

# (MORE) SPRINGS OF MY DISCONTENT: A REPLY TO DOUGHERTY

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ABSTRACT: A further reply to Trent Dougherty, author of *Evidentialism and its Discontents*, on a range of issues regarding a proper understanding of epistemic normativity and doxastic responsibility. The relative importance of synchronic and diachronic concerns with epistemic agency is discussed, both with respect to epistemology 'proper,' as well as in connection with broader concerns with 'ethics of belief' and 'epistemology of disagreement.'

KEYWORDS: doxastic responsibility, synchronic and diachronic, ethics of belief, epistemology of disagreement

I want to thank Trent Dougherty for his comments in "Re-reducing Responsibility" on my paper in this journal, "Recovering Responsibility."<sup>1</sup> Dougherty raises concerns that further highlight key differences between the exclusively "synchronic" focus of his internalist evidentialism, and the more "diachronic" focus of virtue epistemologies generally, and of virtue responsibilisms (or character epistemologies) in particular.

Dougherty begins by providing examples of (standard non-epistemic) moral ir/responsibility and (standard non-epistemic) instrumental ir/rationality – forgetting to mail an important check, drinking too much, spending too much on a watch, and the like. He characterizes them by noting that "Neither of these has anything particularly epistemic about it," and I agree. He then goes on to reiterate his IT or *Identity Thesis* according to which "There are nothing but moral irresponsibility or practical irrationality in cases of epistemic irresponsibility" [or perhaps better, in cases that character epistemologists describe as illustrating epistemic irresponsibility].

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<sup>1</sup> Trent Dougherty, "Re-reducing Responsibility: Reply to Axtell," *Logos & Episteme* II, 4 (2011): 625-632. Guy Axtell, "Recovering Responsibility," *Logos & Episteme* II, 3 (2011): 429-454. In that paper I critiqued Dougherty's "Reducing Responsibility: An Evidentialist Account of Epistemic Blame," a paper in which he was defending evidentialism as set forth by Earl Conee and Richard Feldman against criticisms. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2011, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-0378.2010.00422.x.

My first response is simply to note again how un-intuitive is the claim IT makes. The “Craig Case” that our discussion has focused upon seems very dissimilar in basic respects to *any* of the author’s cited ‘pure’ or ‘standard’ examples, since it directly concerns Craig’s doxastic habits or dispositions – how he goes about maintaining confidence in the truth of his belief by flatly refusing to countenance or pursue counter-evidence brought to his attention. I would call this a question of Craig’s doxastic ir/responsibility, but however we describe it, certainly there is *something* particularly epistemic about the case that must be recognized, *something* importantly disanalogous between it and those instances of ‘pure’ moral irresponsibility or practical irrationality he cites. I would think an evidentialist should grant this much, even if he wants to argue that these disanalogies aren’t enough to lead us to treat inquiry or evidence-gathering activities (what responsibilists call *zetetic activities*) as a proper subject matter in epistemology.

Apparently, though, Dougherty, does not want to give up this much. He alleges that in treating as an epistemological concern Craig’s blanket refusal to heed or read potential defeating evidence to his special creationist belief brought to his attention, I am inventing new, *sui generis* or ‘emergent’ sorts of normativity. We should instead be *reducing* the springs of normativity to their lowest number: one.<sup>2</sup> This charge isn’t well-developed, aside from loose analogies, such as that “Being practically irrational with respect to some matter of belief does not result in some *sui generis*, emergent ‘epistemic’ irrationality any more than paying too much for a meal takes on some *sui generis*, emergent ‘culinary irresponsibility.’ The view that I am inventing a ‘new’ or ‘*sui generis*’ kind of normativity in speaking of evaluating activities of inquiry from an epistemic point of view, it should be noted, is an *interpretation* Dougherty provides of the consequences of my opting out of his intended reduction of epistemic normativity to evidential ‘fit.’ But who besides the evidentialist would have thought of the “epistemic” in such narrow terms? Historically, I do not think that epistemologists have treated issues of “doxastic responsibility” either as non-epistemological or as a purely synchronic matter of ‘fit’ with evidence regardless of how well or ill-gotten that evidence is. The position presented as a radical one on my part seems rather to have been germane to epistemological concern in the modern era, the heyday of Chisholmian internalism, roughly contiguous with that of logical positivism and its fact/value dichotomy

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<sup>2</sup> His original paper also suggests plans to reduce moral irresponsibility to pragmatic irresponsibility in later works, leaving us with two source of normativity overall, the practical (including the moral) and the epistemic (which for Dougherty as for Feldman and Conee is wholly a matter of ‘fit’ between one’s doxastic attitude and one’s present evidence bearing upon a proposition).

being the main exception. I don't see this stance as having the consequence of multiplying kinds of normativity out of hand as Dougherty suggests, and my resistance of Dougherty's reductionist stance is, at any rate, consistent with my own developed "too narrow" objection to the evidentialist conception of epistemic normativity.<sup>3</sup>

One aspect of the reductionism that I argued against in my paper in Dougherty's recent collection, *Evidentialism and its Discontents*<sup>4</sup> is the claim made by Feldman that "By seeking out new evidence concerning some important proposition and then believing what the evidence supports, I don't do a better job of achieving the goal of believing reasonably. I achieve that goal at any moment by believing what is then supported by my evidence ... the epistemically rational thing to do at any moment is to follow the evidence you have at that moment."<sup>5</sup> This is reductionist in the double sense that, firstly, the sources of epistemic value, which I view as plural, are reduced to the standard that evidentialists term *synchronically rational belief* (i.e. 'fit'); and, secondly, that "believing reasonably" is reduced to being "epistemically rational" (i.e., having doxastic attitudes that remain in constant 'fit' with what is taken as evidence, however gotten or ill-gotten).

To examine this, the first reduction imposes a particular account of how to "maximize epistemic value," an account that those not committed to internalist evidentialism reject. Responsibilists doubt that this standing – being synchronically rational – is of uniform epistemic value; its value is contingent upon a base level of expected doxastic responsibility. With questions of doxastic responsibility suspended, the type of rationality the evidentialist puts all their chips on appears to be of doubtful epistemic worth; it may even be a good way to get things wrong. On my view, Feldman's principle of epistemic value-maximization furthermore confuses the *contrastive* judgment that one ought to have the doxastic attitudes that fit one's evidence (rather than a doxastic attitude that doesn't), with the far stronger and more doubtful claim that epistemic *oughts* are exhausted by those that meet his principle. On any externalist account, including the "mixed" variety that

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard Williams makes the related point that the more analytic philosophy in various areas has become, the more exclusively "synchronic" its focus has sometimes become. The responsibilists who Dougherty takes issue with in his paper would I think all agree that this a contingent historical circumstance. On my view virtue, social, feminist epistemologies, genealogical approaches, etc. represent a counter-trend that can provide needed balance by including developmental and longitudinal perspectives on epistemic agency as well as genealogical conceptions of the functions of our central epistemic concepts.

<sup>4</sup> Trent Dougherty, ed., *Evidentialism and its Discontents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

responsibilists tend to favor, doxastic justification and doxastic responsibility cannot always be divided off from one another in the way Dougherty suggests. The causal origin or reliable etiology of a belief matters to its epistemic standing, and this in turn implicates the epistemic conscientiousness or sloth of the agent as an epistemological concern in certain ‘problem cases’ including the one at hand. In short, virtue reliabilists and responsibilists have both explicitly argued that the evidentialist account of account of epistemic value maximization is too narrow, and that this is a major weakness in the theory.<sup>6</sup>

But the second reduction in Feldman’s passage is actually more interesting to me, in that it has dramatic, though rarely noticed practical consequences. This reduction of standards of *reasonable* belief to that of *synchronically rational belief* I would argue is a primary reason why the epistemologies of disagreement developed from this evidentialist starting point have been unable to support reasonable disagreement (or Rawlsian reasonable pluralism), and instead tend to devolve into a silly stalemate between supporters of a “Uniqueness View” (‘if I’m rational, you’re not’) and an “Equal Weight View” (‘whenever evidence-sharing peers disagree, suspension of judgment is our automatic epistemic duty’).

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<sup>6</sup> Virtue reliabilists and responsibilists essentially agree on these points about evidentialism leading to a denaturing of doxastic responsibility, and the diachronic aspects of epistemological evaluation more generally. When doxastic justification and thus “the knowing-self moves to center stage, epistemic evaluation, whether it is of beliefs or of character, cannot function within the constraints of a strict internalism. The relaxation of internalist criteria occurs on two fronts. First, consideration of reliability and success in achieving truth become relevant, and second, a social dimension is introduced to rupture the isolationism of purely ‘internal’ looks within’ ... Epistemic responsibility now is not a function of either not violating epistemic obligations (deontology) nor of factors purely transparent to the knower (internalism). Vrinda Dalmiya, “Knowing People,” in *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty*, ed. Matthias Steup (Oxford University Press, 2001), 232. Alvin Goldman relatedly writes, “The main problem facing deontological evidentialism is to account for the virtues of evidence gathering. If proportioning your degree of belief to the weight of evidence is the sole basis of epistemic virtue, epistemic agents can exemplify all virtues without gathering any evidence at all, by working with the most minimal quantities of evidence ... [I]t is just as meritorious for an agent to adopt a doxastic attitude of ‘suspension’ when her evidence is indecisive as it is for her to adopt a doxastic attitude of full conviction when her evidence is quite dispositive. No further epistemic merit or praise can be earned by investigation, research, or clever experimentation the outcome of which might discriminate between competing hypotheses. In short, deontological evidentialism is perfectly content with investigative sloth! This is surely a major weakness of the theory, because numerous epistemic virtues are to be found among processes of investigation.” Alvin I. Goldman, *Pathways to Knowledge: Private and Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 56.

Returning to our central argument, Dougherty doesn't take the obvious fact that doxastic responsibility is truth-directed, and that some strategies and habits are reliable and others unreliable in leading to true beliefs, as doing anything to qualify the inquiry-directed efforts of an agent as an epistemological concern. But I think he fails to see the force of the point that an agent who conducts him or herself as Craig does will manifest very well-known cognitive biases: We could hardly imagine that Craig, in refusing to countenance or pursue in any way the counter-evidence to his belief, wouldn't be committing what standard critical thinking textbooks refer to as "fallacies of relevance." I am speaking of fallacies like *Appeal to Consequences* ("I can't read or consider that recommended book on evolution because it will lead to ungodliness"); *Appeal to popularity* ("Others tell me not to read such rubbish, so rubbish it must be"). *Weak induction* and *improper appeal to authority* are other candidate fallacies of relevance that come to mind for the Craig case or similar cases like those that Baehr and DeRose discuss.<sup>7</sup> Dougherty and Feldman are committed to claiming that Craig is "doing fine" qua epistemic agent so long as he remains synchronically rational, but isn't there an obvious inconsistency here? How is it that it's at best a *moral* or *pragmatic* shortcoming to manifest *cognitive* biases, and to commit fallacies of relevance?

To even have the ability (wherewithal) to avoid fallacies of relevance one must be able to distinguish genuine evidence from various forms of emotional appeal, etc. There are skills at issue here – skills and habits. Dougherty thinks he has a reply this. He responds that "Failures due to lack of skill might be sad or comical but they can't be cases of any kind of irresponsibility as far as I can see unless the fact of the lack of skill came about via a moral or prudential shortcoming." I don't find this reply satisfactory. I'm firstly not saying it's as simple as that to manifest moral biases is *exclusively* a moral fault, and cognitive biases *exclusively* an intellectual one. My position, like that of most responsibilists, is one that insists upon more 'entanglement,' and that suggests a diachronic encroachment on the purportedly 'pure' epistemic sphere of evidence as the evidentialist understands it. So I don't see why we should be committed to viewing competence over a normal level of intellectual habits and skills as a purely pragmatic or moral concern. It is a concern with the agent's intellectual competence, though no doubt it can often be looked at in these other ways as well. I argued for what I think is the common-sensical view that depending on the case, the *zetetic activities* of agents – their inquiry-directed activities – are assessable in light of moral, pragmatic, or

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<sup>7</sup> See the papers by Jason Baehr and Keith DeRose for further development and depth discussion of such problem cases, and Conee and Feldman's responses, in Dougherty, ed., *Evidentialism and its Discontents*.

epistemic (truth-directed) norms. The question depends on the case, and also on our interests in explanation, but the fact that it is “activities” and diachronic aspects that are in question does not necessarily push the issue outside of the purview of epistemological interest. This multiple-assessability model I developed contrasts sharply and I think quite advantageously with the presented view of Dougherty, in which everything is either a purely this or purely that, and in which all such activities of agents, being part of the active aspects of agency, can only be assessed morally or pragmatically.

My final comment, picking up from where we began, is on the interesting points about the ‘ethics of belief’ that Dougherty makes. Dougherty charges responsibilists generally and me in particular with a conflation: “By failing to realize that the ethics of belief is just a kind of applied ethics, serious mistakes are made about the nature of epistemic justification, knowledge, and other forms of positive epistemic status.” Now the issues that Dougherty utilized the Craig case to raise were decidedly *not* those of the ethics of belief, or of what Craig has a ‘right’ to believe, all things considered. If we were speaking of the ethics of belief, ethics would be directly pertinent, and we would be debating the proper way to restrict the domain in which instances of believing may be judged on ethical as well as epistemic grounds. That has not been our focus by a long shot, so that I am somewhat surprised at Dougherty’s remark. But I take it that what he means is that the diachronic concerns I and other responsibilists raise are *properly* relocated as concerns with an ethics of belief (in contrast with epistemic appraisal). Although I rarely see a point to the ‘just’ and ‘nothing buttery’ talk, I certainly do see a potential worry here. Certainly, first of all, the synchronic/diachronic divide is evident in alternative views about the norms that should inform an ethics of belief; certainly as well, it is possible to make the ‘serious mistake’ Dougherty alleges, in conflating these issues. Perhaps then evidentialists and responsibilists are *both* prone to conflating these issues, but in *opposite* ways. What I mean is that, if readers think that responsibilists bring too much of the diachronic into questions of epistemic appraisal, we should also think about the serious mistakes made by evidentialists like Feldman, who ‘reduce’ the ethics of belief and the question of the possibility of reasonable disagreement to a branch of applied epistemology. If, as I have elsewhere argued, the norms that should inform a sound and civic ethics of belief are primarily diachronic, what is ‘out of place’ is rather the primacy of synchronic rationality in Feldman’s ethics of belief.<sup>8</sup> But rather than trying to

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<sup>8</sup> For a critique of Feldman’s ethics of belief and epistemology of disagreement, see my “From Internalist Evidentialism to Virtue Responsibilism,” in *Evidentialism and its Discontents*, 69-87. For a positive development of a substantially more liberal account of the ethics of belief, an

defend myself further against Dougherty's charge, let me end by just asking: Can't we make equally serious mistakes about the nature of the norms that should inform the ethics of belief (and the understanding of peer disagreement) by failing to realize that internalist evidentialism is properly just an analysis of evidential justification?

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account where backward and forward-looking diachronic responsibilities are foremost, and responsibility is clearly distinguished from the narrower norm of synchronic rationality, see my "Possibility and Permission: A neo-Jamesian Ethic of Belief," in *William James' Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Sami Pihlström and Henrik Rydenfelt (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, forthcoming).