

When in Doubt, Withhold: A defense of two grounds of rational withholding

A.K. Flowerree (amy.flowerree@ttu.edu)

Winter 2021, Texas Tech University

To Appear in “Epistemic Dilemmas: New Arguments, New Angles”
ed. Kevin McCain, Scott Stapleford, and Matthias Steup, Routledge Press

Introduction

Moral dilemmas arise when an agent finds themselves in an untenable situation: no matter what course of action the agent takes, they will act wrongly. Sartre gives the example of a young man who must choose between going to battle to avenge his brother’s death, and staying home to care for his aging mother.¹ If he goes, he fails to care for his mother. But if he stays, he fails to avenge his brother’s death. Either way, he has failed to do something he ought to do.

It is a matter of some debate whether moral dilemmas are insoluble.² It is possible that after extensive moral theorizing we are able to work out a framework under which all moral dilemmas are merely apparent. But setting aside the success of this larger project, moral dilemmas are a familiar existential problem. We often find ourselves faced with difficult, morally fraught decisions with no clearly correct alternatives.

A similar existential problem arises when we wrestle over what to believe. We often find ourselves unsure whether something is true. We wrestle with the evidence, we try out various hypotheses, and sometimes, we cannot settle on an answer. In this case, unlike the moral case, we have an option available to us. We can withhold judgment. Epistemologists have generally rested content that there can be no epistemic dilemmas, guided by a conviction that the principle *when in doubt, withhold* avoids epistemic dilemmas. If evidence does not permit belief or disbelief, then one ought to withhold judgment.³ How could withholding judgment fail to be permitted in such a case?

Recent work has argued that there may be cases where no attitude – including withholding – is rationally permissible.⁴ In this paper, I consider two such epistemic dilemmas, John Turri’s Dilemma from Testimony and David Alexander’s Dilemma from Doubt. Turri presents a case where one’s only

¹ Sartre (2007).

² Conee (1982).

³ Sometimes, the attitude of withholding judgment is referred to as *suspending* judgment. In recent work, Jane Friedman has developed an account of suspending judgment that is closely tied to inquiry. See Friedman (2013) and (2017). In this paper, I use the term *withholding* to refer to an attitude of non-commitment towards *p*. This is in keeping with the authors with whom I’m engaging. Friedman’s notion of suspending judgment is closely tied to her account of inquiry. In what follows, I wish to remain neutral on the relationship between inquiry and withholding.

⁴ See Turri (2012) and Alexander (2013). Other epistemic dilemmas have been discussed. See Leonard (2020) and Hughes (2019) for epistemic dilemmas that turn on conflict between rational or normative principles. I am not addressing these versions of potential epistemic dilemmas. Odegaard (1992) and Conee (1993) discuss an epistemic dilemma where coming to believe some proposition will undermine the justification one has for that proposition by undermining its truth.

evidence rules out withholding (without warranting belief or disbelief). Alexander presents a case where higher order doubt means one must withhold judgment over whether withholding judgment is rational. In both cases, the authors conclude that no doxastic attitude is warranted.

In this paper, I argue against the possibility of these epistemic dilemmas. I argue that withholding cannot be irrational in either case. But meditating on the dilemmas gives us an important – and overlooked – insight into the nature of rational withholding. First, rational withholding is a function of evidence failing to sufficiently support belief or disbelief. As a result, withholding is not symmetrical to belief and disbelief. Second, there can be two distinct grounds for rational withholding. First, *propositional withholding*, which arises when our evidence does not support belief or disbelief in p . And second, *doxastic withholding*, which arises when we cannot determine whether our evidence supports belief or disbelief in p . Accepting two grounds of rational withholding licenses a kind of Weak Permissivism. But this Weak Permissivism should not be troubling to anyone.

The Case for Epistemic Dilemmas

On a standard view of rational belief, there are three doxastic attitudes a believer might take towards a proposition, p . When considering *whether p ?* the believer may believe, disbelieve, or withhold judgment with respect to p .⁵ The rational believer's doxastic attitudes are determined by her evidence.⁶ She follows the evidential constraint, (R).

- (R) For any proposition p , considered by some subject, S, who possesses some body of evidence E, if S holds any doxastic attitude (belief, disbelief, withholding) toward p , it is the one supported by E.

Later, I will argue that (R) needs to be nuanced in order to capture what doxastic attitudes a rational agent should adopt when considering p . But it is enough to get the general picture. If Priscilla is considering whether her beloved Red Sox will win the game today, she will examine the evidence available to her. She will look at the Red Sox's win-loss record, and the win-loss record of the team that they are scheduled to play. She will examine the stats of the players and their overall health. Once she has evaluated her evidence, she can judge that yes, they will win the game; no, they will lose the game, or she could withhold judgment about whether they will win the game. The rational attitude for her to have is the one that fits her evidence.

To this view, we will add an assumption about rationality, Optimism.⁷

⁵ In a recent paper, Smart (forthcoming) has argued that disbelieving p should be understood as a distinct attitude from believing $\sim p$.

⁶ By evidence, I do not mean any particular conception of evidence. This should be amenable to both internalist and externalist conceptions of justification.

⁷ Turri calls this assumption *optimism*. I will follow him with the terminology, but it seems more commonsensical than optimistic.

(Optimism) For any body of evidence, E, and proposition p , at least one attitude (belief, disbelief, withholding) will be rationally sanctioned by E.

Optimism is a fairly weak assumption, one that should be widely endorsed. It says that for any body of evidence, that evidence will either be sufficient to support belief that p , or it will be sufficient to support the disbelief of p , or it will not clearly support either, in which case it supports withholding judgment. What it denies is that there could be some body of evidence that warrants no attitude whatsoever towards p . This assumption is fairly intuitive. Consider:

Suppose Priscilla is considering whether the Red Sox will win the World Series. But her only evidence is that '2+2=4' and 'Springfield is the capital of Illinois'. She has no evidence that directly bears on whether the Red Sox will win the World Series.

We might think that the evidence cannot be properly said to justify any attitude towards the Red Sox's chances because it's not about the Red Sox at all. But one of the attitudes open to Priscilla is that of *withholding*. If your evidence supports neither p nor the negation of p , then it does support *withholding judgment*. To withhold judgment just is to refrain from making a judgment about p . And this seems the rational response. The evidence is not sufficient to believe p nor sufficient to disbelieve p . The remaining option is to withhold. If the evidence has no bearing on p whatsoever, it will make withholding rational.

Optimism does not entail Uniqueness.⁸ It does not hold that *exactly* one attitude is justified by a body of evidence (nor that *at most* one attitude is justified). Optimism is consistent with Permissivism. Permissivism holds that for some propositions and bodies of evidence, more than one doxastic attitude may be rational to have towards p . Optimism should be endorsed by proponents of Uniqueness and Permissivism.

While we are distinguishing various attitudes someone might take towards p , there are a few more that are worth mentioning. First, we should distinguish between *considering whether p* and *withholding with respect to p* .⁹ When you are considering whether p , you have opened deliberation and are evaluating your evidence. Considering whether p is not a doxastic attitude. It can be instigated for practical reasons (a desire to know a tidbit) and can be terminated for practical reasons (being distracted). But it does involve inquiry, which is a truth-directed enterprise. Not all inquiry results in a doxastic attitude. Another potential outcome is *placing on hold whether p* . When we place on hold, we don't close deliberation, but we don't continue it either. It's just on hold.¹⁰

⁸ See Kopeck and Titelbaum (2016) for an overview of the relevant issues.

⁹ It is an open question whether inquiry is broader than considering. On some accounts of inquiry, they will be the same. On others, inquiry may include collecting data, reading books, seeking out shaman, sharpening one's mental skills, and a range of other actions.

¹⁰ Putting on hold is not a doxastic attitude. First, it is not an attitude. It does not involve an attitude towards p (or any proposition). Putting on hold differs from withholding just by failing to be an attitude towards p . Second, it is not doxastic. Putting on hold is not responsive to epistemic reasons or evidence. Instead, it is responsive to practical reasons (e.g., getting bored or distracted).

The Dilemma from Testimony

Now we are in a position to see the puzzle. In his paper, “A Puzzle about Withholding,” John Turri puts forward what I will call the Dilemma from Testimony.¹¹

MATH

Suppose mathematicians have gathered for their annual prove-athon meeting. The task is for one mathematician to put forward a surprising but valid proof. The mathematicians will then debate whether the conclusion follows from the premises. You are waiting outside and record the verdict from each mathematician as they leave the room. Suppose each mathematician comes out and tells you, “You should not withhold judgment about whether the proof is valid!” You attempt to get more information, “So is it valid or invalid, then?” “Oh, I didn’t tell you yet!” several reply, but they are too engrossed in conversation to say more.

Let’s let p be “the proof is valid.” The totality of your evidence for the truth of p is the mathematicians telling you not to withhold judgment (you do not even know what the proof looks like, suppose). So what should you do? You cannot believe p , because you don’t have any evidence telling you to do that. You cannot disbelieve p , because you don’t have any evidence telling you to do that. The only attitude left is for you to *withhold* with respect to p . But the totality of your evidence consists of testimony that this is not the attitude you should take. If the evidence was “do not believe p ” or “do not disbelieve p ,” the upshot would be that the attitude of belief or disbelief are ruled out. Withholding should be no different, Turri argues.

And yet, if that’s true then it seems no doxastic attitude towards p is permissible. You shouldn’t believe p . You shouldn’t disbelieve p . And (it seems) you shouldn’t withhold with respect to p . We get an epistemic Dilemma.

The Dilemma from Doubt

Our second case for an epistemic dilemma makes use of higher order attitudes. This is a Dilemma from Doubt. Here, Alexander proposes, is a plausible principle of higher order defeat.¹²

(COHERE) One’s attitude A towards proposition p is justified only if one neither justifiably disbelieves nor justifiably withholds belief as to whether one is justified in having attitude A towards p .

COHERE embodies what many have thought to be a commonsense principle of rationality, namely inter-level coherence.¹³ COHERE is a claim about when one’s higher order evidence can defeat a first order attitude. Suppose Casey is a very good logic student, but is also absent minded and very prone to mistakes when his blood sugar is low. Casey and Mara are both aware of this fact about Casey.

¹¹ Turri himself calls this an “Epistemic Impasse.” He prefers to reserve the terminology of “dilemma” for a case where two or more options are required and not jointly satisfiable, rather than a case where either action involves doing something impermissible. Nothing rides on the choice of terminology, I think.

¹² Alexander calls this principle ‘RJG.’ I have renamed it to be more euphonious.

¹³ Silva (2016) gives an account of the importance of inter-level coherence.

Casey completes a difficult logic puzzle and thinks with satisfaction that he has done a great job. The logic puzzle was by no means obvious, yet Casey feels confident he did well. But then Mara asks whether Casey remembered to eat today, and Casey realizes he has not. Due to his high error rate when his blood sugar is low, he questions whether he is justified in his belief he completed the problem correctly. Let p be the proposition “I completed the logic puzzle correctly” and q be the proposition, “I am justified in believing p .” Since Casey justifiably disbelieves q , then according COHERE, Casey is not justified in believing p .

Now suppose that Casey cannot remember whether he ate today, but thinks there is a moderately good chance that he did not. In this case, he withholds judgment about whether q . According to COHERE, if Casey withholds judgment with respect to q , then Casey is not justified in believing p .

Here’s how Casey can follow COHERE. If the first order attitude – Casey’s belief that p – is believed or disbelieved, but the higher order attitude withholds or disbelieves whether the belief that p is justified, then it seems plausible that what Casey ought to do to resolve the rational tension is withhold with respect to p . So if Casey is justified in believing he forgot to eat, then he ought to withhold judgment on whether he solved the logic puzzle. And if Casey can’t remember but thinks there’s a good chance he didn’t eat, he should also withhold judgment on whether he solved the logic puzzle.

But what if the first order attitude was already *withholding judgment*? Alexander asks us to consider this case:

SIMON

Alfred and Simon are debating external world skepticism. They are considering the proposition, p , “I have hands.” They both agree they should not disbelieve p . But after reviewing all the arguments for external world skepticism, they are both uncertain whether they would be justified in believing p . Alfred goes with believing p , and Simon criticizes him for believing p while being unsure whether the evidence justifies p . Alfred fails to satisfy COHERE. Simon withholds judgment whether p . But Alfred criticizes Simon on the same grounds. Withholding on p , while being genuinely uncertain whether the evidence justifies withholding also fails to satisfy COHERE.

Simon’s case has the following structure. He withholds with respect to p , but he also withholds whether the evidence justifies withholding. This violates COHERE because it involves withholding on whether the first order judgment is justified. In Casey’s case, it was clear he should shift his judgment from believing p to withholding with respect to p . But Simon’s case presents a troubling possibility. Simon cannot be justified in disbelieving, nor believing (else he’d be in the same boat with Alfred), nor withholding. It seems no doxastic attitude is justified for Simon. Simon is in an epistemic dilemma.

Simon must endorse either (A) or (B):

- (A) “I withhold belief as to whether I have hands, but I am not justified in withholding belief as to whether I have hands.”
- (B) “I withhold belief as to whether I have hands, but I withhold belief as to whether I am justified in withholding belief as to whether I have hands.”

These statements show, Alexander thinks, that justified higher order doubts render the first order attitudes unjustified.

Cases like MATH may not occur very often. But cases like SIMON are nearby. Not only can we imagine someone like Simon withholding about whether the external world exists. We can also imagine him withholding about whether the evidence clearly shows the evidence to be sufficient. And we can imagine him telling us, “I am withholding judgment about whether there is an external world *because* I am withholding judgment about whether the evidence supports this claim.” And even if, dispositionally, many of us are an Alfred – believing there is an external world, though withholding on whether the arguments are sufficient – we have no difficulty imagining that we are talking to a Simon. Indeed Simon is in a familiar position. He is wondering whether the evidence he has supports some conclusion. And he is unable to judge whether it does or does not. According to COHERE, no attitude would be rational.

One might think that the problem here is COHERE. Perhaps we shouldn’t accept a principle of inter-level coherence.¹⁴ Or perhaps we shouldn’t accept *this* principle of inter-level coherence (and I will argue below that we shouldn’t). But it turns out that we can formulate the problem without relying on COHERE. Simon is in a situation where his evidence either supports the conclusion or it doesn’t, and he can’t tell which. If it supports the conclusion, he ought to believe the conclusion. If it doesn’t support the conclusion, he ought not believe the conclusion. He ought to withhold. But he cannot determine whether the evidence adequately supports the conclusion, so he cannot determine whether he ought to withhold. He can rule out disbelief. But should he withhold? According to (R), Simon ought to withhold just in case the evidence supports withholding. But that is the very question Simon cannot settle. And if he cannot determine whether his evidence warrants withholding, the thought goes, he cannot settle on that attitude. In short, there is no attitude available to Simon.

The Dilemma from Testimony gave a case where one’s only evidence ruled out withholding, and so no attitude seemed rational. In MATH, the only evidence you have for p is that you should not withhold with respect to p . But you cannot rationally believe p , and you cannot rationally disbelieve p . And if you withhold, you will have adopted exactly the attitude your evidence says not to adopt. The Dilemma from Doubt gave a case where one could not settle on which attitude was rational, and so no attitude seems rational. In SIMON, Simon rationally withholds over whether he should withhold with respect to p . But according to COHERE, then there is no attitude that Simon can rationally take

¹⁴ The debate on Misleading Higher Order Evidence queries whether we should accept COHERE. See, for example, Horowitz, (2014) and Lasonen-Aarnio, (2014).

towards p . And even without COHERE, if Simon cannot settle what the evidence supports, he cannot settle whether he can rationally withhold.

The Dilemma from Testimony and the Dilemma from Doubt present cases where no attitude – not even withholding – can be rational. In the next section I will argue that the problem with both of these dilemmas is that they wrongly treat belief and disbelief as symmetrical to withholding. Instead, we need to carefully formulate the conditions of rational withholding. Once we do this, we see that belief, disbelief, and withholding are not symmetrical attitudes. We can resolve these dilemmas by deepening our understanding of rational withholding.

Two Grounds of Withholding

The Dilemma from Testimony has a straightforward, though counterintuitive, solution. The answer is that one ought to withhold judgment. On Turri's setup, he assumes that if the content of the evidence is "Don't believe p " then one ought to not believe p ; if it's "don't disbelieve p " then one ought to not disbelieve p ; and if it's "don't withhold on p " then one ought to not withhold on p . The content of the evidence is transparent to the rationality of the attitude. And belief, disbelief, and withholding are symmetrical in this respect. Since the content of the mathematician's assertion was "don't withhold on p ," and belief and disbelief are ruled out, if we assume symmetry of rational attitudes, the puzzle emerges.

It seems fair that the content of the evidence would rule out belief and disbelief. So "don't believe!" or "don't disbelieve!" rationally rules out the attitudes of believing or disbelieving, respectively. If the evidence rules out belief, then one ought not to believe, and the same for disbelief. But what is required for evidence to rationally rule out withholding? Can it be irrational to withhold without it being rational to believe or disbelieve? Nowhere does Turri give us principles for what determines rational believing, disbelieving, and withholding. But here is a plausible suggestion.

(RB) The rational believer follows the following rules:

(Believe) She believes p just in case her evidence for p is sufficiently strong.

(Disbelieve) She disbelieves p just in case her evidence against p is sufficiently strong.

(Withhold) She withholds judgment regarding p just in case her evidence for p is not sufficient for belief or disbelief in p .

On (RB), belief and disbelief are not symmetrical to withholding. Belief and disbelief are understood in terms of the evidence being sufficiently strong for holding some attitude. Withholding is understood as a function of neither (Believe) nor (Disbelieve) determining what is rational. If (Believe) and (Disbelieve) provide no guidance, then the believer ought to withhold. Thus, in MATH, you ought to withhold. It's true that the evidence (the mathematicians' testimony) says "don't withhold on p ." But

this evidence does not give sufficient evidence for belief or disbelief in p . So according to the principle of rational withholding, one ought to withhold with respect to p .¹⁵

The solution is counterintuitive because following the evidence results in forming exactly the attitude that the mathematicians enjoin you not to have. This cannot happen with belief or disbelief. If the totality of one's evidence is "don't believe p " then one does not believe it, one withholds. If the totality of one's evidence is "don't disbelieve p " then one does not disbelieve it, one withholds. But if the totality of the evidence is "don't withhold on p ," according to (Withholding), one ought to still withhold.

One might push back. It is surely paradoxical that one ought to withhold when the totality of one's evidence enjoins one not to withhold. But, I think, this is not the complete description of one's evidence. The rational principle is to believe when the evidence says believe, disbelieve when it says disbelieve, and in all other cases withhold. The testimony of the mathematicians tells you, "Withholding is not the right attitude" but since this is all you know, you can infer, "Disbelief is not the right attitude;" and "Belief is not the right attitude" and, from (RB) you can conclude, "if disbelief is not the right attitude, and belief is not the right attitude, then withholding is the right attitude." Background rational principles, plus the paucity of evidence, defeat the mathematician's testimony. You ought to withhold.

The important lesson here is that withholding is not symmetrical with belief and disbelief. The content of the evidence can prohibit belief and disbelief by merely including that prohibition in the evidence. Not so with withholding. One can rationally withhold only if the evidence is not sufficient for belief or disbelief in p . But if the evidence says "do not withhold" without giving you sufficient evidence to believe or disbelieve, the rational response is still to withhold. Whatever guides rational withholding answers to different considerations than its straightforward compatriots, belief and disbelief. I will expand on these asymmetries in a moment.

Will this same swift answer work for the Dilemma of Doubt? Sadly, no. While in MATH we saw that withholding is a function of how the evidence supports belief or disbelief, this is not what is going on in SIMON.

Simon and Alvin are unsure whether the evidence is sufficient for p . The evidence either supports belief or withholding. Simon goes with withholding. But then Alvin criticizes him that he ought to withhold on whether withholding is the right attitude. This is true because it might be that the evidence supports belief (as Alvin contends). But if Simon is required to withhold over whether withholding is rational, then it seems there is no attitude left for him to have towards p . In MATH, we saw that, despite appearances, the evidence actually supports withholding. But we cannot use that move here. That is because according to (Withholding), withholding is appropriate only if there is neither sufficient evidence to believe nor disbelieve. And Simon's very question is whether there is sufficient

¹⁵ Comesaña (2013) makes a similar suggestion.

evidence to believe. There may be sufficient evidence, and there may not, and that is the issue. Since COHERE requires that he withhold on his withholding, we get the dilemma.

So the quick fix does not work. But we might explore whether there are other asymmetries between belief and disbelief on the one hand, and withholding on the other. We already noted that rational withholding is a *via negativa*. It is a function of whether the evidence fails to make rational belief or disbelief. This makes withholding a kind of catch-all attitude. This means that it does not hold a symmetrical place in the rationality economy, but rather a contrastive one.

Another asymmetry: notice that belief that p and disbelief that p involve a kind of world-oriented commitment about p . It involves staking a claim about the way the world is. By contrast, withholding is not a commitment to anything being the case in the actual world. It is only a reflection of one's evidential relationship to p . This makes it tempting to conclude that withholding just is a higher order attitude. It is not so much a judgment about p as it is a judgment about whether one's evidential situation is sufficient to support a commitment to p (or a commitment to $\sim p$). This notion of withholding – withholding as a reflection of one's evidential situation – is *about* p but is not an attitude *toward* p . Now, withholding need not be a higher order attitude. It could be a committed non-commitment towards p . But regardless of the precise contours of the attitude, it is clear that belief and disbelief involve making a claim about the world, and withholding need not. This makes a strong asymmetry between belief, disbelief on the one hand, and withholding, on the other.

Finally, while one can ground one's commitment to the truth of p by having sufficient evidence for p , there are many ways one might be uncertain. One's evidence could favor p , but one might worry it is not representative. It could favor p , but you worry it is not very good quality evidence. Or it could have no bearing on p at all. All three conditions are grounds for withholding, and they have subtle differences. But there is another sort of difference, one that is present in SIMON, which it is important to acknowledge. This is when one has evidence, but one is totally unsure what that evidence says. Consider these two cases:

UNPUZZLING

A large urn filled with balls that are either red or white. You know that half of the balls are red and half are white, and they are evenly distributed in the urn. In this case, your evidence warrants withholding belief on the proposition that “the next ball pulled from the urn will be red.” Your evidence gives a 50/50 chance to the next ball being red, and so your evidence does not warrant belief and it does not warrant disbelief. Ergo, it warrants withholding judgment.

PUZZLING

A large urn is filled with balls. You know that all the balls in the urn are either red or white. You are given an elaborate set of instructions requiring complicated inferences and multi-step reasoning. You are told that if you do the calculations correctly it will tell you what the next color of ball will be. You've stared hard at these calculations for several hours now. You know

the evidence definitively supports belief or disbelief in the claim “the next ball pulled from the urn will be red.” But you are not confident you have worked out the right answer. In this case, your evidence supports belief or disbelief, but you cannot tell which. Here, it seems, you ought to withhold judgment.

In the first case, you ought to withhold because your evidence is not sufficient for belief or disbelief. In the second case, you ought to withhold judgment, but you should not judge that your evidence is insufficient to ground a judgment of p . That is because your evidence includes the knowledge that the body of evidence you are considering conclusively settles p . So it seems that we have two distinct grounds for withholding, one that arises from inconclusive evidence, and one that arises from one’s inability to synthesize the evidence.

Seen this way, the asymmetry between belief, disbelief and withholding becomes stronger. One could possess evidence that warrants belief and yet withhold because one could not believe on the basis of that evidence. But this is not symmetrical to belief and disbelief. Suppose your evidence supports withholding, but you are completely unable to appreciate anything but the evidence in favor of p . This doesn’t make believing the rational attitude. Inability to appreciate the force of the evidence tends towards making rational withholding, but inability does not make rational believing or disbelieving.¹⁶

The first kind of withholding, the one present in UNPUZZLING, is withholding grounded in the evidence itself. Let’s call this kind of withholding, *Propositional Withholding*. Propositional Withholding is captured by (Withholding), the principle above. But I have argued here that PUZZLING represents a distinct kind of withholding, one that we might call *Doxastic Withholding*. Doxastic withholding arises because sometimes the agent is not in a position to appreciate what her evidence supports.

Some will want to resist this push to recognize two kinds of rational withholding. We could claim that in PUZZLING, you do not *possess* the relevant evidence. That is, you possess the relevant individual pieces of evidence, but you lack the important inferential piece of evidence, “this body of evidence supports p .” And since you do not possess this important inferential piece of evidence, you ought to withhold.¹⁷

Unfortunately, this move will not work. We can bring out the need for the second kind of withholding by discussing *Meta-Evaluations*. Let’s suppose there were only one ground for withholding. In cases like PUZZLING and SIMON, you and Simon are in a position to know that your evidence is either conclusive or not. You are just not in a position to appreciate which. You are considering a *Meta-Evaluation*. A Meta-Evaluation is a proposition of the form, “Conclusion, C, follows from set of Evidence, E.” In the case of a Meta-Evaluation, as long as you possess E, you know that your evidence will either establish or fail to establish p . It will not fail to establish either. In MATH, p is a Meta-Evaluation (though, in the scenario you did not have access to E, you can know that the proof either establishes or fails to establish the conclusion). It is either true or false that the conclusion of a proof

¹⁶ See Silva (2017) and Smithies (2015).

¹⁷ Feldman (2000) makes this claim.

follows from the premises. In SIMON, the evidence either adequately supports the conclusion “I have hands” or it does not. As a result, Simon and Albert can both know that either the evidence sufficiently supports p or it fails to do so. If it supports p , they ought to believe p , if it fails to support p , they ought to withhold. But what they should not do is withhold on “ p is sufficiently supported by my evidence.”

Other Meta-Evaluations will be propositions like, “The evidence presented at trial shows the defendant guilty beyond a reasonable doubt” or “our weather forecasting model predicts it will rain tomorrow.” Meta-evaluations are propositions whose content considers whether some conclusion follows from some body of evidence. It may be quite complicated to work out, but if a proposition is a Meta-Evaluation, then its truth (or falsity) is guaranteed by the body of evidence it refers to.

Any time you are considering a Meta-Evaluation, as long as you possess the evidence from which the Meta-Evaluation is drawn, you can know that the evidence does not support withholding. This is because if you have the evidence, and the question at hand is whether some conclusion follows from the evidence, there is no extra information you need to determine that truth. You have the totality of evidence, and it will be conclusive, one way or the other. To illustrate, consider:

SHERLOCK

Holmes and Watson are surveying the scene of the crime. Holmes and Watson discuss what they see. With uncharacteristic generosity, Holmes fills in Watson on his background knowledge on the local train schedule and the origin of the tobacco ashes left on the table. At the end of listing out all the evidence, Watson puts his head in hands despondently. “There’s just not enough information to know whether this is the work of Moriarty!” he says. Holmes replies, “Nonsense. This is adequate evidence to see whether it was Moriarty.”

Holmes and Watson are looking at the same evidence. Holmes is able to tell whether it is the work of Moriarty, but Watson cannot. Let’s suppose that Holmes rightly concludes, p , “the evidence supports it was not Moriarty.” And so – appropriately – Watson withholds with respect to p . And – appropriately – Holmes believes p . The difference cannot be that Holmes’ evidence includes the inferential belief, “the evidence supports it was not Moriarty” since that is the proposition in question. The difference is that Holmes has an ability to perform the inference, one that Watson has not yet mastered. And so what we need to make space for is the idea that a believer might have grounds for withholding because they are unable to properly base their belief on their evidence. Both Holmes and Watson have propositional justification to believe that the evidence supports it was not Moriarty. But only Holmes would be doxastically justified in believing it. Since Watson cannot yet believe on the basis of his evidence, the attitude he is rational to take towards p is withholding.

SHERLOCK illuminates an important feature about rational withholding. Sometimes it is rational to withhold because the evidence supports withholding. And sometimes it’s rational to withhold because one cannot tell what one’s evidence does support. One kind of withholding is a feature of the evidence. The other kind of withholding is a feature of one’s relation to the evidence. Let’s call the first kind *Propositional Withholding*, and the second *Doxastic Withholding*.

The SIMON case has a strange feature, one that reveals a substantive and unintuitive commitment that Alexander is making. Suppose the story were told with the two propositions reversed. Simon and Alvin debate over external world skepticism. They both withhold on whether the evidence supports skepticism. And then when asked, “But do you accept skepticism?” Simon says, “I withhold on that too, because I withhold on whether the evidence supports it.” There is nothing perplexing about Simon’s assertion. In fact, we might think that Simon is doing the rational thing.

And here, we see another asymmetry between belief and disbelief on the one hand, and withholding on another. According to COHERE, it is irrational to have an attitude that one rationally withholds on whether it is rationally permissible. For belief and disbelief, this has intuitive plausibility. Alvin should not believe p while withholding whether p is justified. He should not disbelieve p while withholding whether p is justified. It is not sensible to say, “I withhold over whether the evidence supports p , and so I believe p .”

But withholding because one withholds on whether the evidence supports p sounds very sensible. While COHERE rules this out, that seems to be a strike against COHERE rather than anything else. As I mentioned above, it’s possible that the attitude of withholding over p just is the higher order judgment that my evidence is inconclusive towards p . So if I withhold over whether my evidence is conclusive, I have thereby withheld with respect to p . I am not committed to this view of the nature of withholding, but regardless, the rational grounds for withholding seem to be, in part, grounded in an assessment of one’s evidential position towards p .

Perhaps we should restate COHERE to acknowledge the intuitive asymmetry. We would just restrict A to the attitudes of belief and disbelief.

COHERE₂ One’s attitude A towards proposition P is justified only if one neither justifiably disbelieves nor justifiably withholds belief as to whether one is justified in having attitude A towards P.

But as I mentioned above, fixing COHERE wouldn’t fix the root of the problem. We can state a version of the puzzle without it. The root of the problem has to do with the way we formulated rational withholding. This is because there is no room in (Withholding) for the agent’s ability or inability to suss out the meaning of the evidence. As long as the evidence involves a Meta-Evaluation, the agent can know that the evidence will favor belief or disbelief, never suspension. And yet, the agent could be genuinely unsure of the upshot of the evidence.

I have argued we should accept that there are two grounds of rational withholding. But, aside from intuitive judgments about rational belief, what would motivate us to accept Doxastic Withholding? Paul Silva and Declan Smithies propose a notion of Doxastic Defeat, and this idea is loosely inspired by that. Silva and Smithies argue that rational belief is partially determined by what would lead to knowledge/justified belief. What is important is not just *propositional justification*, believing what the evidence in fact supports, but also *doxastic justification*, believing on the basis of that evidence. And in cases of doxastic defeat, the agent could not believe on the basis of the evidence. And so, Silva and

Smithies suggest, their evidence is in a sense defeated for them. They ought to believe what they would be doxastically justified in believing, not merely what they have propositional justification for.

I do not mean to endorse this picture wholesale. For example, I am concerned with the idea that cognitive biases or malfunctions might make it that the believer did exactly as they ought in disregarding a piece of evidence that was available to them. The rejoinder is that the evidence was not truly available to them, because they could not truly make use of it.

This, I think, generates more confusion than it helps. When I am sussing out my evidence, I am trying to determine what the evidence says. In order for me to suss, it must be the case that it is my evidence. The fact that p is a conclusion of my evidence, and I haven't yet realized it, doesn't mean that my evidence doesn't support p . Otherwise, how could I figure out p ? The moment I determine p follows, then it becomes part of my evidence that p follows? Such might work as a post hoc reconstruction, but it cannot explain the actual process of reasoning.

But I do think this suggests that we must make room for doxastic grounds for withholding. The fact that Watson is slower than Sherlock, and less capable with drawing inferences (though, let's suppose, could draw them with more time, but could not draw them right now) makes it rational for him to withhold. Not so with Sherlock. He ought to dismiss the idea that Moriarty is involved.

This means we will need to amend RB.

(RB) The rational believer follows these requirements:

(Believe) She believes p just in case her evidence for p is sufficiently strong.

(Disbelieve) She disbelieves p just in case her evidence against p is sufficiently strong.

(Withhold₂) She withholds judgment regarding p just in case her evidence for p is not sufficient for her to believe p or disbelieve p on the basis of her evidence.

There are two conditions that are implicit within (Withhold₂).

(Withhold_{PROP}) She withholds judgment with respect to p if her evidence does not warrant believing or disbelieving p ;

(Withhold_{DOX}) She withholds judgment with respect to p if she cannot appreciate what her evidence warrants.

Let's think about how this will resolve our dilemmas.

In the Dilemma from Testimony, Turri asks us to consider what to believe when your set of evidence consists of the mathematicians telling you "don't withhold!" and nothing else. Optimism was the claim that the body of evidence warrants at least one attitude; when the evidence says "Don't withhold" it suggests that one of the other two – believing or disbelieving – is warranted. But since you have no

evidence supporting belief and no evidence supporting disbelief, according to the propositional version of Withhold₂, you ought to withhold.

In the Dilemma from Doubt, Alexander argues that if one ought to withhold over whether to withhold, then there is no first order attitude one can take towards p . But this one is straightforwardly resolved by thinking that if one cannot determine whether the evidence supports believing or withholding, according to the doxastic version of Withhold₂, one ought to withhold.

Both of these answers are the intuitive ones. But now we have a principled reason for understanding why. According to (RB), there are no doxastic grounds to believe, in addition to propositional ones (the same for disbelieving). But there are doxastic grounds for withholding. We can explain this by looking at the asymmetries between belief, disbelief and withholding. Because belief and disbelief involve world-directed commitments, their rational grounding comes from the evidence itself. But there are many different grounds for lacking such a commitment. Some of those may come from the nature of the evidence itself. But others will come from the agent's relationship to the evidence. Or, to put it another way, there are many things that have to go right for an agent to commit to the world being a certain way. And if any of those things go wrong (on the propositional or doxastic level), then withholding will be the proper attitude.

Because (Withhold₂) includes a clause about what the agent can discern, and abilities to discern will differ from agent to agent (or within an agent at one time to another), this version of (RB) allows for a Weak Permissivism.¹⁸

(WP) It is possible that two epistemic agents, S_1 and S_2 , may be alike in evidence, E , but S_1 is justified in believing/disbelieving p and S_2 is justified in withholding with respect to p .

This is because according to (RB), S_1 and S_2 may both have evidence that is sufficient to warrant belief, but, additionally, S_2 does not have the capacity to appreciate that fact. And so, despite having the same evidence, two different doxastic attitudes are rational. Friends of permissivism may find this to be too weak to be of much interest to their conflict with impermissivists. To my mind, WP presents a toothless challenge to Uniqueness, at least as it is usually defined:

(Uniqueness) For any body of evidence, E , there is exactly one doxastic attitude that it justifies.

Weak Permissivism holds that some body of evidence may justify, for two different people, two different doxastic attitudes.¹⁹ But this is not because the evidence supports two different attitudes

¹⁸ Thanks to philosophers on Board Certified Epistemologists Facebook group for discussion of this possibility. Kopec and Titelbaum (2019) distinguish between *propositional uniqueness* (a body of evidence justifies the proposition, its negation, or neither), *attitudinal uniqueness* (a body of evidence justifies at most one attitude: belief, disbelief, withholding), and *personal uniqueness* (a body of evidence justifies at most one attitude a person may rationally take towards some proposition). (WP) does not challenge *propositional uniqueness* or *attitudinal uniqueness*, and the standard battery of concerns with permissivism do not clearly apply to it. See also Feldman (2007) and White (2007).

¹⁹ As a form of inter-personal permissivism, (WP) does not open the door to intra-personal permissivism (unless we're talking about the same agent having the same evidence at two different times where her ability to process the evidence differs from the one time to the other).

towards p . Rather it is because the agent is not in a position to appreciate what the evidence supports. The evidence supports exactly one attitude, but sometimes agents may be precluded from adopting that attitude because they possess a doxastic defeater. This is because of a feature about the *agent*, not a feature of the *evidence*. So while this goes against the letter of Uniqueness (at least on some formulations), it does not go against its spirit.

There may be some who wish to deny that (WP) is possible because if one person can tell that the evidence supports p , and the other cannot, they do not share the same evidence. This is because, on this view, the assessment of the evidence as supporting p is part of the evidence. I have argued at length above that this sort of view cannot handle Meta-Evaluations. Further, it leaves us stuck with the Dilemma from Doubt. And so, I think, we should be willing to live with a harmless version of permissivism.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined two epistemic dilemmas, the Dilemma from Testimony and the Dilemma from Doubt. I have argued that both of them can be dissolved by thinking more carefully about the conditions of rational withholding. And I argued that there are two distinct grounds for rational withholding: Propositional withholding (when the evidence does not sufficiently support belief or disbelief) and doxastic withholding (when the agent is unable to base her belief on her evidence). I argued that doxastic withholding is not reducible to propositional withholding, but that both are motivated by the same fundamental asymmetry between withholding and the attitudes of belief and disbelief. Belief and disbelief involve a world-involving commitment towards a proposition. Withholding does not involve such a commitment, but there could be more than one reason an agent fails to be in a position to make such a commitment. As a result, we should expect that there are (at least) two such grounds.

The existence of two kinds of withholding also sanctions a weak form of permissivism. I argued that this permissivism should not be troubling to anyone, not even defenders of Uniqueness. This is because Weak Permissivism does not require that a single body of evidence supports more than one rational attitude. That is, it does not provide propositional justification for more than one attitude. Rather, Weak Permissivism allows that differences in an epistemic agent's abilities and awareness may permit one person to withhold judgment while another believes, based on the same evidence.

In this paper, I have focused exclusively on dilemmas within the realm of the epistemic. But I have argued that we should acknowledge that within the domain of the epistemic, there may be doxastic grounds for withholding. This means that various elements within a person's cognitive architecture and skillset could affect whether she ought to withhold. I think that this move is well justified by the epistemic dilemmas considered, and also by other recent work in epistemology.²⁰ However, it opens the door for the unsettling possibility of a more existentially pressing kind of dilemma. I argued that someone has rational, doxastic grounds for withholding if they could not believe on the basis of their

²⁰ See Silva (2017) and Smithies (2015).

evidence. My construal of this modal (“could not believe”) only considered cases where the agent was psychologically unable to suss out where the evidence pointed. I identified some cases where I think this condition holds, but I do not pretend to have given a fully fleshed account of when they arise.

If there are doxastic grounds for withholding (and I have argued that there are), then at least sometimes the grounds for withholding are not purely a function of what the evidence says. And if at least sometimes the grounds for withholding are not purely a function of what the evidence says, then what doxastic attitude one should take is not merely determined by evidential factors. There has been a great deal of discussion about whether there could be practical reasons for belief, or whether practical considerations encroach on whether some belief is justified or knowledge. But little to nothing has been said about whether there are practical reasons for withholding. This, it seems to me, is a largely overlooked possibility. Future work on rational withholding should seek to understand the precise conditions of doxastic withholding, and also explore the extent to which not-evidential features can impact rational withholding.²¹

Works Cited

- Alexander, David J. (2013). The Problem of Respecting Higher-Order Doubt. *Philosophers' Imprint* 13.
- Kopec, M. and Titelbaum, M. “When Rational Reasoners Reason Differently.” In Balcerak Jackson, Magdalena & Balcerak Jackson, Brendan (eds.) (2019). *Reasoning: New Essays on Theoretical and Practical Thinking*. Oxford University Press.
- Christensen, D. (2010). Higher-order evidence. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 81, 85–215.
- Comesaña, Juan (2013). On a Puzzle About Withholding. *Philosophical Quarterly* 63 (251):374-376.
- Conee, Earl (1994). Against an epistemic dilemma. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 72 (4):475–481.
- Conee, Earl (1982). Against moral dilemmas. *Philosophical Review* 91 (1):87-97.
- Feldman, Richard (2000). The ethics of belief. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60 (3):667–695.
- Feldman, Richard. (2007). Reasonable religious disagreements. In L. M. Antony (Ed.), *Philosophers without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Friedman, Jane (2013). Suspended judgment. *Philosophical Studies* 162 (2):165–181.

²¹ I am thankful to the philosophers at CONCEPT at the University of Cologne for their helpful discussion of this paper, especially Sven Bernecker, Waldomiro Silva Filho, Luis Rosa, Paul Silva, Francesco Praolini, Adam Bricker, and Sofia Bokros. I am also thankful to the philosophers on Board Certified Epistemologists for helpful discussion on various points. Finally, I am thankful to Kevin McCain and Scott Stapleford for their helpful feedback.

- Friedman, Jane (2017). Why Suspend Judging? *Noûs* 51 (2):302–326
- Horowitz, S. (2014). Epistemic Akrasia. *Nous*,48, 718–744.
- Kopec, Matthew & Titelbaum, Michael G. (2016). The Uniqueness Thesis. *Philosophy Compass* 11 (4):189-200.
- Lasonen-Aarnio, M. (2014). Higher-order evidence and the limits of defeat. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*,88, 314–345.
- Leonard, Nick (2020). Epistemic dilemmas and rational indeterminacy. *Philosophical Studies* 177 (3):573-596.
- Odegard, Douglas (1993). Resolving epistemic dilemmas. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 71 (2):161 – 168.
- Sartre, Jean Paul (2007). *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Yale University Press.
- Skipper, Mattias (2018). Higher-Order Defeat Without Epistemic Dilemmas. *Logos and Episteme* 9 (4):451–465.
- Smart, Joshua (forthcoming). Disbelief is a distinct doxastic attitude. *Synthese*.
- Silva, Paul (2017). How Doxastic Justification Helps Us Solve the Puzzle of Misleading Higher-Order Evidence. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 98 (S1):308-328.
- Simpson, Robert Mark (2017). Permissivism and the Arbitrariness Objection. *Episteme* 14 (4):519–538.
- Smithies, Declan (2015). Ideal rationality and logical omniscience. *Synthese* 192 (9):2769–2793.
- Stapleford, Scott (2018). Intraspecies impermissivism. *Episteme* 16 (3):340–356.
- Turri, John (2012). A Puzzle about withholding. *Philosophical Quarterly* 62 (247):355–364.
- White, R. (2005). Epistemic permissiveness. *Philosophical Perspectives* 19, 445– 459
- Ye, Ru (forthcoming). The Arbitrariness Objection Against Permissivism. *Episteme*:1–20.