

## The Problem of Respecting Higher-Order Doubt

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### Abstract

This paper argues that higher-order doubt generates an epistemic dilemma. One has a higher-order doubt with regards to P insofar as one justifiably withholds belief as to what attitude towards P is justified. That is, one justifiably withholds belief as to whether one is justified in believing, disbelieving, or withholding belief in P. Using the resources provided by Richard Feldman's recent discussion of how to respect one's evidence, I argue that if one has a higher-order doubt with regards to P, then one is not justified in having *any* attitude towards P. Otherwise put, no attitude towards the doubted proposition respects one's higher-order doubt. I argue that the most promising response to this problem is to hold that when one has a higher-order doubt about P, the best one can do to respect such a doubt is to simply have *no* attitude towards P. Higher-order doubt is thus much more rationally corrosive than non-higher-order doubt as it undermines the possibility of justifiably having *any* attitude towards the doubted proposition.

## The Problem of Respecting Higher-Order Doubt

One has *higher-order* justification with regards to a proposition P if one has justification for believing, disbelieving, or withholding belief in the claim that one is justified in believing P. In recent papers, Richard Feldman has argued that whether one is justified in believing a proposition can be affected by one's higher-order justification. Specifically, he has argued that if one is either justified in disbelieving or withholding belief as to whether one is justified in believing P, then one is *not* justified in believing P.<sup>1</sup> Feldman describes someone who is responsive to his higher-order justification as "respecting the evidence," (2005, 95-6). For example, if Sherlock Holmes's evidence indicates that he is not justified in believing that Moriarty is guilty, then Holmes must respect that evidence by not believing in his guilt.

In this paper I consider the implications of Feldman's position with regards to how one should respect *higher-order doubt*. Higher-order doubt consists of one's justifiably withholding belief as to what attitude towards a proposition is justified. By way of illustration, suppose that a student in an epistemology class considers two propositions:

- (1) I am not a brain in vat.
- (2) I am justified in believing that I am not a brain in a vat.

The student might withhold belief with respect to the truth of (1) without having any doubts as to its justificatory status. Indeed, one possible

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<sup>1</sup> Feldman (2005, 108-110), (2006, 231-233), and (2009, 306-308).

reason for withholding belief in (1) is that one lacks justification on its behalf. In contrast, withholding belief about (2) is a kind of doubt about the justificatory status of (1). Having been exposed to skeptical arguments, the student might not know what attitude he is justified in taking towards (1) – either belief, withholding belief, or somewhat less likely, disbelief. These two kinds of doubt need to be distinguished. Justifiably withholding belief as to the justificatory status of propositions I refer to as “higher-order” doubt.

How should one respect higher-order doubt? That is, if one is justified in withholding belief as to what attitude towards P is justified, what attitude should one take towards P? In this paper, I argue that if one has a higher-order doubt with respect to P, then *no* attitude towards P is justified. One should neither believe, disbelieve, nor even withhold belief as to the truth of P. This is a startling result. If correct, a higher-order doubt generates an epistemic dilemma. No matter what attitude one takes towards P, it is unjustified. In this way, higher-order doubt is more rationally destructive than non-higher-order doubt. For while one can always respect grounds for non-higher-order doubt by withholding belief, no attitude is consistent with respecting a higher-order doubt. In this way, higher-order doubt is particularly toxic<sup>2</sup> – if one has such a doubt, it seems that there is no rational way to respond to it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I am borrowing this term from Christensen (2010). He argues that in some cases, higher-order evidence can be rationally toxic in that respecting it compels one to “fall short of some rational ideal,” (2010, 210).

<sup>3</sup> Turri (2012) argues for a similar position. Turri provides a case where one has reason to believe that withholding belief in P is not justified, but where there is no reason to consider either believing or disbelieving P justified. This produces an epistemic dilemma. Turri presents this as a puzzle about withholding – what attitude should one take when all one has to go on is that withholding is not justified? However, I suggest this is but one instance of the problem of higher-order doubt, which can arise in other ways. For example, the epistemology student may have reason to think that he should not *disbelieve* that he is not a

This paper has three sections. In section 1, I offer examples to clarify the notion of higher-order doubt. In section 2, I argue that when one has a higher-order doubt about a proposition, no attitude towards it is justified. In section 3, I consider responses to the problem. I argue that the most promising is to hold that when one has a higher-order doubt about P, the best one can do is to have no attitude towards P. Because a higher-order doubt renders *any* attitude unjustified, one must simply abandon having any attitude towards the proposition.

### 1. Higher-Order Doubt

We can doubt many things. One thing we can doubt is what attitude towards a proposition is justified. Such doubt I refer to as “higher-order.” For example, a higher-order doubt as to the existence of God would not be a doubt about whether God exists, but rather about what attitude one is justified in taking towards God’s existence. In this section, I introduce two examples to clarify this kind of doubt.

Suppose that a conscientious juror is assessing the evidence presented in a murder trial. Everyone on the jury agrees that the evidence does not show that the defendant is innocent. However, there is disagreement as to whether the evidence justifies believing or withholding belief in his guilt. Strong arguments have been provided on both sides, and upon reflection, the juror is at a loss. It seems to him that each side makes a compelling argument as to whether the evidence justifies believing or withholding belief in the guilt of the defendant, and he finds it difficult to determine which argument comes out on top. For this reason, the juror justifiably withholds belief in the following:

(J1) I am justified in believing that the defendant is guilty.

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brain in vat, but he might doubt whether he should believe or withhold belief. Both cases raise the problem of what attitude one should take towards a proposition when one has reason to not consider *any* of the attitudes justified.

The juror's justifiably withholding belief in (J1) is an example of higher-order doubt.

Later we will consider reasons for denying that higher-order doubt is possible. But upon first consideration, this is very implausible. You don't have to be a philosopher to recognize that you can be mistaken about whether you are justified in believing a claim. And in some cases like that of the juror's, one might have good reason to suspend judgment as to whether belief is justified. If there are any claims that it is not possible for someone to justifiably withhold belief in, they are few in number. And it is not plausible that all claims about what we are justified in believing belong to this privileged class. If that were the case, there would not be so many interesting disputes in epistemology.

Although you need not be a philosopher to have a higher-order doubt, it sure helps. For philosophers who spend their time puzzling over the nature of epistemic justification, higher-order doubt is an occupational hazard. The reason is simple. Doubt about the conditions of justified belief can lead to doubt about whether one is justified in believing a particular proposition. To illustrate, let us consider an example of someone who has doubts about how to resolve a recent debate in epistemology.

The debate over *peer disagreement* concerns how we should respond to a peer's disagreeing with us about some matter.<sup>4</sup> In this debate, your peer is someone who is equally informed as you, and who has comparable cognitive abilities with regards to a certain subject matter.<sup>5</sup> How should one respond to perceived peer disagreement? Consider an example. Suppose that based on a careful assessment of the philosophical considerations both for and against, you have come to accept the compatibilist position in the free-will debate. However, you discover that

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<sup>4</sup> For a helpful introduction to this debate, see Feldman and Warfield (2010).

<sup>5</sup> See Feldman (2007, 201).

one of your peers disagrees and thinks that those very considerations instead support incompatibilism. How should you respond to that disagreement? On *strong conciliatory* views, you should “split the difference” and suspend judgment about whether compatibilism is correct. On *weak conciliatory* views, you should lower your confidence in the truth of compatibilism, although this may not require the suspension of judgment. On *non-conciliatory* views, you should ignore the disagreement and maintain your attitude towards compatibilism.<sup>6</sup>

Since this debate concerns the necessary conditions of justified belief, doubt as to its resolution can generate doubt as to whether your beliefs are justified. Suppose that you are aware of your peer’s disagreement regarding compatibilism, but that you are undecided about which view concerning the proper response to disagreement is correct. This is no far-fetched possibility. You might be aware of the debate, but not well enough informed to take a side. Or you might have plunged into the debate, only to come up skeptical. Either way, you should withhold belief in the following:

(D1) I am justified in believing that compatibilism is correct.

If the strong conciliatory position is correct, then (D1) is false. But if the non-conciliatory position is correct then it may very well be true. Being undecided about which position is correct, you ought to be undecided as to the truth of (D1). You ought to have a higher-order doubt.

Before turning to the question of how one ought to respond to such doubts, three points of clarification will prove useful. First, it is important to be clear as to *content* of a higher-order doubt. Recall that the juror’s higher-order doubt consists of his withholding belief as to the truth of:

(J1) I am justified in believing that the defendant is guilty.

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<sup>6</sup> I have borrowed this taxonomy from Matheson (2009, 269-70).

What makes this doubt higher-order is that it concerns what he is justified in believing. In contrast, withholding belief in the following would not be a higher-order doubt:

(J2) The defendant is guilty.

It is because the juror withholds belief as to (J1) rather than (J2) that his doubt is higher-order. And yet it is natural to say that his doubt is in some sense about (J2). After all, his doubt is about the *epistemic status* of (J2). We might accommodate this by saying that while the juror's doubt consists of withholding belief as to the truth of (J1), (J2) is the indirect object of that doubt. Since it simplifies matters, I permit myself the convenience of using "a higher-order doubt about (J1)" as shorthand for "justifiably withholding belief about what attitude towards (J1) is justified."

Second, note that one can have a higher-order doubt about P despite being confident of one of the attitudes towards P that it is *not* justified. Our juror has doubts about whether he is justified in believing or withholding belief in (J2). And yet he is confident that he is not justified in disbelieving (J2). That is, while he is confident that he has no good reason to believe that the accused is innocent, he is doubtful as to whether he should believe or withhold belief as to whether the accused is guilty. As I use the expression, a higher-order doubt involves justifiably withholding belief as to what attitude is justified. That is compatible with justifiably believing of one of the possible attitudes that it is unjustified.

Finally, my focus will be on all things considered, or *ultima facie* justified higher-order doubt. The reason for this is that if one's doubt is not *ultima facie* justified, then it is not clear whether one ought to respect that doubt. For example, suppose that the juror's doubt about whether he is justified in believing in the guilt of the accused is completely unjustified. Perhaps the juror is a racist, and refuses to give sufficient credibility to an African American witness who has provided good reason

to believe in the guilt of the accused. If so, must he take into consideration his doubt when assessing the guilt of the accused? This is a difficult question. On the one hand, it is odd to suggest that he should be responsive to an unjustified doubt based on an irrational prejudice. On the other hand, it would seem that if he really has such a doubt, he would be irrational to not take it seriously. I will not attempt to decide this issue here. Instead, I will simply focus on examples of *ultima facie* justified higher-order doubt as the clearest examples of doubt that deserve our respect.

## 2. Respecting Higher-Order Doubt

The thesis of this paper is that when one has a higher-order doubt about P, one is not justified in having *any* attitude towards P. To have such a doubt is to justifiably refuse to endorse any attitude towards P. And although one is not required to endorse every attitude that one has – that would yield a vicious regress – one should not have an attitude that one ought *not* endorse. If so, when one has a higher-order doubt about P, one should not take any attitude towards P.

To defend this position, I will extend the work of Feldman, who has argued that we must respect the evidence, which he explains as follows:

I will say that the person is *respecting the evidence* about E and P when the person's belief concerning P corresponds to what is indicated by the person's evidence about E's support for P. That is, a person respects the evidence about E and P by believing P when his or her evidence indicates that this evidence supports P or by not believing P when the evidence indicates that this evidence does not support P. (2005, 95-6)

For example, if our juror concluded that the evidence did not support the guilt of the defendant, he should not so believe. Feldman supports this by noting the oddness of claims like:



(3) The defendant is guilty, but the evidence does not support his guilt.

(4) The defendant is guilty, but I withhold belief as to whether the evidence supports his guilt.<sup>7</sup>

These claims express incoherent attitudes. The juror should not believe that the defendant is guilty while denying or withholding belief as to whether the evidence supports this position.

For Feldman, respecting the evidence involves respecting one's justification. Consider another odd pair of claims:

(5) The defendant is guilty, but I am not justified in believing that he is guilty.

(6) The defendant is guilty, but I withhold belief as to whether I am justified in believing that he is guilty.

These claims also express incoherent attitudes. The juror should not believe that the defendant is guilty while denying or withholding belief as to whether that attitude is justified. For evidentialists like Feldman who hold that the justified attitude is the one that fits the evidence, these requirements are equivalent.<sup>8</sup> Respecting one's evidence involves respecting one's justification. Thus we can formulate this requirement as:

RJ. One justifiably believes P only if one neither justifiably disbelieves nor justifiably withholds belief as to whether one is justified in believing P.

As Feldman notes, this requirement can be explained in terms of the notion of *defeat*.<sup>9</sup> One's justification for believing is undefeated only if

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<sup>7</sup> Feldman (2005, 108), (2006, 232), and (2009, 307-8).

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Feldman (2005, 101) endorses a version of the requirement that we respect our higher-order justification.

<sup>9</sup> Feldman (2005, 103-4) and (2009, 308).

one does not justifiably disbelieve nor withhold belief as to whether one is justified in believing.

RJ applies to one kind of attitude: belief. But what of the other attitudes – disbelief and withheld belief? Are they subject to analogous requirements? I contend that they are, and that we should extend Feldman’s position to cover all three. That is, we should accept the generalization:

RJG. 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.

In general, it is plausible that belief and disbelief are subject to the same requirements. This would be trivial if disbelief in P is simply the belief that P is false. But even without making that assumption, the analogous requirement is supported by another pair of odd claims:

(7) I disbelieve that the defendant is guilty, but I am not justified in disbelieving that he is guilty.

(8) I disbelieve that the defendant is guilty, but I withhold belief as to whether I am justified in disbelieving that he is guilty.

Like (5) and (6), (7) and (8) express incoherent attitudes. The explanation of the incoherence is the same. Just as one should not believe while not considering that attitude justified, nor should one disbelieve while not considering that attitude justified.

RJG also entails that one should not withhold belief while refusing to consider that attitude justified. Certainly one should not withhold belief if one considers that attitude *unjustified*. For example, the following is incoherent:

(9) I withhold belief as to whether the defendant is guilty, but I am not justified in withholding belief as to whether he is guilty.

Suppose the juror concluded that the evidence clearly shows that the defendant is guilty, and that he is not justified in withholding belief.

Clearly in that case he would not be justified in withholding belief. But might it be reasonable for him to withhold belief if he is justified in withholding belief as to whether that attitude is justified? Consider the following:

(10) I withhold belief as to whether the defendant is guilty, but I withhold belief as to whether I am justified in withholding belief as to whether he is guilty.

We have seen that analogues of (10) suggest that one should not believe or disbelieve a proposition if one refuses to consider such attitudes justified. It is hard to see why the combination of attitudes expressed by (10) is any more coherent. To refuse to consider an attitude justified upon reflection is to deny it one's endorsement. If that denial is justified, then one has good reason to not have that attitude. (10) expresses a denial of endorsement of withholding belief. If such a denial is justified, then one should not continue withholding belief. Thus (10) does not appear to be any more coherent than (6) or (8).

Since the incoherence of withholding belief in the face of higher-order doubt is crucial to what follows, another supporting example is called for. Suppose that Alfred and Simon have scrutinized the considerations on behalf of external world skepticism. As a result, both have concluded they cannot decide what attitude they should take towards claims like "I have hands," (H). They are confident they should not disbelieve (H). But should they follow the skeptic and withhold belief in (H)? Or should they follow the anti-skeptic and believe (H)? As to this matter, they cannot decide. And yet despite their shared higher-order doubt, they adopt very different attitudes towards (H). Simon sides with the skeptic and withholds belief, whereas Alfred sides with the anti-skeptic and believes (H).

Feldman has given us reason to consider Alfred's position incoherent. Simon might explain this to Alfred as follows:

Alfred, your position is unreasonable. On the basis of careful reflection, you withhold belief as to whether it is reasonable for you to believe (H). So far as you can tell, there's no better reason to be an anti-skeptic and believe (H) rather than to be a skeptic and withhold belief in (H). And yet you continue to cling to your pre-philosophical belief in (H). By your own lights, you must admit that this is clearly unreasonable.

Simon's criticism seems right. Given his higher-order doubt, Alfred should not believe (H). However, Alfred can use the very same reasoning against Simon:

Your response is no more reasonable, Simon. We both doubt whether we should believe or withhold belief in (H). You argue that given these doubts, my anti-skeptical position about (H) is unreasonable. But how is your skepticism any more reasonable? Granted, as far as I can tell, the reasons do not favor my position. But you grant that as far as *you* can tell, nor do they favor yours. Given this parity, how can your attitude be any more reasonable than my own?

Alfred's response seems right. If Alfred should not believe while refusing to consider his attitude justified, then nor should Simon withhold belief while refusing to consider his own attitude justified. If so, those who hold that belief must respect higher-order doubt should also hold that so too must withheld belief. Otherwise one must hold that while Simon can disregard his higher-order doubt, Alfred cannot.

Thus far I have argued that Feldman's considerations on behalf of RJ also support RJG. But RJG generates the problem of how to respect higher-order doubt. Indeed, the case of Alfred and Simon clearly illustrates this problem. Given their higher-order doubt, what attitude towards (H) are they justified in having? If RJG is correct, then they are not justified in having *any* attitude towards that proposition. For according to that principle, one should not take an attitude that one is

justified in not considering justified. Since Alfred and Simon are justified in not considering any of the attitudes towards (H) justified, they cannot coherently have any attitude towards that proposition.

This is a disquieting result. Can one's standing with respect to a proposition be so bad that even withholding belief is not an option? Non-higher-order doubt does not have this corrosive power. If one has grounds for doubting whether a proposition is true or false, one may always withhold belief. But if RJG is correct, higher-order doubt leaves one with no possibility of having a justified attitude towards the proposition at all. This consequence of RJG should therefore give us pause.

### **3. Responses**

In this section, I consider three different responses to the problem. The first appeals to versions of *internalism* in order to argue that it is never reasonable to withhold belief about what attitude towards a proposition is justified – making higher-order doubt impossible. The second appeals to the idea that withholding belief is justified by *default* in order to argue that it is not possible for one to lack justification for some attitude towards a proposition – making epistemic dilemmas impossible. I argue that these responses fail and defend a third. I suggest that while higher-order doubt does render any attitude unjustified, one can always retreat to *having no attitude* towards the proposition.

#### **3.1 Internalism**

On an internalist account of justification, higher-order doubt may seem impossible. According to internalism, what justifies an attitude must be accessible, or internal to one's perspective in the way that pain is. Pain is an occurrent mental state, and while one need not attend to a pain, it is easy to become aware of the pain just by reflection. Because it is accessible in this way, it is difficult to imagine a circumstance in which

one could reasonably doubt whether one is in pain. According to internalism, the factors that determine what attitude towards a proposition are justified – or *justifiers* – are within one’s perspective in the way that pain is. On that view, doubts about justification may seem no more reasonable than doubts about whether one is in pain. After all, if the justifiers are accessible to one and not hidden from view, then to suspend judgment about whether a particular belief is justified would be to fail to adequately respond to the available evidence. In this way internalism may seem to preclude the possibility of higher-order doubt.<sup>10</sup>

However, even if the *justifiers* of an attitude are necessarily accessible, it does not follow that so too is the attitude’s *justificatory status*. If so, internalism does not preclude higher-order doubt. Suppose that Holmes and Watson are aware of the very same crime scene evidence, and yet only Holmes is in a position to recognize its implication of Moriarty. In that case, Watson possesses evidence affording him justification on behalf of Moriarty’s involvement without having access to its epistemic import. He has access to the justifiers, but not to the fact that they justify belief. Thus even if we grant that one necessarily has access to the justifiers of an attitude, it does not follow that higher-order doubt is impossible.

To illustrate this point, consider a particular version of internalism: Conee and Feldman’s *evidentialism*. The heart of this internalist position is the following principle:

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<sup>10</sup> For a clear statement of this kind of internalism, see Smithies (2011). Smithies argues that justification is accessible in that one has justification for believing P if and only if one has justification for believing that one has justification for believing P.

EJ. Doxastic attitude D toward proposition p is epistemically justified for S at t if and only if having D toward p fits the evidence S has at t. (1985, 83)

EJ is internalist in that it restricts justifiers to the available evidence. Anything not reflected in one's evidence cannot bear on justification. But the fact that what justifies – one's evidence – is accessible does mean that one cannot have doubts about what attitude fits that evidence. Consider again our juror. It may very well be the case that the juror's evidence supports the guilt of the defendant even though he cannot appreciate that fact. In that case EJ implies that belief is justified, even though the juror cannot recognize it. Evidentialism allows for higher-order doubt.

A stronger form of internalism, however, may preclude higher-order doubt. This is *inferential internalism*, which can be formulated as:

II. One is justified in believing P on the basis of evidence E only if one is justified in believing that E supports P.<sup>11</sup>

Evidentialism and inferential internalism impose different necessary conditions on justified belief. According to evidentialism, justified belief requires supporting evidence. According to inferential internalism, it requires *justification for believing* that one has supporting evidence. How might inferential internalism preclude the possibility of higher-order doubt? Consider how the juror ought to reason according to the inferential internalist:

A. I cannot determine whether the evidence supports the defendant's guilt.

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<sup>11</sup> "Inferential Internalism" is Richard Fumerton's label for someone who accepts his *Principle of Inferential Justification* (PIJ): "To be justified in believing P on the basis of E one must have not only (1) justification for believing E, but also (2) justification for believing that E makes probable P," (Fumerton 2006, 39). II is simply the second condition of PIJ.

B. So, I am not justified in believing that the evidence supports the defendant's guilt.

C. So, I am not justified in believing in the defendant's guilt.

The step from A to B is unproblematic. The juror is at a loss about what the evidence indicates, and ought to consider himself unjustified in believing that it implicates the defendant. The step from B to C is mandated by inferential internalism. According to this form of internalism, the juror is justified in believing in the guilt of the defendant only if he is justified in believing that his evidence supports that verdict. But as we have seen, he is not justified in believing this claim about his evidence. Finally, note that if the juror ought to reason in this way then he should not have a higher-order doubt. For C is the claim that belief in the defendant's guilt is *not* justified. In this way, inferential internalism suggests that the juror should have no doubt about whether belief is justified.

This strategy generalizes. Plausibly, any case where one might seem to have grounds for higher-order doubt is a case where one has doubts about what the evidence indicates. But if you have doubts about the evidence, then you should have no doubt that belief is *not* justified.

Does inferential internalism solve the problem of how to respect higher-order doubt? It suggests that anyone who accepts inferential internalism should not have such doubts. Unfortunately, that does not show that higher-order doubt is impossible, nor does it explain how to respect such doubt should it occur. This is because those who do not accept inferential internalism can still have higher-order doubts. Suppose that instead of accepting inferential internalism, the juror rejects it in favor of evidentialism. If so, he would hold that the attitude he is justified in taking towards the defendant's guilt is the attitude supported by the evidence, *regardless of whether he can appreciate that support*. From his position, the evidence may provide him with justification for belief even if



he cannot recognize it, and thus he would reject the inferential internalist's move from B to C. Yes, he cannot tell whether his evidence supports belief. But no, that does not mean that belief is unjustified. Given his evidentialism, the fact that he cannot tell what the evidence supports simply means that he cannot tell what attitude is justified. He ought to have a higher-order doubt.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, those who rationally withhold belief as to whether inferential internalism is correct can have higher-order doubts. Suppose the juror is agnostic in this way. He should then be equally doubtful about the step from B to C. Being undecided about inferential internalism, he should doubt whether his having justification on behalf of the defendant's guilt depends upon his having justification for believing the higher-order claim that his evidence supports that verdict. If inferential internalism is correct, then there is such a dependence and belief is not justified. But if inferential internalism is *not* correct, then there is no such dependence, and belief might very well be justified. Given that he cannot tell whether inferential internalism is correct, so too he cannot tell whether belief is justified. He ought to have a higher-order doubt.

Far from showing it impossible, the inferential internalist response thus suggests a recipe for the production of higher-order doubt. Many debates in epistemology concern the necessary conditions of justified

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<sup>12</sup> This is something of an oversimplification. In Alexander (2012) I have argued that while we should reject inferential internalism, we should accept a form of externalism that has some of the consequences of internalism. If the juror accepted this hybrid position, then his doubts about his evidence would *defeat* whatever justification they provide. But just as the juror may reject inferential internalism, so too he may reject my proposed hybrid position. For such an individual, higher-order doubt remains a possibility.

belief. Must one be justified in believing that one's evidence supports one's belief? Must one lack peers who disagree? Doubt about these proposed necessary conditions can generate higher-order doubt. For if you recognize that whether or not a belief of yours is justified depends upon a proposed necessary condition of justification, and you have doubts about the correctness of that condition, then so too you ought to doubt whether your belief is justified.

### **3.2 The Default Response**

It is natural to think that the default attitude towards a proposition is withheld belief. In the absence of justification for either believing or disbelieving, one is justified in withholding. If so, epistemic dilemmas may seem impossible. By lacking justification for either belief or disbelief, one would automatically have justification for withholding. And so it would seem impossible for one to lack justification for any attitude if withholding is justified by default. Call this the “default” response.<sup>13</sup>

How should we understand the claim that withholding is justified by default? Consider an analogy. To say that keeping a promise is justified by default is to say that unless there is overriding reason in favor of breaking it, it ought to be upheld. It is not to say that you should always keep your promises. Only that in the absence of reason to do otherwise, they should be kept. Otherwise put, when one has made a promise, one has prima facie justification to keep it, although that justification may be defeated. In this light, the proposal that withholding belief is default justified amounts to the claim that in the absence of justification for either belief or disbelief one has prima facie justification for withholding. This is plausible. Consider our juror, but before the trial has begun. At

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<sup>13</sup> Thanks to both Fabrizio Cariani and Andrew Jordan for suggesting versions of this response.

that point, given the absence of evidence, the juror ought to withhold belief as to the defendant's guilt.

This suggests what I call the *default thesis*:

DT. If S lacks prima facie justification for believing P, and S lacks prima facie justification for disbelieving P, then S has prima facie justification for withholding belief with respect to P.

So understood, the idea that withholding belief is default justified is quite plausible. However, it is perfectly compatible with the thesis that higher-order doubt generates an epistemic dilemma. For while the default thesis concerns the conditions under which withholding belief is prima facie justified, my thesis concerns the conditions under which that justification is *defeated*. One can consistently hold that while withholding belief is default justified, such justification can be defeated by a higher-order doubt. Consider the case of the juror. It is perfectly consistent to hold that at the beginning of the trial he is default justified in withholding belief as to whether the defendant is guilty, but that in the course of the trial he acquires a higher-order doubt that renders *any* attitude towards the defendant's guilt unjustified. According to DT, if the juror lacks prima facie justification for belief or disbelief, then he possesses prima facie justification for withholding. But that says nothing about how such justification can be defeated. The default thesis about the conditions under which withholding belief is prima facie justified is thus compatible with my thesis about when that justification is defeated.<sup>14</sup>

The default thesis therefore does not entail that there are no epistemic dilemmas. The analogy with promise keeping illustrates this. That keeping one's promise is default justified does not imply that one could never face a moral dilemma about keeping a promise. Even if the

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<sup>14</sup> I raise additional concerns with the default thesis in Alexander (2012, 513-515). I will not revisit them here, as I think that in this context the more pressing concern is that the thesis does not preclude higher-order doubt.

default is to keep one's promises, there could be a circumstance where both keeping and breaking one's promise are, all things considered, wrong. So too with the case of withholding belief. Even if the default is to withhold belief, there could be a circumstance in which all things considered no attitude towards a proposition is *ultima facie* justified.

In response, one might propose the following stronger principle:

ND. If S lacks *ultima facie* justification for believing P, and S lacks *ultima facie* justification for disbelieving P, then S has *ultima facie* justification for withholding belief with respect to P.

ND may look like a mere variant of the default thesis. After all, ND is saying the same thing about *ultima facie* justification that DT says about *prima facie* justification. But the apparent similarity is misleading. For ND is equivalent to:

ND\*. S has *ultima facie* justification for either believing P, disbelieving P, or withholding belief in P.

And ND\* is simply a denial that epistemic dilemmas are possible – the claim I have argued against in this paper. This makes the appeal to either ND or ND\* simply question begging. As we have seen, these principles do not follow from the thesis that withholding belief is default justified. Thus to appeal to them would be to simply assert that epistemic dilemmas are not possible, without offering any explanation as to why.

The suggestion that withholding is default justified therefore provides no solution to the problem of how to respect higher-order doubt. The default thesis is perfectly compatible with the claim that a higher-order doubt generates an epistemic dilemma. In contrast, while ND does preclude such dilemmas, it is not supported by the default thesis and it simply begs the question against the position defended in this paper.

### **3.3. The No Attitude Response**

I have argued that a higher-order doubt about P renders any attitude towards P unjustified. In this section, I propose an understanding of this result that makes it less counter-intuitive. According to this proposal, the only way to respect a higher-order doubt is to have no attitude towards the proposition. If a higher-order doubt renders any attitude unjustified, then we must simply avoid having any attitude. Call this the “no attitude” response.

This response is possible because there is a difference between withholding belief and having no attitude. For example, there is a difference between your withholding belief as to whether God exists, and a terrier’s having no position regarding the matter. The difference is that withheld belief is an attitude towards a proposition. This distinction is important. After all, the propositions to which one has any attitude towards are but a small sample of the population. There are countless propositions that we have not considered, as well as propositions that outstrip our powers of comprehension. For this reason we must distinguish the propositions to which we have some attitude from those to which we have none.<sup>15</sup>

Still, one might grant the distinction between withholding belief and having no attitude while doubting what the no attitude response requires: namely, that one can respect a higher-order doubt about P by having no attitude towards P at all. That sounds like the impossible: having a doubt about P while having no attitude towards P. But this semblance of impossibility disappears when we recall that a higher-order doubt is not an attitude towards P but to the higher-order claim that belief in P is

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<sup>15</sup> Beyond the fact that it involves an attitude towards a proposition, what is the nature of withheld belief? Like the complementary question about the nature of *belief*, this is a substantive question in its own right that I will not attempt to address here. For further defense of the claim that withholding belief is an attitude towards a proposition, see Friedman (2013).

justified. Recall that in the case of the juror we distinguished two propositions:

(J1) I am justified in believing that the accused is guilty.

(J2) The accused is guilty.

The juror's higher-order doubt consists of his justifiably withholding belief in (J1). According to the no attitude response, the only way to respect that doubt is for the juror to have no attitude towards the lower-order proposition, (J2). So understood, the response does not require the juror to both have and not have an attitude towards the same proposition.

John Turri has aptly described one's coming to not have an attitude towards a proposition under consideration "withdrawing" (2012, 361). Why think that when one has a higher-order doubt, one can respect that doubt by withdrawing and having no attitude? Mark Nelson (2010) has provided the basis of an answer to this question by arguing that there are no *positive epistemic duties*. Whereas a negative epistemic duty merely enjoins one to *not* believe when one lacks sufficient justification, a positive epistemic duty would require belief insofar as one possesses such justification.<sup>16</sup> Nelson makes a strong case that a positive epistemic duty would be unreasonably demanding.<sup>17</sup> At any given time, perception provides reason to believe countless propositions. For example, observation of a city street provides justification for an overwhelming variety of claims. It provides justification for claims about the appearance and behavior of the pedestrians passing by, claims about the flow of the traffic and the interaction between the vehicles, claims about the surrounding buildings – the list is endless. Given this "infinite justificational fecundity" of our evidence (2010, 96), a positive epistemic duty would be impossible to satisfy. Much more plausible is that our

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<sup>16</sup> "There are things that we ought not to believe, but there is nothing that we ought to believe, on purely epistemic grounds," (2010, 83).

<sup>17</sup> See in particular Nelson (2010), pp. 86, 87-88, and 96-98.

epistemic duties are merely negative. Rather than prescribe belief, they merely restrict the scope of permissible belief.

These considerations support the permissibility of not only the absence of belief, but also the absence of *any* attitude. For if it is overly demanding to require belief when justified, then the same can be said about a requirement to withhold belief. Observation of a city street may settle some questions, but it leaves even more undecided. Are you obliged to withhold belief whether that pedestrian waiting for the light to change prefers chocolate to vanilla ice cream? Must you have any attitude as to whether the number of people in the building across the street is odd or even? Surely not. You possess justification for withholding belief, and so that attitude is epistemically permissible in each case. But it is not obligatory. You do not violate any epistemic duty if you simply have no position regarding these matters and prefer to concern yourself with other things. There is no positive epistemic duty to either believe or withhold belief. It is always epistemically permissible for one to have no attitude.<sup>18</sup>

The absence of positive epistemic duties thus provides a solution to the problem of higher-order doubt. If it is always epistemically permissible to have no attitude, then a reasonable response to a higher-order doubt is to withdraw from the proposition. By doing so, one avoids violating any epistemic duty. That said, it is important to note the modesty of this solution. Unlike the previous responses, the no attitude response concedes

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<sup>18</sup> Nelson equates the absence of belief and withheld belief, and thus fails to distinguish withholding belief from having no attitude towards a proposition. This is unfortunate. For if you do not make this distinction, then the thesis that belief is never epistemically obliged will seem to entail the thesis that withholding is always epistemically permitted. Thus, Nelson must respond to the charge that it is counter-intuitive to hold that it is permissible for one to withhold belief regarding P when one is justified in believing P (2010, 93-94). If instead we recognize, as I have urged, that withholding belief is not the same as having no attitude then we face no such problem.

not only that higher-order doubt is possible, but also that when one has such a doubt, no attitude towards the proposition is justified. And while the no attitude response shows us how to live with this result, it does not make it any less surprising.

Does the no attitude response show that higher-order doubt does not generate an epistemic dilemma, as I have claimed? After all, it shows that when one has such a doubt, one can avoid violating one's epistemic duties by withdrawing. However, this does not mean that there is no epistemic dilemma. Consider an analogy. A chess player might discover that whatever he does, his next move will put him in checkmate. Within the game of chess he faces a dilemma, and it would be a mistake to say that there is no dilemma since he can always withdraw from the game. So too with an epistemic dilemma. Within inquiry one faces an epistemic dilemma insofar as no attitude towards a proposition is justified, and it would be a mistake to say that there is no dilemma since one could always withdraw from the proposition.

Regardless of whether it is classified as an epistemic dilemma or not, the important point is that the result of a higher-order doubt is a dramatic failure of inquiry. Less exotic failures are commonplace. Irresponsible inquiry can fall short by producing an unjustified attitude. And responsible inquiry can produce justified attitudes that fall short of the truth – as in the case of not only justified false beliefs, but also every instance of justified withheld belief. But in comparison, higher-order doubt represents a more dramatic failure. For when one has a higher-order doubt about P, one is not justified in having *any* attitude towards P – not even withheld belief. Thus while the no attitude response does show that there is something that we can do in response to a higher-order doubt, it does not deny that such doubt represents a distinctive problem for inquiry.



## Conclusion

In this paper I have defended the thesis that if one has a higher-order doubt about P, no attitude towards P is justified. I have considered three responses to the problem, and have argued that the no attitude response is the most promising. According to that response, if one has a higher-order doubt the best one can do is to withdraw from the proposition – to simply have no attitude. This response concedes that higher-order doubt is possible, and that when one has such a doubt, no attitude towards the proposition in question is justified. The solution is therefore a modest one. Granted, when one has a higher-order doubt, there is an epistemically permitted response – withdrawal. Nevertheless, that does not mean that higher-order doubt is not a genuine problem for inquiry. On the contrary, the production of higher-order doubt remains a distinctive way that inquiry can fail.<sup>19</sup>

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