Review of “Beyond Justification: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation”

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In his programmatic 1993 paper “Epistemic Desiderata,” William Alston articulated a radical new approach to epistemology that rejected the centrality of epistemic justification, instead focusing upon the various ways in which beliefs might be good or bad from a variety of epistemic points of view, or relative to certain kinds of desiderata (or what he now calls different ‘dimensions of epistemic evaluation’). This pluralist research program called for the development of many alternative frameworks or ‘packages’ of desiderata against which our beliefs might be evaluated. Further, these frameworks could themselves be graded relative to the various points and purposes of our epistemic theorizing. Yet, as Alston himself notes, this article “mostly evoked only deadening silence” (xii). In Beyond Justification: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation, Alston attempts to redeem the promise of his radical multidimensional proposal and offer a fully developed theory grounded in the defense and development of a package of epistemic desiderata framed around the central cognitive aim of acquiring, retaining and using true beliefs. To my mind, this book is long overdue but disappointingly one-dimensional in its execution.

Alston divides his book into two parts. The first develops his preferred desiderata approach in detail while the second is directed at some more general questions about methodology and skepticism. The first part naturally divides into two fairly distinct sections. In the first, Alston defends the desiderata centered approach in general. The second section is devoted to the development of a truth-centered desiderata based epistemology. I will proceed to discuss these serially, focusing on the development of the desiderata based approach.

The argument for desiderata based epistemology as offered by Alston (1993) and further developed here works like this. Alston notes that there are a wide variety of candidates for what we generally refer to as epistemic justification, e.g. a belief being formed on the basis of a reliable process, a belief arising from the exemplification of some epistemic virtue, a belief resulting from the satisfaction of some epistemic obligation, etc. Each candidate is argued to be defensible and desirable relative to a particular range of epistemic situations, but problematic in other cases. Alston asserts that the disagreement over the nature of justification is intractable and asks us to consider the possibility that we have been confusing the many for the one. We should, he argues, reject the very idea of a single conception of epistemic justification in favor of accepting a wide range of possible ways in which beliefs might be desirable, e.g., that a belief was formed on the basis of a reliable process, or arose from the exemplification of some epistemic virtue, or resulted from the satisfaction of some epistemic obligation, etc. That there is no single thing that is justification is, Alston claims, the best explanation of the disagreement. Thus, what we originally conceived of as competing accounts of justification, are recast as different ways in which a belief might
be desirable to hold from an epistemic point of view; Alston calls these ‘epistemic desiderata’.

The result is a theory that shares its broad outlines with Mackie’s argument from disagreement for error theory in ethics: from the intractable disagreement about the nature of goodness, we should conclude that the best explanation of the disagreement is that there is no such thing. This argument from intractable disagreement is also the focus of some recent criticism offered by Alvin Goldman against Alston’s rejection of the concept of justification. Goldman maintains that even if Alston is right that there is no single thing—‘justification’—that epistemologists are interested in, we should not reject the notion entirely, for if we did, then we should also by the same form of argument need to deny that in other cases of protracted disagreement the point under discussion has a single nature (e.g. truth, or consciousness). Alston has replied that the argument ultimately turns upon our inability to specify a theory neutral way to resolve the disagreement, but I fail to see how this does more than restate the deep intractability of the problem.

Assuming that Alston is correct that we should reject the idea that there is a single characteristic picked out by the term ‘justification’ and turn instead to a desiderata based model, what should this approach look like? In 1993 this was an open question with a multitude of possible answers. Every extant theory about the nature of justification was apt to be reconceived as describing a possible epistemic desideratum. And each desideratum was liable to be combined with others to form hypothetical packages of desiderata. But Alston makes a move in this book which severely narrows the actual range of possibilities he wants to consider. Alston decides to focus upon what, by his lights, is the core cognitive project of human beings: true belief. Of this decision Alston writes that,

I don’t know how to prove that the acquisition, retention, and use of true beliefs about matters that are of interest and/or importance is the most basic and most central goal of cognition. I don’t know anything that is more obvious from which it could be derived. But I suggest that anyone can see its obviousness by reflecting on what would happen to human life if we were either without beliefs at all or if our beliefs were all or mostly false. (30)

Alston then proceeds to develop an essentially teleological framework oriented toward the aim of maximizing our acquisition, retention, and use of true beliefs. Just as specifying the moral good determines right action, identifying the epistemic “good” determines the factors that feed into right belief. The product of this line of reasoning is what Alston calls the truth conducive (TC) set of desiderata, with reliability of the belief formation process enjoying pride of place. Alston’s choice to focus on TC desiderata is rooted in his desire to ground his epistemological theorizing upon recent results in cognitive psychology and locate it in the naturalistic epistemic tradition.

But, one need only borrow a page from Alston’s own book to see how a potential objection to this choice might develop. One need not deny that truth is an important cognitive aim in order to affirm that there are other aims to human cognitive activity. Likewise, one wonders why we should reject an epistemic monism aimed at knowledge and guided by a singular concept of justification (even if we cannot agree about its nature) in favor of a doxastic monism, aimed at truth and guided by the singular aim of being truth conducive. Instead of a radical departure from traditional epistemology, this route feels a bit like a conservative return to traditional externalism, albeit with a new coat of paint. If the focus upon truth conductivity settles the question of which sets of epistemic desiderata to adopt, won’t the same considerations offer a theory neutral way of resolving, or at least softening, the intractable dispute over
One important result of Alston’s analysis of how various desiderata fit into the TC package is the argument Alston develops for the essential equivalence of the claim that a belief is the product of adequate grounds and the claim that a belief is produced by a reliable method or process. If the production of beliefs is conceived of as a function relating epistemic grounds as inputs to beliefs as outputs, then to be produced by a process that is truth conducive must also involve being produced on the basis of the right kind of grounds. Again, this result does not seem to be dependent upon adopting desiderata based epistemology so much as upon the particular account of belief formation outlined by Alston. If this is so, then traditional reliabilists will have something to learn from this book. But if this approach shows us how to begin to unify various traditional candidates for justification, doesn’t this too suggest that the difficulty is less intractable than we were originally led to believe? By focusing on truth conductivity, Alston has undercut the factors which make the desiderata approach a real alternative to traditional epistemology. These hints of conservativism are buttressed by the discussions of methodological and skeptical issues which comprise the final part of the book. Here we learn that we can still be, e.g., foundationalists and that despite surrendering justification, the desiderata based approach does not give up the game to the skeptic.

These particular points aside, my main criticism of this work is that it is a disappointment to those who, like me, were immediately sympathetic to the epistemic pluralism and openness the early presentation of the epistemic desiderata approach represented. In place of a wide ranging, multi-dimensional dialectic between competing packages of desiderata, this work is a one-dimensional defense of a view that feels far too familiar. No one denies that having true beliefs is an important epistemic and cognitive goal, a true epistemic desideratum, but must we repeat the old mistake of confusing what can be desired for what must be desired? What of other possible cognitive or epistemic goals? What of the other dimensions of epistemic evaluation? The last few pages offer a tip of the hat to other possibilities, and issues a call for ‘laborers’ to develop the desiderata approach further. It seems to me, however, that by focusing so singularly on truth conductivity, Alston has made the larger pluralist project more difficult to pursue.

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Notes


