

Foreword

In the essay that follows, Nathan Shannon skillfully brings to light the connections between two aspects of my thought that I myself have never explicitly connected in my published writings, namely, the theory of situated rationality that I developed in my writings on epistemology, and the account of justice and shalom that I developed in my writings on topics in social ethics.

From the time I first began to think and write about epistemological matters, two topics especially have intrigued me. One was the picture of the belief-forming self that one finds in the work of Thomas Reid. We are all created, says Reid, with dispositions to form beliefs of certain kinds upon having experiences of certain sorts, and with dispositions to form new belief-forming dispositions upon having experiences of certain sorts. Examples of the latter sort of belief-forming dispositions are the multiplicity of dispositions that we all have to form inductive beliefs. Adults living in the midwestern part of the United States all have the disposition, upon seeing lightning, to believe that thunder will follow. Those who have this disposition acquired it; it was not innate. What was innate was the disposition to acquire this disposition.

In some of my writings I have described this aspect of Reid's thought as the *historicizing* of the belief-forming self. The belief-forming dispositions that one has, at any particular point in one's life after infancy, are in good measure the result of one's personal history.

The other topic that, from the beginning, intrigued me within the field of epistemology was the connection between belief and obligation. I share the view of Reid and most other philosophers that beliefs are formed by dispositions, not by volition. We don't believe some proposition because we decided to believe it. Yet we commonly say such things as, "You should have known the answer," "You should have known better," "You shouldn't just believe what your eyes tell you in such a situation," "You should have believed

what he told you.” But if “You should have believed what he told you” cannot be understood as elliptical for “You should have *decided* to believe what he told you,” how then is it to be understood?

To answer this question, I introduced the idea of *practices of inquiry*. Practices of inquiry are social practices aimed at finding something out. We all employ such practices. The practices of inquiry available to us vary to a considerable extent from person to person; their availability depends on the skills one has acquired, the state of technology in one’s society, and so forth. Though we cannot decide to believe or not believe some proposition, what we can decide to do is employ some practice of inquiry, the hoped-for result of such employment being that we come to believe something.

Belief and obligation are connected through the intermediation of practices of inquiry. For each of us there are practices of inquiry that we *ought* to employ. At this point I introduce the concepts of *being entitled* to some belief and of *not being entitled*. In contemporary analytic epistemology the term “rationality” often functions as a multivalent word for a number of distinct merits in beliefs. Entitlement is one of those. Roughly speaking, one is not entitled to a certain belief just in case there is some practice of inquiry that one ought to have employed but did not and which is such that, had one employed it, one would not hold that belief. The merit of entitlement is attached to some belief just in case the demerit of non-entitlement is not. One is entitled to a belief that one has if it is permissible for one to have it.

And how do we determine which practices of inquiry a particular person is obligated to employ? Some philosophers have held that we are dealing here with a distinct species of obligation, purely intellectual obligation, and that it is possible to give a universalistic formulation of the obligation. That was the view, for example, of Roderick Chisholm, who wrote: “We may assume that every person is subject to a purely intellectual requirement—that of trying his best to bring it about that, for every proposition *h* that he considers, he accepts *h* if and only if *h* is true.”

My own view is that there are no purely intellectual obligations; the practices of inquiry that one is obligated to employ are a function of one’s obligations in general. And the obligations that one has vary from person to person depending on one’s situation: one’s maturity, one’s role in society, the state of knowledge in one’s society, and so forth. The theory of rationality (entitlement) that I develop is thus a theory of *situated rationality*.

Shannon lays out these ideas lucidly in chapters 2 and 3 of his essay. He then goes on to note that while my theory of rationality (entitlement) depends crucially on the concept of obligation, in my writings on epistemology I offer no account of obligation. I assume that there are obligations and that, to a considerable extent, these vary from person to person; and I

let it go at that. What Shannon then rightly observes is that my writings on justice and shalom fill in the gap.

The Hebrew word *shalom* occurs often in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. In most English translations it is translated as “peace”; I strongly prefer translating it as flourishing. An indispensable component of flourishing, as it is understood in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, is that the members of society treat each other justly—treat each other as they are obligated to treat each other. Genuine flourishing goes beyond doing what we ought to do and beyond being treated justly; but those are its ground floor. I hold that a person’s obligations are determined by what she, in her situation, is required to do by way of pursuing the shalom of her neighbors and herself. Thus it is that Shannon speaks of my *shalom doxastic ethics*. It’s not a term that I myself used; but I gladly accept it.

The final two chapters of Shannon’s essay are a judicious discussion of the ways in which my Christian convictions have shaped my philosophical thought on these matters. I will refrain from giving the reader a peek in advance at what he says.

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