

Ampliative Transmission and Deontological Internalism*

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Abstract: *Deontological internalism* is here the family of views where justification is a positive deontological appraisal of someone's epistemic agency: S is justified, that is, when S is blameless, praiseworthy, or responsible in believing that *p*. Brian Weatherson (2008) discusses very briefly how a plausible principle of ampliative transmission reveals a worry for versions of deontological internalism formulated in terms of epistemic blame. Weatherson denies, however, that similar principles reveal similar worries for other versions. I disagree. In this paper, I argue that plausible principles of ampliative transmission reveal a worry for deontological internalism in general.

Keywords: Epistemology, Deontology, Internalism, Transmission, Epistemic Agency

Introduction

The literature on the inferential transmission of justification has so far focused almost exclusively on competent deductive inferences: on cases where (i) *p* follows deductively from *q* and *r*, and (ii) S infers *p* from *q* and *r* because of awareness of that relation. Since competent deductions seem so secure, transmission *failure* has taken center stage.¹ But this narrow focus is misguided. Ampliative inferences present philosophically interesting cases of *successful* transmission instead.

Consider the following transmission principle discussed very briefly by Weatherson (2008, 568):

Blamelessness Ampliative Transmission (BAT):

If:

- (a) S believes that believing that *p* is justified (call this higher-order belief *q*)
- (b) S is epistemically blameless in believing that *q*

Then:

- (c) If S forms the belief that *p* on the basis of *q*, then S is epistemically blameless in believing that *p*.

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¹See, for example, Wright (2003, 2004) and Davies (2004).

Condition (c) defines a certain ampliative inference that is claimed to transmit blamelessness whenever conditions (a) and (b) obtain. Though (BAT) seems harmless, Weatherston has argued that it causes a serious problem for versions of deontological internalism formulated in terms of epistemic *blame*: views where being justified in believing that p is being blameless in believing that p . I agree. But Weatherston denies that a similar argument can be pushed against versions formulated in terms of epistemic *praise*. Here I disagree. (BAT), I will argue, creates a serious problem for any version of deontological internalism where justification is a positive appraisal of someone’s epistemic agency.

Here is how I proceed. After some clarifications (section 1), I mount a two-stage defense of (BAT): I argue that (BAT) is intuitively plausible (section 2), and I argue that the most common alleged causes of transmission failure do not apply to it (section 3). I then argue that my two-stage defense of (BAT) supports similar ampliative transmission principles focused on the related deontological notions of epistemic *praise* and epistemic *responsibility* (section 4). Finally, I consider Weatherston’s argument from (BAT) and argue that his resistance to the soundness of similar versions is implausible (section 5).

1. Clarifying (BAT)

I begin by answering three clarificatory questions: What exactly does it mean to transmit? What exactly does the transmitting? What exactly gets transmitted?

Transmission is the phenomena where a belief that p has some epistemic property *in virtue of* a distinct belief that q having that same epistemic property. At a minimum, transmission requires causation: if my belief that q plays no causal role in the formation or maintenance of my belief that p , then my belief that q cannot transmit any epistemic properties to my belief that p . (BAT) is thus a claim about how a belief can have the epistemic property of blamelessness in virtue of a causally relevant belief having that epistemic property as well. This answers the first question.

I will understand the inference codified in “forms the belief that p on the basis of q ” as the mental act of (i) believing that q and (ii) having that belief as a partial cause of one’s belief in p . In the case of (BAT), this amounts to performing the following inference:

1. I am justified in believing that p .
2. Therefore p .

Such inferences are *level-lowering* since the believer infers the lower-level belief that p from the higher-level belief that she is justified in believing that p . Such inferences are *ampliative* since q does not entail p —I will assume throughout that justification does not entail truth.² So whenever someone accepts (2) on the basis of (1)—in the sense just defined—I will say that she has performed a *level-lowering ampliative inference*. And whenever someone

²See Littlejohn (2012) for discussion and disagreement on this point.

accepts (2) on the basis of (1) in the absence of any defeaters for (1), I will say that she has performed a *competent* level-lowering ampliative inference. (BAT) is thus the claim that blamelessness transmits through competent level-lowering ampliative inferences. This answers the second question.

Mirroring the distinction between warrant and doxastic justification in the literature on transmission, I will here distinguish between (i) the *ground* for blamelessness (that which makes it blameless for S to believe that p at t), and (ii) *blamelessly believing* that p (a belief that is appropriately connected to existing grounds for blamelessness). Just as one can have warrant for a certain belief and yet fail to be doxastically justified in believing it, one can similarly have grounds for blamelessly believing a certain belief and yet fail to be blameless in believing it. I will here take (BAT) as a claim about the transmission of blameless belief and not as a claim about the transmission of grounds for blamelessness.³ (BAT) is thus the claim that blameless belief transmits through competent level-lowering ampliative inferences. This answers the third question.

2. The Intuitive Defense of (BAT)

A subject satisfies conditions (a) and (b) of (BAT) when she is blameless in believing that she is justified in believing that p . How should we understand the notion of blamelessness at stake? Here it is helpful to turn to a hypothetical case sometimes used as an argument for internalism about justification. Suppose that John's inferential habits accord with all the true internal epistemic standards for belief formation and maintenance. Perhaps John always gathers as much evidence as it is reasonable to expect of him; perhaps John never believes what his total evidence does not support; perhaps John always believes what he believes on the basis of appropriate epistemic grounds; perhaps John even fully endorses these true internal epistemic standards; and so on. We can say that John is in this way *reflectively ideal*. Now suppose that an evil demon is ensuring that all of John's beliefs about the external world are nonetheless false. The argument for internalism about justification that I have in mind turns on the conviction that while John lacks knowledge (by having false beliefs), and lacks reliability (by only having processes that produce a preponderance of false beliefs), he is nonetheless justified in his false beliefs about the external world. He is justified, that is, by virtue of his ideal reflection.⁴

Here is how this case is relevant for our present purposes: whatever we say about John's epistemic justification for believing that, say, the sun is shining, it seems hard to deny that John is *blameless* in believing it. John, after all, is being deceived *despite his best*

³I am here following Tucker (2010, 502-507). This is important since it allows for inferences that *do not* transmit warrant (or grounds for blamelessness) to sometimes count as transmission success by virtue of transmitting doxastic justification (or blameless belief). This will be relevant in section 3 below.

⁴See Cohen (1984) and Pryor (2001), for example, for arguments of this sort. See Weatherston (2008, 564-567) for discussion.

efforts: everything that is under John's control is being executed to perfection; John is not being derelict in any of his epistemic duties; and so on. There are simply no grounds for blaming John for having that false belief. Quite the contrary, in fact: John's ideal reflection is the very ground for his blamelessness. While it is controversial whether or not justification has a substantive connection to truth—and, more exactly, how that connection should be understood—the connection to truth seems entirely beside the point when the evaluation in question is focused on *blame*. Only facts about the *agent* matter for this kind of deontological evaluation, and John seems beyond reproach.

Similarly, it seems hard to deny that John's ideal reflection would be just as appropriate for grounding higher-order beliefs. Suppose that John has been informed by an unreliable source that he is being deceived by an evil demon. Knowing that the source is unreliable, but wanting to be extra careful nonetheless (unreliable sources sometimes are right), John suspends his belief that the sun is shining and proceeds to examine whether he is justified in holding that belief after all. "I can't account for the behavior of evil demons," he thinks to himself, "but I can account for mine." After the kind of ideal reflection defined above, suppose John forms the belief that he is justified in believing that the sun is shining. "As far as I can tell," he concludes, "believing that p is entirely appropriate from my epistemic position." Just as ideal reflection seems enough to ground John's blamelessness in believing that the sun is shining, ideal reflection seems here enough to ground John's blamelessness in believing that he is justified in believing that the sun is shining.

A case of ideal reflection like John's (after being challenged and having confirmed the internal credentials of his belief), then, seems to be a case where conditions (a) and (b) of (BAT) are satisfied: John believes that he is justified in believing that the sun is shining and John is blameless in that higher-order belief. Now suppose that John performs the following competent level-lowering ampliative inference:

1. I am justified in believing that the sun is shining.
2. Therefore the sun is shining.

According to (BAT), John is now blamelessly believing that the sun is shining. This seems correct to me. John's ideal reflection, on its own, seemed sufficient to make him blameless in believing that the sun is shining. It seems odd to suggest that the same ideal reflection cannot make him blameless in believing that very same thing once we add a blameless higher-order belief as an intermediary step.

3. (BAT) and Transmission Failure

Put generally, an inference will fail to transmit blameless belief just in case the conclusion is not blamelessly believed in virtue of being based on a blamelessly believed premise. In John's case, we have already seen that the relevant premise—"I am justified in believing

that the sun is shining' (q)—is, plausibly, blamelessly believed. What could then prevent q from transmitting this epistemic property to John's conclusion that 'the sun is shining' (p)? There are four main alleged causes of transmission failure that are discussed in the literature. Neither, however, applies to (BAT).⁵

One alleged cause of transmission failure is *simple premise circularity*—an inference of the form “ x therefore z therefore x .” But John's inference is clearly not premise-circular in this simple way. Another alleged cause of transmission failure is *failure to resolve doubt*. If John's inference from q to p cannot resolve John's doubts about p , that is, then perhaps it has failed to transmit blamelessness from q to p (cf. Wright 2003, 63). Whatever we think about the truth of this conditional, its antecedent seems false in John's case anyway. In our story, John first suspends his belief that the sun is shining, but only to remove his doubts about it by way of his competent level-lowering ampliative inference. John's inference seems in this way entirely capable of resolving doubt. This is a stipulation, of course, but there is no reason to think that John's case is conceptually incoherent.

A more involved alleged cause of transmission failure is *having an inefficient structure*. This happens when the following two conditions are satisfied. First, there is some ground G that is sufficient by itself to make belief in premise q blameless and is also sufficient by itself to make belief in conclusion p blameless. Second, S nonetheless bases her belief that p in her belief that q , which is itself supported by G (cf. Wright 2002, 334). In our case, John's inference does, in fact, have an inefficient structure. John's ideal reflection is sufficient to make him blameless in believing that he is justified in believing that the sun is shining, as well as straightaway blameless in believing that the sun is shining. And yet John arrives at the latter via the former. So if having an inefficient structure is in fact a cause for transmission failure, then (BAT) is false.

Having an inefficient structure is not, however, cause for transmission failure. We can see this first by counterexample, following Tucker (2010, 512):

The perceptual evidence that warrants me in believing... that there are exactly twenty-five people in the room, seems to be an equal warrant for the conclusion... that there are fewer than one hundred people in the room. The deduction [in this case], therefore, has an inefficient structure... It nonetheless seems clear that it transmits (doxastic) justification to its conclusion.

This seems correct and, moreover, applicable to the epistemic property of blamelessness. What it brings out is the importance of distinguishing between transmission of grounds for blamelessness (or warrant) and transmission of blameless belief (or doxastic justification).

⁵Discussion of transmission failure has so far focused on the epistemic properties of *warrant* and *doxastic justification*. My discussion below adapts these claims to the present context where the relevant epistemic property is *blamelessness*. My references in the text should then be understood as indications of where to find similar claims about either warrant or doxastic justification, as opposed to where to find corroborations of the claims I am making about blame.

An inference with ineffective structure cannot provide a ground for its conclusions since the ground for at least one of its premises is already itself ground for the conclusion. John’s ideal reflection, for example, is already grounds for both q and p and John’s inference is not what is providing p with those grounds. But inferences with inefficient structures can nonetheless provide the conclusion with an *appropriate connection* to the relevant grounds (cf. Tucker 2010, 513-4). John has grounds for blamelessly believing that p , but is only blameless in that belief when his belief is appropriately connected to those grounds for blamelessness. This is the sense in which John’s inference transmits blameless belief without transmitting grounds for blamelessness: it provides an appropriate connection between John’s ideal reflection and his belief that the sun is shining. (BAT)’s inefficient structure, therefore, is no reason to think that it is false.

Consider one final alleged cause of transmission failure: *robust premise circularity*. This happens when one is justified in believing some premise in virtue of already being justified in believing the conclusion (cf. Tucker 2010, 214-16). But John’s is not a case of this kind either. John’s blamelessness for believing that q does not in any way depend on his blamelessness for believing that p . John’s beliefs share a common ground for blamelessness—John’s ideal reflection—but neither belief is itself a part of that ground.

4. Extending (BAT)

I have mounted a two-stage defense of (BAT) in sections 2 and 3. I’ve argued that (BAT) is intuitively plausible and that the most common properties suggested in the literature as reasons for transmission failure do not apply to it. It seems we have good reason to think that (BAT) is true.

(BAT), however, can be extended to the related deontological notions of epistemic *praise* and epistemic *responsibility*. Consider:

Praiseworthiness Ampliative Transmission (PAT):

If:

- (a) S believes that believing that p is justified (call this higher-order belief q)
- (b₁) S is epistemically praiseworthy in believing that q

Then:

- (c₁) If S forms the belief that p on the basis of q , then S is epistemically praiseworthy in believing that p .

and

Responsibility Ampliative Transmission (RAT):

If:

- (a) S believes that believing that p is justified (call this higher-order belief q)
- (b₂) S is epistemically responsible in believing that q

Then:

- (c₂) If S forms the belief that p on the basis of q , then S is epistemically responsible in believing that p .

Since the most common properties suggested in the literature as reasons for transmission failure are all *formal* properties as opposed to properties of the *content* of the relevant inferences, it follows that these properties do not apply to (PAT) and (RAT) if they do not apply to (BAT). This means that my defense of (BAT) in section 3 serves as a defense of (PAT) and (RAT) as well. This is one reason for thinking that they are true.

(PAT) and (RAT), moreover, seem equally intuitive. Think of John once again. Everything that is under John's control is being executed to perfection; John is not being derelict in any of his epistemic duties; and so on. I've already suggested that there are therefore no grounds for blaming John for having the false belief that the sun is shining. What grounds could there be for withholding praise or claiming that John is not being epistemically responsible? I can see no such grounds. John's ideal reflection, instead, seems quite appropriate as ground for his epistemic praiseworthiness and responsibility. In both these cases, as with blamelessness, the connection to truth seems entirely beside the point and the efforts of the agent seem to measure up. This is another reason for thinking that (PAT) and (RAT) are true.

5. Trouble for Deontological Internalism

Deontological internalism, as I will have it, is the claim that justification should be defined in agent-focused deontic terms. Many versions of deontological internalism so construed are currently in vogue.⁶ Weatherson, however, has argued that (BAT) creates a serious problem for versions formulated in terms of epistemic *blame* and has denied that a similar problem can be created for versions focused on epistemic *praise*. We are now in a position to see that Weatherson is mistaken in this last point.

Consider the following version of deontological internalism:

Blame (B): S is justified in believing that p iff S is blameless in believing that p .

Think of John one more time. (B) suggests that John's belief that the sun is shining is justified precisely because it is blameless. Now consider the following principle of *false reflection*:

False Reflection (F): It is possible for S to have a justified but false belief that her belief that p is justified.

⁶See, e. g., BonJour (2010), Booth (2012), Petersen (2013), and Smithies (forthcoming). Notice that my definition of deontological internalism leaves out deontological views where justification is *permissible* belief. Some of these views are externalist (e.g. Goldman 2009), but some are internalist as well (e.g. Wedgwood 2012). So there is a sense of "deontological internalism" that is not my target here.

Those who deny that justification and truth can ever come apart will naturally deny (F) as well. Those who do not deny that justification and truth can ever come apart will find it difficult to reject (F) in a way that is not *ad hoc*. Suppose that John considers whether to believe that *p*. He first reflects on what he takes as his evidential base; he then reflects on which inferential principles lead from his evidence to justified beliefs; he then finally reflects on whether there are any defeaters that are relevant in this situation. If justification and truth can sometimes come apart, then it is possible for John to have a justified but false belief about the contents of his evidential base, or about the relation between that base and *p*, or even about the presence of defeaters. *Human* ideal reflection, after all, is not *perfectly* ideal.⁷

Together, however, (BAT), (B) and (F) entail a contradiction (cf. Weatherson 2008, 568-9):

The Transmission Argument Against Blame:

1. S justifiedly, but falsely, believes that she is justified in believing *p*. (Instance of F)
2. On the basis of this belief, S comes to believe that *p*.
3. S blamelessly believes that she is justified in believing that *p*. (1, B)
4. S blamelessly believes that *p*. (2, 3, BAT)
5. S is justified in believing that *p*. (4, B)
6. S is justified in believing that *p* and S is not justified in believing that *p*. (1, 5)

The Transmission Argument suggests that (B) should be rejected.⁸ If I'm correct about (PAT) and (RAT), moreover, then similar transmission arguments can be pushed against versions of deontological internalism formulated in terms of epistemic *praise* and epistemic *responsibility*. What are Weatherson's reasons for resisting these extensions?⁹

⁷Importantly, none of these mistakes need to be attributable to John, as long as the relevant mental states are *non-transparent*. See Williamson (2000, ch. 4) for an influential argument that all interesting mental states are non-transparent.

⁸One might worry that there is no contradiction between (1) and (5) since (1) is a claim about what S is justified in believing *before* performing the relevant level-lowering inference. Taken in this way, that is, (1) says nothing about what S is justified in believing *after* performing that inference. Let me make two comments about this worry. First, I take it that (1) is, in fact, a claim about what S is justified in believing after the relevant level-lowering inference. The appropriate paraphrase of S's justified belief in this case would be: "I'm looking at my reasons for *p* and I believe that believing that *p* is justified for me." When one forms this justified higher-order belief, that is, one does not yet have the lower-order belief as well. We can say that (1) is future-directed in this way. Second, notice that the level-lowering inference that S performs subsequently simply *connects* *p* to the grounds that S mistakenly believes are good enough. The level-lowering inference, that is, is not itself a part of those grounds. (See my discussion of inferences with ineffective structure in section 2.) This means that the justifying power of those grounds with respect to *p* stay the same throughout. This is important, otherwise (1) would be false. When taken in this way—where (1) is future-directed and where the subsequent inference does not alter the grounds for *p*—(1) is both a true instance of F and in tension with (5). I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for bringing this worry to my attention and to Chris Tucker for discussion of the issue.

⁹Weatherson only discusses epistemic praise, so I'll focus exclusively on his reasons against (PAT). My claims in its defense, however, apply *mutatis mutandis* as a defense of (RAT).

(PAT) is a conditional, so it is false only if there can be instances where (a) and (b₁) are true while (c₁) is false. Weatherson (2008, 569) suggests one such instance: ‘the inference from *I am justified in believing that p* to *p* is not praiseworthy if the premise is false’ (his emphasis). Perhaps it is fair to take him here as suggesting, more exactly, that S’s belief that *p* is never praiseworthy if arrived at via a competent level-lowering ampliative inference where *q* is false. But this is very hard to maintain.

The extreme version of this suggestion would be that one can never be praiseworthy in believing something false. This would mean denying that only facts about the agent matter for the kind of epistemic evaluation that is focused on praise. But there are at least three reasons for resisting this denial and one further reason for resisting this suggestion in general.

First, the denial seems intuitively false: John’s ideal reflection does seem to ground his praiseworthiness in believing that the sun is shining. As I’ve mentioned in section 4, the intuitive defense of (BAT) in section 2 seems equally good as a defense of (PAT), and the agent-centeredness of deontic evaluations is central to that defense. Second, the denial seems at odds with our evaluations of *moral* praiseworthiness. Suppose a soldier jumps on top of a live grenade intending to sacrifice his life for the safety of the group. Suppose that his action causes the opposing side to send a mortar bomb next, this time killing five-times more people than they would’ve otherwise. Whatever we say about the rightness or wrongness of this soldier’s action—perhaps we think the consequences matter for that assessment—it seems intuitive that he is nonetheless praiseworthy for his sacrifice. Moral praiseworthiness, that is, seems agent-centered. Third, both of these intuitive judgments are buttressed by widely accepted accounts of moral and epistemic praiseworthiness. On these accounts, both praise and blame are evaluations of someone’s *reason-responsiveness*: S is praiseworthy or blameworthy for ϕ -ing, that is, when S ϕ ’s as a result of responding to what S perceives as sufficient reasons to ϕ . This is because praise and blame are assessments of the quality of someone’s will, and because the quality of someone’s will is revealed by how one responds to what one perceives as one’s reasons.¹⁰ Taken together, these three considerations give us good reason for thinking that only facts about the agent matter for the kind of epistemic evaluation that is focused on praise.

But these reasons, at any rate, can be put aside. This extreme suggestion would make it impossible for the antecedent of (PAT) to be true in the kinds of cases that are supposed to show it false. Challenging (PAT), that is, requires accepting that one can in fact be praiseworthy in believing something false.

The moderate version of this suggestion would be that one can never transmit the praise-

¹⁰For versions focused on *moral* praise and blame, see, e.g., Fischer & Ravizza (1998, 62-91) and Arpaly (2006, 16-7; 19); for versions focused on *epistemic* praise and blame, see, e.g., Ryan (2003, 70-74) and Hieronymi (2008, 359-363). I have argued elsewhere that our lack of voluntary control over our beliefs makes talk of epistemic praise and blame simply inappropriate (cf. Oliveira 2015, 393). My argument here is independent of that argument.

worthiness of a false belief. Here one avoids the main problem facing the extreme version just considered. But given the kind of transmission that is at stake in (PAT), this would mean denying that a false belief which is appropriately connected to grounds that make it praiseworthy can ever serve to appropriately connect another belief to grounds that would make *it* praiseworthy. Intuitively, once again, this seems false, specially when we notice that such failure cannot be explained by claiming that the relevant grounds are not good enough to make the further belief praiseworthy. The suggestion here would have to be that the quality of one's reflection would have been enough to make one praiseworthy in believing that *p*, had one not instead inferred *p* from some further belief also made praiseworthy by the quality of that reflection. But I've already suggested that this is implausible (section 2). Once we reflect on the kind of transmission that is at stake in these cases, that is, then we see that even the moderate version of Weatherson's suggestion should be rejected.

Conclusion

Since the two-stage defense of (BAT) mounted on sections 2 and 3 gives us good reason to think that (PAT) and (RAT) are true, versions of the Transmission Argument work equally well against versions of deontological internalism formulated in terms of epistemic praise and epistemic responsibility. As I have just argued, attempts to resist these damaging extensions are implausible. The moral, in fact, is quite general: if one attempts to draw a close connection between justification and an evaluation of how well the believer has carried herself given her situation—has she been blameless? has she been responsible? has she been praiseworthy?—then very plausible ampliative transmission principles and very plausible transmission arguments will lead one into a contradiction. Justification, that is, should be distinguished from the deontological appraisal of epistemic agency.

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