In Chapter 1 we highlighted the two dimensions of perspective and truth conducivity that any adequate theory of epistemic justification should incorporate and be accountable to. We then discussed a number of well-known accounts of the nature of epistemic justification and found that, one way or another, they failed to respect and heed these constraints, thus, only compounding the confusion over the precise nature of epistemic justification. The increasing sophistication (often in an ad hoc manner) of current theories of justification and the ensuing disarray have prompted some theorists to deny its privileged place in epistemology, and redefine the debate in different terms (cf. my discussion of Alston in section 1.6; Plantinga 1993; Haack 1993). In this chapter, I shall try to articulate and defend one theory of justification (the so-called “deontological” conception) that, I claim, is able to accommodate the above concerns. Let us then begin by setting the stage for introducing the deontological conception of epistemic justification.

Judging by our previous discussions, while there are currently a number of different alternative accounts of justification on offer, they can, nonetheless, be divided into the two broad categories of deontological and nondeontological theories. There are, on the one hand, those (deontological) theories that link epistemic justification with epistemically responsible action and there are, on the other hand, those which deny that justification involves the fulfillment of epistemic duty. It is, nonetheless, generally agreed that the most basic and fundamental notion of epistemic justification is the traditional Cartesian-Lockean conception usually construed in terms of the fulfillment of epistemic duty or obligation. Many find the notion of justification as somehow devoid of content when “cut loose from considerations of obligation and blame” (Alston 1985, fn. 21). Generally known as the deontological
conception of epistemic justification, it takes justification to be a function of how an agent has formed his beliefs vis-à-vis the fulfillment or violation of his epistemic obligations and duties. Thus, to say that a belief is deontologically justified ($J_d$) is to say that in holding that belief, the cognizer has flouted no epistemic obligations, and is, thus, subject to no blame or disapproval.

It is important, however, to note that epistemic obligations are sharply distinguished from, say, moral or prudential obligations. This is sometimes done by emphasizing the impartial and disinterested perspective that gives rise to such obligations (Ginet 1975; Feldman 1988), but, more naturally, epistemic obligations are marked as being concerned with ways of achieving, what we have called the “truth goal,” namely, the goal of believing the true and not believing the false. Despite its illustrious history, however, the deontological conception of justification has, in recent years, come under attack primarily on the grounds of presupposing the implausible thesis of doxastic voluntarism and for failing to be truth-conducive. In what follows, I shall argue that both these charges are unfounded. I begin however by examining certain attempts at introducing and articulating the deontological conception of justification. A closer look at the debate would reveal that these attempts usually help themselves with question-begging assumptions and unargued premises.

One of the most extensive treatments of this conception of justification is that of William Alston who, in a series of articles, seeks to identify its proper form and assess its feasibility by comparing it to other accounts of epistemic justification (Alston 1985, 1988). While discussions of this topic are often carried out against the background of internalism/externalism debate, a plausible feature of Alston’s treatment is that he tries to steer his discussion away from those controversies. Accordingly, I find it more appropriate to focus on his account of the debate when seeking to contrast deontological and non-deontological conceptions of justification. In what follows, I begin by evaluating Alston’s strategy in delineating the deontological conception, and then try to show that the main reasons often adduced in rejecting this conception are inadequate. In the course of the discussion I shall also consider the contributions of other theorists to the debate when appropriate.

### 2.1 The deontological approach

We may recall that to say of a belief that it is epistemically justified is to appraise it favorably from the epistemic point of view and assign