary beliefs, the set of voluntary beliefs about the justificatory status of our first-order beliefs. Those are reflective beliefs, such as ‘My belief that there is a bird is justified’. They are voluntary in at least a minimal sense. That is, they are the consequence of the deliberation or inquiry I have undertaken, and the procedure I am following is a matter of choice, since I can come to a reflective belief in many different ways. Also, the voluntariness of this type of belief is evidenced by the role that these beliefs typically play in our epistemic practice, namely, to enable us to resist the natural inclination of our mind, which tempts us to believe that the world is as it appears to our senses, and to rise to our epistemic duty.

The answer to the second question, namely, whether meta-beliefs are truly voluntary, depends partly on the answer to the first question, that is, where we mark the cut-off between the first-order, involuntary, beliefs and the second-order, voluntary, beliefs. However, there remains the question whether these meta-beliefs are genuinely voluntary, or voluntary in a strong enough sense to be subject of the deontological notion of epistemic justification. My answer to this question is “yes”. This is because whenever we engage in deliberation, reflection, and inquiry, we are free to choose a certain path in establishing the belief. So, we are able to resist the inertia of first-order belief and to conduct our beliefs in a way that is determined by reflection. This is sufficient for being the subject of deontological justification.

3.

Let us now apply the results of the forgoing discussion to three different cases of belief, to which we can apply epistemic justification.

1. X believes that P.
2. X believes X’s is justified in believing that P.
3. X believes X knows that P.

In (1), the notion of justification that applies is non-deontological justification, for (1) might be the case of involuntary belief. However, in (2), the notion of epistemic justification that applies is the deontological notion. Since the first order belief is the content of the meta-belief, (2) involves non-deontological justification too, and the same holds for (3). However, (1), (2), and (3) are not disconnected. The connection between them corresponds to the link between the non-deontological and the deontological notion of justification. Indeed, I think that it is intuitively plausible to think that whenever we form a belief, we have the ability to form a meta-belief. Take an analogy with a desire. Whenever we have a desire, we have the ability to engage in judging whether we should pursue it or not. Our desires can be, so to say, accompanied by meta-desires. The same holds for beliefs. Even if we do not engage in such an activity we are still blameworthy for doing so. Similarly, if we do not engage in reflection, we are accountable for not doing so.

We can construct parallel cases for knowledge claims in a following way:

(1’) X knows that P.
(2’) X knows that X is justified in believing that P.
(3’) X knows that X knows that P.

In (1’) we have a case of non-deontological justification, or at least it looks like that at first sight, since

(K) X knows that P iff
iv. P is true
v. X believes that P
vi. X is justified in believing that P.

Since (ii) is a case of first-order belief, in (iii) we have non-deontological justification, hence one might think that only the non-deontological justification is present in (1’). However, if I am right, having a first-order belief is accompanied with meta-belief if we rise to our epistemic duty. But let us leave this aside for a moment and look at (2’) and (3’).

In the case (2’), we have, clearly, both deontological and non-deontological justification. For X knows that X is justified in believing that P just in case

vii. ’X is justified_{nde} in believing that P’ is true
viii. X believes that X is justified_{nde} in believing that P
ix. X’s belief is justified_{de}. 

Since (ii) is a case of meta-belief, clearly, in (iii), we will have deontological justification. If that belief, i.e., (ii), is justified_{nde}, we get (3') or the case of meta-knowledge. Meta-knowledge involves both deontological and non-deontological justification.

There remains the question whether it is plausible to think that in (1') we have the deontological notion of justification, which is equivalent to the question whether there is a meta-belief involved in (1') to which we apply this justification. I think that from what has been said before it is clear that my answer is 'yes'. There are two related points, though, worthy of being pointed out.

First, for S to know that P, it is not necessary that S believes that P, and hence it is not necessary that she has any meta-beliefs subject to deontological justification.

However, whenever someone claims that she knows something, she thereby expresses a meta-belief; so, knowledge claims are always associated with such meta-beliefs and such deontological justification.

One cannot but notice that whenever we do epistemology, we tend to ignore cases where a subject does not have any meta-beliefs, for, of course, we instinctively imagine the subject of the example being challenged as to whether she knows something, and then we imagine her making a knowledge claim and thereby ascending to the meta-level.

It seems perfectly plausible then to argue that the two ingredients, namely, deontological and non-deontological justification, are united in the single notion of epistemic justification. For whenever we are in the business of knowing we are in the business of reflection. As I said earlier, a distinctive feature of meta-beliefs is that they are reflective, and subject to deontological justification. That leads us to the conclusion that deontological and non-deontological justification are applicable (1'), since first-order knowledge claims mirror a reflective stand which we take with respect to the first-order belief we have, or, in another words, they mirror our possession of the meta-beliefs, which are the subject of deontological justification.

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(Summary)

The thesis of this paper is that there are two distinct notions of epistemic justification, namely, deontological and non-deontological justification that work together in a full account of epistemic justification that is necessary for knowledge. These two notions apply to different beliefs. The non-deontological justification applies to first-order beliefs, while the deontological justification applies to second-order beliefs (metabeliefs). From the external perspective, although a subject, S, needs not to have any metabeliefs that are the subject of the deontological justification in order to be said to know something, yet whenever S claims that she knows something, she thereby expresses a meta-belief that is subject to deontological justification. Thus, knowledge claims that one ascribes to oneself or to others are always associated with such metabeliefs and hence with the deontological justification. If successful, this proposal would have explanatory power with respect to the clash between externalist and internalist intuitions in epistemology. It seems that these intuitions have its place and can be reconciled in one complex notion of epistemic justification.

KEY WORDS: epistemic justification, deontological justification, nondeontological justification, first-order beliefs, metabeliefs.