Interventions/Discussions

Does Epistemic "Ought" Imply "Can"?

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Given that there is no psychological difference between consciously according belief to a proposition and mentally imputing truth to it, the doxastic result is the same as if, having identified some propositions as truths you then proceeded, with complete success, to give credence just to those. On the other hand, no one ever is prompted to believe a proposition in view of considering it true, since, if one considers a proposition true, one is conscious of *already* believing it. And so, although no one ever does quite literally accord belief to a proposition as a means of believing that which is true on the question which it answers, truth is indeed believing's inner telos or aim in a looser sense: believing the proposition, according to the believer, is the way to believe what is true on that question.

Whenever it comes to taking means to believe what is true, and not false, on some question, there is a right way of proceeding and a wrong way; and, as in other instrumental proceedings, to make a *mistake* is to do something *wrong* (even if it does chance to result in the aimed-at outcome). This is how the deontological language of *right*, *wrong,* and *ought* comes to be used in epistemological evaluation. A *mistaken* belief (even when it happens to be true) is *wrong* epistemically and *ought not* to be held in the circumstances.

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And yet, given that "ought" implies "can," it must be possible to *help* believing whatever *ought not* to be believed. But *can* a mistake always be helped?

Alvin Plantinga colourfully writes:

> Suppose I develop a rare sort of brain lesion that causes me to believe that I will be the next president of the United States. I have no evidence for the proposition, never having won or even run for public office. …
>
> Nevertheless, due to my cognitive dysfunction, the belief that I will be the next president seems to me obviously true. … Now: am I so situated that I can better fulfill my obligation to the truth by withholding than by accepting this proposition?[1]

Hitler, we say, *ought* to have ordered a speedy retreat from Stalingrad so as to avoid encirclement. People who will readily agree that this *ought* expresses an instrumental requirement and not a requirement of righteousness will often still insist that the word "can," at any rate, is univocal. So they either oppose the invoking of any epistemic "ought" or else deny that it does necessarily imply "can." But Hitler really *could* have ordered a speedy retreat from Stalingrad, after all; it is only thanks to his having had that possibility that his failure to order a retreat was a *mistake* on his part. ("Hitler *could* have ordered a retreat." That is, no *impediment* prevented him from doing that; only stubbornness did.) The case is similar, then, when believing something is a *mistake* epistemically (even if the proposition believed should chance to be true).

An epistemic *ought*, presumably, specifies a condition requisite for any belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgment to be in order epistemically. It identifies, if "rationalism" is right, a necessary condition for not being *irrational*. ("Rationalism," let us say, is the epistemological position which opposes giving any more or any less credence to a proposition than reason dictates.)[2]

No one will consider a belief (rationally) unjustified merely because the believer failed to take into account evidence beyond what was available — beyond what would have been brought to light by an inquiry conducted with as much diligence as the importance of the question under investigation demanded. That does look like an example of the "*Ought* implies *can*" maxim's applicability.

But consider "invincible ignorance" due to ingrained prejudice, or failure to detect the fallacy in some argument due to limited intelligence. Surely the latter does not in itself count against a believer's moral innocence; and neither should the former, at any rate in cases where what makes the prejudice in question so ingrained has nothing to do with unworthy motives on a believer's part (such unworthy motives, e.g., as the selfish emotional gratification of being able to consider oneself entitled to the benefits attaching to membership in a superior race or gender). In the absence of any unworthy motives, to excuse *such* innocent irrational beliefs morally on the grounds that the believers "can't help"

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thinking as they do seems quite consistent with continuing to call those beliefs, in the existing circumstances, epistemically unjustified (erring, not in order).

Arguably, though, the universality of the "*Ought* implies *can*" maxim's scope is still defensible after all. When it comes to morally assessing individuals and their acts of commission and omission, surely all that matters is their exhibiting or not a good will and character. And so, that "inability to act differently" which is morally exculpatory will have been present just in those cases where in the existing circumstances it is false that the individual would have acted any better even given the best possible will in the world[3]. But you *cannot*, though, escape moral responsibility for uncaring inhumanity simply by having no conscientious objection to it personally. A corrupt conscience ethically committed, however sincerely, to evil ultimate principles will not excuse its possessor since it cannot, obviously, count as exemplifying the best possible will in the world; but misinformation that would be unavoidable even given such a will *can* suffice to excuse any resulting behaviour.

In the end, then, what moral duty requires is neither more nor less than that we be fully committed to right ethical first principles, whatever those are. Can we not say, similarly, something like the following? For its part, all *reason* demands of us is that we be fully rational, so that we are rationally *unjustified* in believing or failing to believe a proposition only if it is false that we "couldn't help" in just *this* sense opining the way we do: viz., only if it is true that we *would* think differently were we fully rational; that is, if our thinking were fully in accordance with whatever the correct first principles of right reason are.

When it comes to first principles and the "strict liability" attached to respect for them, just as ignorance of the moral law is no excuse, so neither is ignorance of the law of reason. So far as concerns the basics, an erring conscience is *not* innocent, and honest unreason is not *epistemically* faultless.

Suppose, then, that lack of intelligence causes one innocently to overlook some fallacy or to draw a conclusion on the basis of too little evidence. Even so, if one's thinking were fully rational, one *wouldn't* be thinking like that; and accordingly it is not true, in the relevant sense, that one "couldn't help" thinking like that. So the resulting belief can indeed count here as *unjustified* epistemically.

At that rate, when it is suitably interpreted, the universal applicability of "*Ought* implies *can*" can indeed remain unrestricted.

Notes

1 Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 44.

2 See D. Goldstick, "Cognitive Reason," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52, no. 1 (March 1992): 121–2. In that article I argue that our "reason" should be understood in this connection as the ensemble of our reliable *natural* doxastic dispositions. At that rate, *rationalism* will be the logically contingent

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thesis that no available alternative way of fixing belief is ever going to be as good at giving us true, and not false, beliefs.

3 See D. Goldstick, "Immorality with a Clear Conscience," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (July 1980): 248.

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