

‘Ought’ implies ‘can’ against epistemic deontologism: beyond doxastic involuntarism

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Abstract: According to epistemic deontologism, attributions of epistemic justification are deontic claims about what we ought to believe. One of the most prominent objections to this conception, due mainly to William P. Alston (1988), is that the principle that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ (OIC) rules out deontologism because our beliefs are not under our voluntary control. In this paper, I offer a partial defense of Alston’s critique of deontologism. While Alston is right that OIC rules out epistemic deontologism, appealing to doxastic involuntarism is not necessary for generating that tension. Deontologists would still have a problem with OIC if doxastic voluntarism turned out to be true or if deontologism did not require voluntarism. This is because, in short, epistemic justification does not imply ‘can’. If, as deontologists maintain, epistemic justification implies ‘oughts’, then epistemic justification must also imply ‘can’ given OIC. But since epistemic justification does not imply ‘can’, OIC dictates that we reject deontologism. I end by exploring the possible consequences of this incompatibility between OIC and deontologism. My conclusion is that at least one of the following claims must be true. Either (i) ‘ought’ does not imply ‘can’, (ii) attributions of epistemic justification are not deontic claims, or (iii) epistemic claims lack necessary or categorical normative authority.

Keywords: Epistemic deontologism, epistemology, ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, epistemic justification, doxastic involuntarism, epistemic normativity, epistemic norms

1. Epistemic deontologism and William P. Alston’s critique

According to *deontologism* about epistemic justification (*epistemic deontologism* or ‘ED’ for short) attributions of epistemic justification are *deontic* claims about what we ought, may, or ought not to believe, epistemically speaking.¹ More precisely, epistemic deontologists hold the following conception of epistemic justification:

ED If the belief that P is epistemically justified for an agent S, then S *ought* to, or at least *may* believe that P, epistemically speaking. And if the belief that P is epistemically unjustified for S, then S *ought not* to believe that P, epistemically speaking.²

¹ As opposed to non-epistemically (i.e. ‘morally’, ‘prudentially’, ‘aesthetically’, ‘legally’, and the like). Although I only mention belief, I take these epistemic ‘oughts’ to govern disbelief and withholding or suspension of belief as well. Another thing worth clarifying is that while ED is a thesis about both *propositional* and *doxastic* epistemic justification I will mainly focus on propositional justification. Therefore, unless specified otherwise, I use ‘epistemic justification’ to refer only to propositional justification. I return to this distinction below.

² Where ‘ought’ is a *deontic* ‘ought’ or an ‘ought to do’ and not an *evaluative* ‘ought’ or ‘ought to be’. I also assume that according to ED, epistemic ‘oughts’ are categorically or necessarily normative – much like e.g. moral ‘oughts’ – and not ‘oughts’ that lack necessary normative authority like those provided by etiquette or the law. Finally, for simplicity, I will restrict my focus to *synchronic* epistemic justification and ‘oughts’ in what follows. I return to these distinctions below.

To say that S has epistemic justification to believe that P, according to ED, is to say that S has the epistemic *obligation*, or at least the epistemic *permission*, to believe that P.³ Similarly, to say that the belief that P is epistemically unjustified for S is to say that she is epistemically *forbidden* or *prohibited* to believe that P.⁴

One of the most prominent critiques of deontologism is due to William P. Alston (1988). According to Alston, we should reject ED because it is incompatible with the well-known principle that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ (‘OIC’ for short). I will refer to this general claim as the ‘OIC rules out ED’ thesis:

OIC rules out ED OIC is incompatible with ED. If ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, then epistemic deontologism is false.

The precise formulation of OIC is, of course, a contentious matter to which I will return below. But for now, the following characterization will suffice:

OIC If S ought to ϕ , then S can ϕ . And if S ought not to ϕ , then S can avoid ϕ -ing.⁵

That is, deontic claims like attributions of ‘oughts’, obligations, permissions, and prohibitions to someone cannot be true unless that agent can, in the relevant sense, do what the deontic claim requires of her.

Why does OIC rule out ED according to Alston? Because, in short, *doxastic involuntarism* is true. We do not, at least typically, have *voluntary control* over our beliefs. Alston introduces his argument as follows:

[T]his conception of epistemic justification is viable only if beliefs are sufficiently under voluntary control to render such concepts as requirement, permission, obligation, reproach, and blame applicable to them. By the time honoured principle that “Ought implies can”, one can be obliged to do A only if one has an effective choice as to whether to do A. It is equally obvious that it makes no sense to speak of S’s being permitted or forbidden to do A if S lacks an effective choice as to whether to do A. [...] Therefore the most fundamental

³ Note that many philosophers, including Alston, take the deontological to include *hypological* notions like blameworthiness, praiseworthiness, and responsibility. However, this conflation is controversial. Many think that claims can be deontic without being hypological. That is, it is common to make a distinction between what we ought and ought not to do and what we would be blameless or blameworthy for doing. See e.g. Zimmerman (2002), Srinivasan (2015), and Littlejohn (Forthcoming) for discussion. My target in this paper will only be the claim that epistemic justification is deontic, not that it is also hypological.

⁴ Some have argued that although there are epistemic permissions and prohibitions, there are no such things as positive epistemic obligations or duties. That is, although there are things we *may* believe and things we *ought not* to believe, there are no propositions that we epistemically ought to believe. See for instance Wrenn (2007), Nelson (2010), and Littlejohn (2012a). If this is right, then epistemic deontologism only entails that attributions of epistemic justification are deontic claims about what we are epistemically permitted or forbidden to believe. What I say in this paper is entirely compatible with this possibility. For one thing, it is plausible that ‘may’ also implies ‘can’ if OIC is true. For another, OIC clearly applies to prohibitions or ‘ought nots’ and my argument below could be put exclusively in terms of what is epistemically *unjustified* for agents to believe.

⁵ For explicit defenses of OIC, see e.g. Zimmerman (1996), Haji (2002), Streumer (2003), Vranas (2007), and Littlejohn (2012b).

issue raised by [epistemic deontologism] is as to whether belief is under voluntary control. Only if it is can the question arise as to whether the epistemic justification of beliefs can be construed deontologically. (Alston 1988, 259)

But since we do not typically have voluntary control over our beliefs, OIC dictates that we reject the deontological conception of epistemic justification.⁶ This argument for ‘OIC rules out ED’ can be summarized schematically as follows:

Alston’s involuntarism argument

1. **Deontology-voluntariness:** Given OIC, epistemic deontologism is true only if we typically have voluntary control over our beliefs.
2. **Doxastic involuntarism:** Our beliefs are not (or at least not typically) under our voluntary control.
3. Therefore, **OIC rules out ED.**

Although it has been widely discussed, the involuntariness argument has rarely been defended.⁷ Discussions of Alston’s argument have mainly been about how to best reject it. While some have argued that we do, in fact, have voluntary control over our beliefs⁸, others have rejected Alston’s Deontology-voluntariness premise. For them, epistemic deontologism does not actually require that our beliefs be under our voluntary control.⁹

My aim in what follows won’t be to adjudicate this debate between Alston and his critics. Instead, I will set aside the involuntarism argument and turn my attention to Alston’s more general ‘OIC rules out ED’ thesis. I would like to argue that regardless of doxastic involuntarism and deontology-voluntariness, there is a *different* argument in favor of ‘OIC rules out ED’, which does not require Alston’s controversial premises. Even if it turned out that doxastic voluntarism is true

⁶ It is worth pointing out that towards the end of his article, Alston (1988, 277-294) considers and rejects an alternative version of deontologism, which is not vulnerable to his involuntarism argument. Although we typically lack voluntary control over our beliefs, Alston recognizes that we can still exert *indirect influence* over what we end up believing. That is, we still have voluntary control over things like the quantity and quality of epistemic reasons we end up having and the quality of our belief-forming habits and tendencies. This opens the door to an alternative form of deontologism that construes epistemic justification not directly in terms of obligations or permissions to believe, but rather in terms of what Alston calls ‘intellectual obligations’, i.e. obligations to act so as to end up believing the truth and not what is false. On such a conception, very roughly, S is justified in believing that P if and only if S’s belief is not the result S’s violating her intellectual obligations. Call this alternative form of epistemic deontologism ED*. Alston also rejects ED*, but not because of OIC. For more on this and on how to understand deontologism, see Vahid (1998), Nottelmann (2013), and Peels (2017). As I explain below, my aim in this paper will be to defend the ‘OIC rules out ED’ thesis, where ED is the conception of epistemic justification in terms of *doxastic* obligations, permissions, and prohibitions (not in terms of intellectual obligations). So, my target will only be ED, not ED*. Since the latter focuses on intellectual obligations instead of doxastic obligations, it falls outside the scope of the argument I offer in this article. I return to this issue below.

⁷ One notable exception is Levy (2007).

⁸ For instance, Steup (2000), (2008), Ginet (2001), and Weatherston (2008).

⁹ See for instance, Heller (2000), Feldman (2001), Adler (2002), Leon (2002), Ryan (2003), Smith (2005), Chuard and Southwood (2009), McHugh (2012), and Peels (2017).

or that deontology does not require voluntarism, OIC would still rule out ED because there is an independent argument for that conclusion.

That argument, in a nutshell, is that OIC rules out ED because *epistemic justification does not imply 'can'*. If deontic claims imply 'can' and if epistemic justification attributions are deontic claims, then epistemic justification attributions must imply 'can' as well. Given OIC, in other words, ED can only be true if the following is also true:

EOIC If the belief that P is epistemically justified for S, then S can believe that P.
 And if the belief that P is epistemically unjustified for S, then S can avoid believing that P.

The problem, however, is that EOIC is false. Epistemic justification does not imply 'can'.¹⁰ As I will argue in the next section, there can be cases where (i) the belief that P is clearly epistemically justified or unjustified for S, even though (ii) S *cannot* believe that P or avoid believing that P. Since epistemic justification *would* imply 'can' if epistemic deontology were true (given OIC), it follows that ED should be rejected. This is what I will refer to as the *Justification-OIC argument* for 'OIC rules out ED'. The argument can be summarized schematically as follows:

Justification-OIC argument

- I. Deontic claims imply 'can'. (OIC)
- II. If ED is true, then attributions of epistemic justification are deontic claims.
- III. Therefore, given OIC, ED is true only if attributions of epistemic justification imply 'can'.
- IV. Attributions of epistemic justification do not imply 'can'. (EOIC is false)¹¹
- V. Therefore, given OIC, ED is false; attributions of epistemic justification are not deontic claims if 'ought' implies 'can'. (OIC rules out ED)

Since this argument takes OIC for granted and since premise II follows from the definition of epistemic deontology, the crucial premise that needs defending is premise IV, i.e. the denial of EOIC. I provide such a defense in the next section. I will start by discussing the relation between

¹⁰ While it is not an argument that Alston explicitly puts forward, the germ of that argument can be found in Alston's article. I return to this point at the beginning of section 2.

¹¹ As I mentioned above, my main concern in this paper is with propositional justification. However, this raises a potential worry. Even if propositional justification does not imply 'can', doesn't *doxastic* justification imply 'can'? After all, you can't be doxastically justified in believing a proposition unless you *do* believe that proposition. But if doxastic justification implies 'can', then couldn't we remain deontologists about doxastic justification even if we give up deontology about propositional justification? My main reply to this suggestion is that my case against EOIC will, in fact, cover doxastic justification. This is because my counter-examples to EOIC involve attributions of doxastically *unjustified* beliefs. If 'S ought not to ϕ ' implies 'S can avoid ϕ -ing' (as OIC states) and if 'S is doxastically unjustified in believing that P' implies 'S ought not to believe that P' (as ED states), then S is doxastically unjustified in believing that P only if she can avoid believing that P. However, I will offer cases where S is doxastically unjustified in believing that P even though S cannot avoid believing that P. So, although the Justification-OIC argument is primarily about propositional justification, it does extend to doxastic justification.

Alston's article and the Justification-OIC argument. I will argue that his article actually provides some support for that alternative argument, but that this support is insufficient. I will then offer an independent case against EOIC that does suffice to establish premise IV. EOIC, I will argue, faces fatal counter-examples. Hence, the Justification-OIC is sound. Regardless of doxastic voluntarism and its relationship with ED, OIC rules out epistemic deontologism.

I will end, in section 3, by exploring the possible upshots of the Justification-OIC argument for deontologism and for epistemology more generally. To anticipate, my conclusion will be that given the Justification-OIC argument, at least one of the following three controversial theses must be true. Either, (i) OIC is false and 'oughts' do not imply 'can' after all, (ii) epistemic deontologism is false and attributions of epistemic justification are not deontic claims, or (iii) epistemic norms are not necessarily or categorically normative. That is, we have no choice but to give up either OIC, ED, or categorical epistemic normativity.

2. Epistemic justification does not imply 'can'

According to the Justification-OIC argument, the principle that 'ought' implies 'can' rules out epistemic deontologism because EOIC is false, i.e. because epistemic justification does not imply 'can'. As I explained above, this is not how Alston's argues for 'OIC rules out ED'. But even though Justification-OIC does not explicitly feature in his landmark article, the germ of that argument can actually be found in Alston's attack on deontologism. More specifically, Alston's defense of the involuntarism argument already provides some basis for a case against EOIC.¹²

For Alston, we cannot have doxastic obligations and prohibitions because we don't have voluntary control over our beliefs. Yet his conclusion is *not* that we thereby have much less justification than we thought we had. Rather, his conclusion is that epistemic deontologism is an *inadequate* conception of epistemic justification and that we need an alternative conception. Why does he go with the latter conclusion instead of the former? It must be because he accepts that beliefs can be epistemically justified or unjustified for S even if S lacks voluntary control over those beliefs. He accepts, in other words, that epistemic justification does not imply voluntary control over our beliefs. But as the passage given in section 1 indicates, Alston thinks that OIC means that 'ought' implies voluntary control. That is, he appears to think that 'S can ϕ ', in the context of OIC, implies 'S has voluntary control over ϕ -ing'. Therefore, Alston goes for the conclusion that ED is inadequate (as opposed to the conclusion that we have far fewer justified beliefs than we thought we had) because he accepts that justification does not imply 'can'.

So although it does not explicitly feature the Justification-OIC argument, Alston's article can be seen as offering, in effect, a case for that argument and for its premise that justification does not imply 'can'. How effective is that case? To answer that question, we must first clarify what Alston means by 'voluntary control' and 'voluntarism'. The following passage summarizes the kind of control he has in mind:

¹² Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention.

One has control over a given type of state only if one also has control over some field of incompatible alternatives. To have control over believing that p is to have control over whether one believes that p or not, i.e., over whether one believes that p or engenders instead some incompatible alternative. One cannot effectively choose to believe that p without refraining from choosing an incompatible alternative; nor can one choose such an alternative without refraining from believing that p . Voluntary control necessarily extends to contraries; the power to choose A at will is the power to determine at will whether it shall be A or (some form of) not- A . (Alston 1989, 261)

For Alston, then, voluntary control amounts to what is often called *dual* control.¹³ That is, you have voluntary control over ϕ -ing if you can both ϕ and not ϕ . But since ‘can’ implies voluntary control according to Alston, he must accept the following condition on ‘can’ in OIC:

Dual control condition S can ϕ (avoid ϕ -ing) only if S can avoid ϕ -ing (can ϕ).¹⁴

That is, you can do something only if you can do otherwise. If this is right, then given his acceptance of OIC, Alston must also think that ‘ought’ implies doxastic dual control, i.e. the power to *believe* otherwise.

What does this mean for EOIC? Recall that one lesson of Alston’s argument is that epistemic justification does not imply voluntary control. Given his acceptance of the dual control condition, this means that for him, epistemic justification does not imply doxastic dual control. That is, the following version of EOIC must be false:

EOIC-dual-control If the belief that P is epistemically justified for S , then S can avoid believing that P . And if the belief that P is epistemically unjustified for S , then S can believe that P .

Since he denies that we have dual control over our beliefs (given doxastic involuntarism) and since he still thinks that we are justified (and unjustified) in believing many things, Alston rejects EOIC-dual-control. This raises two questions. First, is Alston right to reject EOIC-dual-control? Can we really be epistemically justified (or unjustified) in believing that P in cases where we cannot believe otherwise? Second, is the rejection of EOIC-dual-control sufficient to refute EOIC and establish premise IV of the Justification-OIC argument?

The answer to the first question is ‘yes’. EOIC-dual-control is false and it is false independently of Alston’s views on voluntary control and doxastic voluntarism. This is because EOIC-dual-control is vulnerable to counter-examples that do not depend on doxastic involuntarism. Here is one example.

¹³ This is also how Levy (2007) interprets Alston. The label ‘dual control’ is due to Kane (1996). See Chuard and Southwood (2009, 604-605; 616-617) for a criticism of this adequation between voluntary control and dual control.

¹⁴ See Zimmerman (1996) and Haji (2002) for a defense of that condition. A related condition is what philosophers such as Lavin (2004) call the *error constraint* on normativity. As Lavin puts it: “an agent is subject to a principle only if the agent can go wrong in respect of it.” (2004, 425) If a norm requires you to ϕ , in other words, then you can violate that norm.

Simon the neurosurgeon. Simon is a neurosurgeon who is obsessed epistemology and epistemic value. In particular, he is so deeply convinced of the badness of error that he invented a device that prevents his patients from believing what they do not know. Whenever there is any sign that a patient might be about to believe something they won't know, the device automatically and infallibly takes over that patient's cognitive system and instantly causes her to suspend judgment about the matter at hand. Tanya is one of Simon's patients who has agreed to have the device implanted in her brain. After the procedure, Tanya goes out with a friend who, at some point in the night, asks her whether she thinks that the number of stars is even. Without any hesitation, Tanya replies that she has no way to know the answer and so suspends her judgment about that question. Because of her lack of hesitation, Simon's device did not activate and Tanya ended up suspending judgment by herself. However, if there had been the slightest indication that she might lean towards belief or disbelief, the device would have instantly taken over and caused her to suspend judgment.

In this example, Tanya could not have had the epistemically unjustified attitude of believing (or disbelieving) that the number of stars is even. Yet despite her inability to refrain from suspending judgment Tanya's doxastic attitude is, by all accounts, epistemically justified (propositionally *and* doxastically). Therefore, EOIC-dual-control is false. Whether or not Alston is right about doxastic involuntarism, he is right that epistemic justification does not imply dual doxastic control.

What about our second question? Is the falsity EOIC-dual-control sufficient to refute EOIC? Is it sufficient for showing that epistemic justification does not imply 'can'? It would be if 'S has dual control over her believing that P' were necessary for the truth of 'S can believe that P'. It would be, in other words, if what I referred to as the dual control condition were true.

The problem, however, is that not all proponents of OIC accept the dual control condition. Many think that although 'ought' implies 'can', it does not imply the power to do otherwise. For them, it can still be true that you can ϕ in cases where you cannot avoid ϕ -ing. Therefore, given the controversial character of the dual control condition, showing that epistemic justification doesn't imply the kind of dual control involved in doxastic voluntarism – as Alston does – is not enough to falsify EOIC. Rejecting EOIC-dual-control, in other words, won't suffice to convincingly establish that justification does not imply 'can'. Doing so leaves the door open, for deontologists, to respond by rejecting the dual control condition. Instead, one must show that we can be epistemically justified (or unjustified) in believing that P even in situations where it is obvious that we cannot believe (or avoid believing) that P. One must, in other words, go after conditions which, everyone would agree, are necessary for the truth of 'S can ϕ ' in the context of OIC.

Are there such widely accepted conditions? Although there is widespread disagreement about how to formulate OIC exactly, the vast majority of those who have discussed the principle agree that 'S can ϕ ' implies, at a minimum, that S has both the *ability* and the *opportunity* to ϕ . Here are some passages from both proponents and opponents of OIC that illustrate this.

“[A]n agent *S* ought to perform an action *A* only if *S* has the opportunity to perform *A*; nothing prevents or would prevent *S* from successfully exercising the relevant abilities to perform *A*.” (Haji 2002, 22)

“By virtue of conceptual necessity, if an agent at a given time has an objective, pro tanto obligation to do something, then the agent at that time has both the ability and the opportunity to do the thing.” (Vranas 2007, 171)

“The ‘can’ in OIC is the ‘can’ of ability and opportunity.” (Graham 2011, 341)

“Necessarily, if *S* has an all-things-considered epistemic obligation to believe that *p*, then *S* has the specific ability and opportunity to believe that *P*.” (Mizrahi 2012, 830)

Most of those who discuss OIC, then, view ability and opportunity as jointly necessary for the truth of ‘*S* can ϕ ’. That is, they accept the following condition on ‘can’ in the context of OIC:

Ability-opportunity condition *S* can ϕ (avoid ϕ -ing) only if (i) *S* is *able* to ϕ (avoid ϕ -ing), and (ii) *S* has the *opportunity* to exercise her ability to ϕ (avoid ϕ -ing).

It is therefore safe to assume that if OIC is true, then ‘ought’ implies, at the very least, ability plus opportunity. Therefore, it is also safe to assume that if *S* lacks either the opportunity or the ability to ϕ , then *S* cannot ϕ .

What does this mean for EOIC? If epistemic justification does imply ‘can’, then at the very least, it must imply *doxastic* ability and opportunity. More precisely, the following must be true:

EOIC-ability-opportunity If the belief that *P* is epistemically justified for *S*, then (i) *S* is able to believe that *P* and (ii) *S* has the opportunity to exercise her ability to believe that *P*. And if the belief that *P* is epistemically unjustified for *S*, then (i) *S* is able to avoid believing that *P* and (ii) *S* has the opportunity to exercise her ability to avoid believing that *P*.

If deontic claims imply ‘can’ and if attributions of epistemic justification are deontic claims, then such attributions must imply, at the very least, doxastic ability and opportunity. Given that ‘can’ requires at least ability plus opportunity, we can conclude that EOIC is true only if EOIC-ability-opportunity is true. If EOIC-ability-opportunity is false, then epistemic justification does not imply ‘can’.

While Alston's article casts doubts on EOIC-dual-control, it does not rule out EOIC-ability-opportunity. For all that we have shown so far, epistemic justification could still imply ability plus opportunity. However, as I would now like to argue, EOIC-ability-opportunity is false. It is vulnerable to counter-examples just like EOIC-dual-control. Therefore, epistemic justification does not imply 'can'.

Take the opportunity condition first. Below are two cases where (i) some beliefs are clearly epistemically justified or unjustified for agents, but where (ii) those agents are in situations that do *not* allow them to exercise their ability to form the required doxastic attitude.

Logical Linda. Linda is a participant in a psychological experiment that requires her to solve an easy logical puzzle. Linda is very intelligent, but she initially makes a silly reasoning mistake and concludes, incorrectly, that the answer is A. Since her evidence clearly indicates that the answer is B and since the answer is fairly obvious, she would realize her mistake and form the correct belief if she carefully thought about it for a few more minutes. Unbeknownst to Linda however, the neurosurgeon conducting the experiment does not want her to get it right because that would contradict his hypothesis. So once he sees that she gets it wrong, he immediately gives Linda an anesthetic and installs a microscopic chip in her brain that will prevent her from thinking about the puzzle ever again. Every time she will start thinking about the puzzle, the chip will immediately distract her or make her think about something else. The experimenter therefore ensures that Linda won't ever have the opportunity to correct her initial belief. She thus goes on believing that the answer is A.

In this example, Linda lacks the opportunity to exercise her ability to figure out the right answer and to stop believing that the answer is A. Crucially however, her belief that the answer is A remains, by all accounts, epistemically unjustified (propositionally and doxastically). Similarly, even though she lacks the opportunity to believe it, the belief that the answer is A is clearly epistemically justified for her.

Here is a second example.

Fear of death. Because of his extreme fear of death, Rob paid a hypnotist to 'program' him to instantly fall asleep whenever he starts thinking about his own death. Since before the treatment, Rob has had the belief that he won't die before he reaches 85 years old. Unfortunately, a few months after his treatment, Rob is diagnosed with a serious illness that will significantly reduce his life expectancy. After the diagnosis, Rob's evidence conclusively shows that he will *not* live in his eighties. He knows he has the illness. He also knows that no one who has had that illness went on to live older than 65. However, because of his hypnotism treatment, he never gets to revise his initial belief that he won't die before he reaches 85 since he has to think about his own death in order to do so.

Even though Rob lacks the opportunity to change it, his belief that he won't die before he reaches 85 years old is still epistemically unjustified (propositionally and doxastically). Similarly, the belief that that he *will* die before he reaches 85 years old is epistemically justified for him, even if he lacks the opportunity to form that belief. As these examples show, then, there can be situations where a belief that P is epistemically justified or unjustified for S even though S lacks the opportunity to exercise her ability to believe accordingly.

What about the ability condition? As we have seen above, if justification implies 'can', then at the very least, attributions epistemic justification imply the *ability* to form the required doxastic attitude. More precisely, if the belief that P is epistemically justified for S, then S is able to believe that P. And if the belief that P is epistemically unjustified for S, then S is able to avoid believing that P.

This claim is also vulnerable to counterexamples however. There can be cases where the belief that P is clearly epistemically justified or unjustified for S even though S is unable to believe that P or to avoid believing that P. Here are three examples.

Impostor syndrome. Anne suffers from severe impostor syndrome. She is deeply convinced that her intellectual aptitudes are well below average and that her achievements are all due to pure luck. This, however, clearly goes against what she knows. As she herself acknowledges, she always scores very high on standardized tests, everyone tells her how smart she is, and she has a long list of impressive academic and professional achievements. Yet she has this unshakable feeling that she is completely worthless. Anne knows that this feeling is not supported by her evidence. Yet it is always there and it causes her to systematically disregard or explain away that evidence by citing luck and her ability to appear smart. It also prevents her from doing anything to get rid of that feeling.

In this example, Anne is unable to avoid believing that she is worthless. Yet by all accounts, that belief is epistemically unjustified (propositionally and doxastically) for her. Similarly, even though she lacks the ability to believe that she is *not* worthless and stupid, that belief is clearly epistemically justified for her. Here is a second example.

Michael Jackson. Ever since Michael suffered a serious head injury in an accident, he has been convinced that he is the reincarnation of Michael Jackson. While he is aware that this is extremely implausible and improbable given everything he knows, he cannot help but believing that he is Michael Jackson. He cannot even imagine himself as someone else.

Michael's belief that he is the reincarnation of Michael Jackson is clearly epistemically unjustified (propositionally and doxastically). Yet he is unable to avoid believing that. Similarly, the belief

that he is *not* the reincarnation of Michael Jackson is clearly epistemically justified for him. Yet he is unable to form that belief.¹⁵ Here is a final example.

Evidential blindspot. Daniel is an experienced epistemology professor. One of his students, Alex, is the worst student he has ever seen. In class, Alex could never stay focused for more than a few seconds and could never understand what was going on. Even though he attended all the lectures, he still has literally no idea what epistemology is supposed to be about. Unsurprisingly, Alex failed the class miserably. His performance was so bad and his understanding so poor that Daniel concluded not only that Alex is incapable of passing an epistemology class, but also that *he cannot even form beliefs about evidence*. At least this is what the evidence indicates and what any reliable observer would conclude.

Daniel's belief that Alex cannot form beliefs about evidence seems epistemically justified. However, a lot of the evidence that support this conclusion is also available to Alex. Alex is well aware that he could never understand what was going on, that he could never focus more than one or two seconds in the class, that he failed miserably, and so on. Hence, just like Daniel, Alex seems to have epistemic justification for believing that he cannot form beliefs about evidence. This is, after all, what his evidence supports and what any reliable observer would conclude.

However, Alex cannot believe what his evidence supports in this situation. This is because if he were to form the belief that he cannot form beliefs about evidence, his so believing would immediately provide him with conclusive evidence that he *can* form beliefs about evidence. The belief that he cannot form beliefs about evidence would thereby be epistemically *unjustified* for him. Alex is therefore unable to believe, at least justifiably, what is epistemically justified for him to believe.

This, along with the two previous examples, means that attributions of epistemic justification do not even imply doxastic ability.¹⁶ There can be situations where the belief that P is

¹⁵ Note that these last two examples also happen to cast doubts on the alternative form of deontology formulated by Alston, which I labelled ED*. Recall that according to ED* epistemic justification should be construed not in terms of doxastic obligations, but rather in terms of *intellectual* obligations, i.e. obligations to *act* so as to end up believing the truth and not what is false. But in both 'Impostor syndrome' and 'Michael Jackson', it does not seem like Anne and Michael have voluntarily broken any of their intellectual obligations in coming to believe what they believe. After all, their incorrect beliefs are mainly the results of unfortunate circumstances beyond their control, namely a psychological disorder and an accident. Crucially however, their respective beliefs are still clearly epistemically unjustified.

¹⁶ Mizrahi (2012) also provides a counter-example to EOIC-ability-opportunity. It is a case inspired by the 2010 film *The Next Three Days*. His example is the following:

In this movie, the life of a family of three takes a turn for the worse when the wife is accused of murder. The forensic evidence against the wife, Lara, is compelling, and it includes fingerprints, an eyewitness account, ballistics reports, DNA from blood samples, and a clear motive. Lara is convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. But her husband, John, cannot believe that she is a murderer. Now, in the film, there are hints pointing to Lara's innocence. For the sake of argument, however, suppose that she is in fact guilty of murder. [...] What we have here is a scenario in which John ought to believe that Lara is guilty of murder, but he simply cannot believe that his wife is a murderer. [...] John ought to believe that his wife is a murderer, and yet he cannot believe that his wife is a murderer. In other words, as an epistemic agent, John is required to

epistemically justified or unjustified for S even though S lacks the ability to believe that P or to avoid believing that P.¹⁷ It appears, then, that EOIC-ability-opportunity is false. Epistemic justification does not imply doxastic ability and opportunity. Given the ability-opportunity condition, then, we can safely conclude that EOIC is false. The Justification-OIC argument therefore appears to be sound. Regardless of Alston's controversial premises concerning doxastic voluntarism and its relation to deontology, OIC rules out ED because epistemic justification does not imply 'can'.

3. Where to go from here?

What does the incompatibility between OIC and ED mean for deontology, and for epistemology more generally? The answer, I would like to suggest, is that at least one of the three following controversial theses must be true. Either (i) deontic claims do not imply 'can', (ii) attributions of epistemic justification are not deontic claims, or (iii) epistemic claims are not categorically or necessarily normative. In other words, we must abandon either (i) OIC, (ii) ED, or (iii) categorical epistemic normativity. Let us look at those three possibilities more closely.¹⁸

First, for all that the Justification-OIC argument says, we could keep epistemic deontology and categorical epistemic normativity by giving up OIC. All that argument shows is that *if* 'ought' implies 'can', *then* attributions of epistemic justification are not deontic 'ought' claims. This, however, is compatible with the conclusion that it is not ED that must be rejected, but OIC. For one thing, OIC is not universally accepted. Perhaps there are sufficient independent

believe that Lara is guilty of murder, but John lacks the specific ability and opportunity to believe that his wife is a murderer. (Mizrahi 2012, 832-833)

Although John lacks the ability to believe that his wife is a murderer, that belief is clearly epistemically justified for him. Moreover, although John seems unable to avoid believing that his wife is innocent, that belief is still epistemically unjustified for him (doxastically and propositionally).

¹⁷ Note that those examples work against EOIC and ED even if we formulate them in *diachronic* terms. So far I have assumed that those theses are best understood in synchronic terms. However, one might argue that EOIC only requires that S *had* the ability (and opportunity) to believe that P in order to have justification for that belief. This won't be enough to save EOIC, however. Examples like Impostor syndrome, Michael Jackson, and Evidential blindspot are just as effective against this diachronic formulation of EOIC. Even if we specify that the protagonists *never* had the ability to form the appropriate beliefs, these beliefs clearly remain justified (or unjustified) for them. Perhaps Anne has had her impostor syndrome since she was a young child and therefore never had the ability to believe that she is smart and to avoid believing that she is worthless. This, however, does not change the fact that she is clearly epistemically unjustified in believing that she is worthless, and that the belief that she is smart is epistemically justified for her.

¹⁸ Isn't there a fourth possibility, namely adopting ED*? Since my argument only targets ED, isn't ED* another possible upshot of the Justification-OIC argument? I would say three things in response to this suggestion. First, as I pointed out above, some of my counter-examples to EOIC also happen to cast doubts on ED*. Second, as Alston (1988, 277-294) points out, ED* seems incompatible with both internalism or externalism about epistemic justification. His point, very roughly, is that having met your intellectual obligations is neither necessary nor sufficient to form a belief in a truth-conducive way, either from an external perspective (which externalism requires) or from your own perspective (which internalism requires). But if ED* is not compatible with either externalism or internalism then it is hard to see how it could be an adequate conception of epistemic justification (although see Vahid (1998) and Peels (2017, 237-250) for criticisms of this argument). Finally, even if you are not convinced and still view ED* as a genuine possibility, then you can simply interpret the second possible consequence of Justification-OIC as the idea that ED is false and that attributions of epistemic justification are not *doxastic* deontic claims.

reasons to reject it.¹⁹ For another, one might view the failure of EOIC not as a problem for ED, but rather as evidence against ‘ought’ implies ‘can’. Perhaps attributions of epistemic justification are best seen as providing counter-examples to OIC.

Alternatively, we could keep OIC and epistemic normativity by abandoning ED. Even if we accept that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, deontic claims are not the only kinds of normative claims. Normative discourse also includes *evaluative* claims, which are not about what agents ought to do, but rather about what ought to *be* the case. Evaluative normative statements make claims about what is valuable or good, in some sense, without ascribing obligations, permissions, or prohibitions to agents.²⁰ Crucially, however, OIC only applies to deontic ‘oughts’. Even if deontic claims imply ‘can’, evaluative claims do not. The claim that there ought not to be so many deadly natural disasters, for instance, remains true even if no one can do anything about it. One possibility, then, is that OIC is true and epistemic claims are categorically normative, but that such epistemic claims are *evaluative* normative claims about what is good or bad – about what ought to be the case – epistemically speaking.²¹

A final, less commonly discussed option would be to give up the necessary normativity of epistemic claims. If we did, we could then keep OIC together with a modified version of epistemic deontology. This would be a weaker or deflated form ED according to which epistemic norms are not norms with necessary or categorical authority like morality, but rather norms that lack such necessary normativity just like etiquette, club rules, or the law. Why would such a deflated form of ED be compatible with OIC?

Norms are one thing, but normativity is another. For any norm N, we can recognize the (non-normative) fact that N *says* that we ought to ϕ – i.e. that we ought to ϕ *relative to* or *according to* N – and still ask whether N has genuine normative authority or normativity, i.e. whether there is any genuine *normative reason* to conform to N. Most norms or ‘oughts’ are such that the answer to this question *can* be ‘no’. Most norms, in other words, do not have necessary or categorical normative authority. For example, there is not necessarily a normative reason to conform to the ‘oughts’ or norms of e.g. etiquette, club rules, honour codes, fashion, the law, tradition, gender stereotypes, and so on.

At the same time, some ‘oughts’ *do* seem to have necessary normativity. The standard example is the *moral* ‘ought’. According to many metaethicists, if you morally ought to ϕ – that is, if moral norms say you ought to ϕ – then there is automatically a normative reason for you to ϕ . There is, therefore, a fundamental distinction between norms that have necessary normative authority like moral norms, and those that lack such authority like the norms of etiquette, fashion, club rules, the law, and countless others.²²

¹⁹ See e.g. Sinnott-Armstrong (1984), Saka (2000), Mizrahi (2009), and Graham (2011).

²⁰ For more on the distinction between deontic and evaluative ‘oughts’, see Schroeder (2011) and Chrisman (2015).

²¹ This is, for example, the approach taken by many reliabilists and proper functionalists about epistemic justification. See for instance, Plantinga (1993), Bergman (2006), Sosa (2007), Greco (2010), and Graham (2012). See also Chrisman (2008).

²² Other labels used in the literature for this distinction include normativity versus mere *norm-relativity* (Hattiangadi, 2007), *reason-implying* versus mere *rule-implying* normativity (Parfit, 2011), *robust* versus merely *formal* normativity

This distinction is relevant for our purpose because OIC only applies to deontic norms that have necessary normative authority. Even if OIC is true, in other words, deontic ‘oughts’ that are *not* necessarily normative do not imply ‘can’. Take legal ‘oughts’ for example. The law forbids you from stealing even if you suffer from extreme, treatment-resistant kleptomania that makes you unable to refrain from stealing. Whether or not you can avoid stealing, in other words, it remains true that you *legally* ought not to steal. Similarly, imagine you cannot avoid dressing in a way that is contrary to the dress code of a particular club. Perhaps you suffer from a psychological condition that compels you to continually wear a particular outfit. Crucially however, even if you cannot avoid it, it remains true that you ought not to dress in that way according to those club rules. So even if OIC is true, it does not extend to deontic ‘oughts’ that lack necessary normative authority like legal ‘oughts’ and club ‘oughts’.

We are now in a better position to clarify the final possible upshot of the Justification-OIC argument. Perhaps OIC is true, but epistemic claims lack necessary normative authority, in which case they can still be a weaker, deflated kind of deontic claims. Since it is only categorically normative ‘oughts’ that imply ‘can’ if OIC is true, such a deflated version of epistemic deontology would not be ruled out by OIC despite the soundness of the Justification-OIC argument.

These, then, are the three possible upshots of the Justification-OIC argument. Which of those three theses we should accept is a difficult question, which goes well beyond the scope of this paper. Each option is highly controversial and comes with considerable theoretical costs. Each of OIC, ED, and categorical epistemic normativity are closely associated with popular theses and have significant intuitive appeal. OIC is still widely taken for granted, especially by ethicists and normativity theorists. Similarly, epistemologists typically see deontology as the most natural way to understand the normative character of epistemic justification and to flesh out the common claim that epistemology is a normative discipline just like ethics. Finally, epistemologists and normativity theorists standardly view the idea that epistemic norms lack necessary normative authority as unacceptable.²³ For one thing, epistemic norms don’t seem to be just a matter of arbitrary or relative conventions like etiquette and club rules. For another, such a deflated picture of epistemic normativity seems hard to reconcile with our practice of truly blaming, praising, and holding people responsible for their epistemically justified or unjustified beliefs. So whatever avenue we end up taking, the Justification-OIC is bound to have far-reaching consequences for epistemology and beyond.

(McPherson, 2011; Maguire and Woods, MS.), *strong* versus *weak* categoricity (Joyce, 2001), *normative requirements* versus mere *requirements* (Broome, 2013), and *irreducible* versus merely *reducible* normativity (Olson, 2014).

²³ Exceptions include Sosa (2007), Hazlett (2013), Papineau (2013), and Maguire and Woods (MS). For explicit defenses of the necessary normative authority of epistemic norms, see Kim (1988), Kelly (2003), Cuneo (2007), Grimm (2009), and Rowland (2013). I discuss the authority of epistemic norms in Côté-Bouchard (2015), (2016), and (forthcoming).

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