

A Defense of Endorsement

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Abstract

It is often irrational to believe philosophical claims because they are subject to systematic disagreement, under-determination, and pessimistic induction. Along with some other authors in this volume, I argue that many philosophers should (and do) have a different attitude to their own philosophical commitments. On my account, this attitude is a form of epistemic acceptance called endorsement. However, several objections have been raised to this view and others like it. One worry is that endorsement is spineless: that people who merely endorse their theories fail to have a stable, global commitment to their views. A second worry is that endorsement, and the assertions it licenses, are objectionably insincere. Here, I defend the theory of endorsement from these objections. I suggest that endorsement can be more resilient than belief, while better supporting both intellectual courage and humility. Then, I argue that endorsement can be perfectly sincere, since it is not deceptive.

Keywords: endorsement, inquiry, metaphilosophy, disagreement, sincerity

1 Introduction

There are good reasons to doubt that philosophers are in a position to rationally believe the controversial claims at the heart of philosophical inquiry. Philosophical claims are often subject to pervasive and systematic disagreement. Historically, most philosophical hypotheses have not been accepted as true. And the available evidence pertaining to difficult philosophical questions often underdetermines which answer is best supported.

Despite these apparent defeaters, many philosophers have particular theories or propositions which they defend, argue for, and assert. And it's a good thing they do! At least, it is if you think philosophy is a valuable activity. It is hard to imagine what philosophy would look like without rigorous debate between philosophers advocating for competing views. It is certainly a positive thing, if it isn't a necessary thing, that philosophers provide the best defense of alternative answers to interesting and difficult philosophical questions. However, rationally defending and asserting a claim usually involves believing that claim.

The problem, then, is to make sense of how it can be a good thing for philosophers to commit to favored philosophical views, to advocate and defend these views, and to assert their correctness, despite the available defeaters which seem to make belief in such views irrational.

As a solution to this problem, several of us have offered alternative accounts of the nature of philosophical commitment. These accounts suggest that committed advocacy does not require belief in order to be rational. Instead, we propose alternative attitudes that constitute this commitment. I call the attitude at the center of my account *endorsement*. I argue that endorsement is the rational attitude for inquirers to have toward their own favored theories during inquiry. Unlike a belief, rationally endorsing a proposition is compatible with having a low credence in that proposition. Moreover, an endorsement of a proposition can be rationally justified, in part, by inquisitive reasons: epistemic reasons that are not evidence for that proposition. Hence, one can rationally endorse a claim even in light of the defeaters mentioned above.

There have been several pressing objections raised to alternative attitude accounts, including endorsement. It has been alleged that endorsement of a proposition is a weak or “spineless” form of commitment that fails to vindicate our intuitions that philosophers should have a deep commitment toward their own philosophical views (Jackson in press). It has also been suggested that endorsement is an insincere attitude, and that the theory of endorsement licenses insincere assertions (Basu in press; Jackson in press; Sarihan 2023; Singh 2021).

Here, I will offer a defense of the theory of endorsement from these objections. I will suggest that endorsement is not spineless, but rather promotes both intellectual courage and humility. I will also argue that endorsement of an improbable view can be sincere, and that endorsement can explain the sincerity of philosophical assertions during inquiry.

2 Endorsement

There are many reasons for skepticism about controversial philosophical claims. The most commonly discussed defeaters result from disagreement. Disagreement is particularly acute in philosophy: disagreement about controversial philosophical claims are systematic and pervasive (Goldberg 2013a, 2013b), and concern questions with multiple plausible answers (Walker 2022). Moreover, many of us find ourselves disagreeing with acknowledged “epistemic superiors” (Frances 2013). This means that even if one has a largely steadfast view of ordinary *peer* disagreement, the disagreement in philosophy may still provide strong defeaters for one’s views. But disagreement-based defeaters are not the only serious problems for believing philosophical claims. Controversial philosophical propositions also face particularly strong versions of arguments for anti-realism drawn from the philosophy of science, e.g., the pessimistic induction (Psillos 1999) and underdetermination of theory by evidence (Stanford 2023). Finally, it’s plausible that philosophical questions are simply particularly hard—that is part of why they remain philosophical questions, rather

than scientific ones (Parent in press).

In response to these reasons to doubt that belief in controversial philosophical claims is justified, several philosophers have suggested alternative attitudes one may take toward such claims. These include: *inclination* (Barnett 2019), *hypothesizing* (Palmira 2020), *acceptance* (Elgin 2010), and *attitudinal speculation* combined with the activity of *championing* (Goldberg 2013a). My own contribution to this discussion is the attitude of *endorsement*. Here, I will briefly re-introduce the endorsement account.¹

Endorsement is an attitude of resilient commitment and advocacy that inquirers take to their favored views during inquiry. It is a propositional attitude with many similarities to belief, but is also markedly different in both its dispositional profile and in the epistemic norms that govern it.² Endorsement is a type of acceptance, a kind of attitude that is typically voluntary and involves commitment to the truth of a proposition.³ Endorsement is distinguished from other kinds of acceptance in that it is provisional and governed primarily by epistemic norms, rather than practical ones. On my account, endorsement is the rational attitude to have toward a favored controversial claim or theory during inquiry—including philosophical inquiry.

Endorsement explains how it can be rational to have a view, even in light of the skeptical doubts raised above. It explains how it can be rational to be committed to a controversial proposition, even where that proposition is less than 50% likely to be true based on the total evidence—even by the lights of the person endorsing the proposition. Endorsement also helps to ease some apparent tensions between individual and collective epistemic rationality.

Endorsement can be characterized by a certain functional profile:

Endorsement Endorsement is a propositional attitude. If *S* endorses *p* in a research context *c*, then (typically):

1. *S* is disposed to categorically assert that *p*, or otherwise utter an expression of endorsement of *p* (in *c*).
2. *S* takes herself to be obligated to defend *p* (in *c*).
3. *S* treats *p* as a premise in her further reasoning (in *c*).
4. *S* shapes her research program in *c* (in part) based on *p*.
5. *S* is resiliently committed to *p* (in *c*).
6. *S* takes *p* to be a live option (i.e., they don't know *p* is false).

¹For more detailed discussion of endorsement, see (Fleisher 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023) The philosophy of science contains some precursor ideas concerning pursuit of a theory during scientific inquiry. For additional discussion and citations, see (Fleisher 2018, p. 562).

²“Endorsement” here is a term of art that I’m using to name this attitude; it is not meant to track ordinary usage. There are also other perfectly legitimate uses of the term “endorse” in philosophy.

³This is the kind of acceptance discussed by Cohen (1989). For discussion of other varieties of acceptance, see (Fleisher 2018).

7. In endorsing p , S aims to promote successful inquiry.⁴

This account is compatible with a wide variety of non-eliminativist views about the nature of attitudes and mental states. One can endorse many propositions, though I will largely focus on endorsements of theories.⁵

Endorsing a proposition is a more resilient commitment than believing it. This is primarily due to two features of the epistemic norms governing endorsement. First, rationally endorsing a proposition is compatible with a low credence in that proposition. This means it can be rational to endorse a proposition even after receiving strong disconfirming evidence about the proposition, e.g., evidence about systematic disagreement concerning it. This allows researchers to remain committed to a theory despite evolving evidential circumstances, as new studies are published, new arguments are made, and new problems come to light. Belief, on the other hand, is (plausibly) highly sensitive to evidence. If I receive strong evidence disconfirming P —especially if it is strong enough to lower my credence below $Pr(P) = .5$ —then epistemic rationality demands that I lose my belief in P .⁶ Thus, endorsement is more resilient to contrary evidence than belief.

Second, the norms for rational endorsement are sensitive to epistemic considerations that rational belief is not. I call the relevant sort of epistemic considerations *inquisitive reasons*: reasons which favor pursuing a theory because doing so will promote successful inquiry (Fleisher 2022, 2023).⁷ There are two primary kinds of inquisitive reasons. *Promise reasons* concern features of the theory itself which suggest that pursuing the theory will be fruitful. These might include the fact that the theory is testable. Or that the theory has useful conceptual resources, such as an associated analogy, that help suggest new lines of research. For instance, Daltonian atomism was associated with several useful analogies, including treating atoms as pieces of shot and treating them as billiard balls (Whitt 1992). Promise reasons are inspired by the literature on theory change and pursuitworthiness.⁸

Social inquisitive reasons are reasons to think that pursuing a theory would be fruitful because of the social circumstances of inquiry. For instance: that working on a particular theory would contribute to a better distribution of cognitive labor (Kitcher 1990; Strevens 2003); that working on the theory would help to avoid premature consensus (Zollman 2010); or that advocating for, and defending a theory, would promote beneficial disagreement (De Cruz &

⁴This version represents a minor revision to how I have presented the view before (e.g., Fleisher 2021). The “typically” language better captures that this is meant to characterize the general functional profile of endorsement. Meeting each and every condition is not really a necessary condition for having the attitude.

⁵If you doubt that theories are propositional, you can think of endorsing a theory as endorsing a proposition about the theory being true or approximately true.

⁶This claim about the evidential sensitivity of belief is not quite universally accepted. I will return to this below.

⁷In (Fleisher 2018), I called these extrinsic epistemic reasons.

⁸This literature is primarily inspired by (Kuhn 1970) and (Laudan 1978). For overview, see (Šešelja & Straßer 2014).

De Smedt 2013; Mercier 2011).⁹

Inquisitive reasons are reasons that concern promoting successful inquiry, and doing so in the right kind of way, by the standards of our practices of inquiry. They are not merely practical reasons concerning health or wealth. Thus, I think they are genuinely epistemic reasons.¹⁰ However, they are not good reasons to believe a theory. That a theory is testable is at best very weak reason to believe it. That no one else is working on a theory, so that my working on it will contribute to successful inquiry, is not a reason to believe the theory. In fact, it's a reason to doubt the theory. In other words, inquisitive reasons are not evidence in favor of the theory in question. Or more carefully: the degree of support they provide for pursuing a theory far outstrips any evidential support they provide. Moreover, the same proposition may serve as an inquisitive reason for one theory, but serve as evidence for a competing theory.

Belief is an attitude that is appropriately sensitive only to evidence, not to inquisitive reasons. More carefully: the *epistemic* norms that govern whether one should believe a proposition P are sensitive only to considerations about the truth of P . It is (epistemically) irrational to believe that P just because doing so would promote successful inquiry.¹¹

Inquisitive reasons may also be agent relative. For instance, what resources an agent has, or what internal motivations they have, help determine how the agent can best contribute to successful inquiry. If I have a preference for one theory, or if I'm the creator of a theory, I may be better motivated to advocate and defend that theory. Knowledge about my own motivations can help me see how I can best contribute to inquiry. Such motivation would count as irrational motivated reasoning if it were affects an agent's beliefs. But not so for endorsement: these considerations count as inquisitive reasons, as they concern what will promote successful collective inquiry. Moreover, they don't violate our standards for inquiry: it is common for researchers to be the advocates for particular views, especially the views they develop. We expect people to have such motivations, and reward them for following them (Strevens 2003).

Thus, endorsement explains the resilient commitment of philosophers to their controversial views in a way that belief-based accounts cannot. What justifies continued endorsement of a low-probability theory is that the theory has inquisitive reasons in its favor. The combined weight of inquisitive reasons and evidence can provide strong reason for continued endorsement, even where the weight of evidence alone does not provide strong reason for high confidence and belief. This means that a person can be sensitive to their total evidence—including the evidence from philosophical disagreement and other skeptical worries—and still have good reason to endorse a controversial propo-

⁹I take inquisitive reasons to be a species of reasons within zetetic normativity, as (Friedman 2020) uses the latter term.

¹⁰For defense of this claim, see (Fleisher 2022, 2023).

¹¹Though Aronowitz (2021) argues otherwise. There isn't space for a full response to her nuanced and interesting view here. I will simply note that I think the endorsement account better handles the cases and reasons she discusses, and some additional cases, without making sacrifices concerning the intuitive relationships between belief, credence, and evidence.

sition, based on their inquisitive reasons.

The endorsement account also vindicates assertions of controversial philosophical claims. On my account, there are two kinds of assertions that we can distinguish in research contexts: advocacy role assertions and evidential role assertions. These roles are distinguished by the kinds of questions they attempt to answer, and the kind of effect on the conversational context that a speaker should expect—and aims to elicit—when making them. In other words, there are different output and uptake conditions for the two kinds of roles.¹² Evidential assertions are made in order to add to the common stock of evidence available for researchers. They aim to answer questions concerning, e.g., previously discovered evidence, the results of experiments, or what claims have already been made in the literature. If I report the results of an experiment, the claims in the report are evidential role assertions. Evidential role assertions are made with the expectation that the audience will believe them, on the basis of the speaker’s testimony.¹³ Plausibly, the norms governing such assertions require a high degree of epistemic warrant—justification, knowledge, or certainty. This might correspond to whatever norm one is partial to in their account of assertions in ordinary contexts. Or the requirements might be more stringent for making evidential role assertions in the context of science or philosophy.

In contrast, advocacy role assertions aim to promote beneficial debate and discourse. Advocacy role assertions attempt to answer the controversial questions of a research field, questions at the heart of the inquiry. The speaker doesn’t (or shouldn’t) expect that the audience will believe the asserted proposition on the basis of their testimony. Instead, they will expect the assertion to be met with disagreement and to prompt philosophical debate on the question. On my account, the attitude that is required for warranted advocacy role assertions is rational endorsement.

Endorsement is an attitude that governs one’s activity within a particular context of inquiry. What I endorse is compartmentalized, or “fragmented”, so that I may endorse a claim in one field of inquiry while not endorsing it on other fields of inquiry. Moreover, my endorsement will not govern my behavior outside of inquiry: in betting, engineering, or giving public policy advice, I will be best served by following my beliefs and credences. After all, these are my attitudes that track only my evidence. This ensures that following my inquisitive reasons won’t get me in trouble at the casino. However, this does mean that what I assert outside of the context of inquiry may be different than what I assert within it. I might assert in a paper that “virtue reliabilism gives the right account of knowledge-level justification.” But in casual conversation, outside of a professional talk, I may admit that I don’t believe this claim. I

¹²For further support of the argument for making this distinction between roles for assertions (and for seeing them all as assertions), see (Fleisher 2019, 2020). I’m working with an information updating view of assertion, inspired by (Stalnaker 1984) and (Roberts 2012). However, a version of the distinction is compatible with other theories of speech acts.

¹³Evidential role assertions are thus similar to “tellings”, but in the context of inquiry (Fricker 2006; Greco 2020; Hinchman 2005).

merely endorse it. I think that this fragmentation of the attitude accurately reflects how some philosophers (perfectly reasonably) behave. And in any event, it is valuable to allow different attitudes to govern behavior in different contexts in this way.¹⁴

3 On the possession of spines

The first objection I will consider claims that endorsement calls for a kind of “spinelessness.” A philosopher who merely endorses a controversial proposition may admit that they don’t believe it, or may fail to fully defend it, when asked about it in contexts outside of inquiry. Elizabeth Jackson (in press) has argued that this suggests that endorsement does not vindicate the kind of commitment that philosophers should have toward their own deeply held convictions.¹⁵

To illustrate the worry, imagine I give philosophy conference talk, and I assert “virtue reliabilism is the correct theory of epistemic justification.” Suppose that I rationally endorse this claim. Then, over some post-conference drinks, you ask me “do you believe that virtue reliabilism is correct?”, and I respond, “No, I’m only about 40% confident that its correct. The virtue responsibilists and proper functionalists have some great arguments, and I suppose we can’t entirely rule out evidentialism.” Jackson thinks this response is spineless. I initially claim one thing, but when asked about it in another context, I spinelessly give up my apparent commitment. She suggests that it is objectionable that endorsement is limited to research contexts, and that one may endorse conflicting claims within different research contexts.

To further motivate the objection, Jackson appeals to controversial propositions that are core commitments for some philosophers—core in the sense of being at the center of their Quinean “web of beliefs”. These include propositions such as that *factory farming is morally objectionable*; that *God exists*; and that *epistemic permissivism is true*. In each case, she thinks it is intuitively implausible that it cannot be rational to believe such propositions. Moreover, she thinks that a type of commitment—like endorsement—that fails to license assertion and defense of such propositions in *every context* fails to reflect the fact that these are among some philosophers’ core commitments.

I will argue that, despite these worries, endorsers display adequate spinal rigidity. In fact, the theory of endorsement is necessary for understanding certain forms of intellectual courage. We need endorsement to make sense of what both intellectual humility and intellectual courage require in the context of difficult and controversial inquiry. In response to Jackson’s objection,

¹⁴Note that I now think one may both believe and endorse the same claim. (This is an amendment to the view.) For one thing, one might have a more resilient commitment to a position than just having the belief would justify.

¹⁵Her objection is in part inspired by spinelessness objections to conciliationism about peer disagreement (Elga 2007). See (Vavova 2014) and (Levy 2020) for a defense of conciliationism from these worries, and (Fritz 2018) for criticism of such responses.

we can distinguish two kinds of cases. First, cases where belief in a controversial claim is warranted, as Jackson suggests. The theory of endorsement is compatible with acknowledging such cases. Second, cases where the skeptical challenges—and intellectual humility in general—preclude rational belief, but where intellectual courage requires some kind of steadfast commitment. The latter kind of case shows how the theory of endorsement makes sense of courage and humility in a way that belief-based accounts cannot. I will discuss these in turn. (I will also return to discussion of fragmentation in the next section).

As a preliminary, note that it is not the theory of endorsement, but the separate skeptical arguments mentioned above—e.g., disagreement, pessimistic induction, underdetermination—that suggest belief is irrational in controversial philosophical propositions. The endorsement account attempts to vindicate philosophical commitment despite these defeaters. But the account does not entail that belief in controversial claims is *always* irrational. The account is compatible with the idea that one may have justified beliefs (or even knowledge) concerning *some* controversial claims.

In the first type of case, a subject's belief in a controversial proposition is epistemically rational and justified, despite the presence of the skeptical challenges. In general, such cases will arise when subjects have defeater-defeaters for the skeptical worries. These might include special reasons for doubting the reliability of disagreeing interlocutors, showing they are not peers (let alone experts) on the controversial claim in question. Alternatively a subject might have private evidence that rationally justifies their own belief, but which cannot be easily shared (Sosa 2010). Private evidence may be inappropriate as a basis for public arguments and commitments, but can still justify personal beliefs. Alternatively, a subject might have very strong justification for certain first-order claims—e.g., that *the cup is on the table*—where any disagreement about philosophical principles and background assumptions has inadequate force to undermine this first-order knowledge.

Jackson's factory-farming example illustrates these points. I think the wrongness of factory farming is something that one can know in virtue of perceiving (or otherwise recognizing) farmed animals as suffering, conscious beings, given a few background empirical and moral claims I'm very confident in. I'm more confident in this knowledge than any more abstract proposition justified purely by philosophical argument.¹⁶ In addition to the direct, first-order evidence, we have defeater-defeaters for disagreement over the claim: our society is structured to inculcate meat-loving norms for non-epistemic reasons, and moreover, people gain great pleasure eating factory-farmed animal products. Thus, there is widespread confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, and other biases which explain the disagreement. This serves to undercut the force of the disagreement on this topic. So, not only can I gain direct, basic knowledge about the wrongness, but I have defeater-defeaters for the disagreement.

¹⁶My discussion here is similar to discussions concerning moral disagreement, conciliationism, and skepticism, e.g., in Vavova (2014) and Levy (2020).

(Other considerations serve as defeater-defeaters for the other skeptical challenges in this case.)

Of course, each of the claims in the last paragraph is potentially in conflict with controversial philosophical claims that I don't know are false, e.g., claims about the nature of defeaters, higher-order evidence, perceptual knowledge, moral knowledge, and moral realism. However, two things prevent this from being a problem: my high level of justification in the first-order claims, and confirmational holism. I might not know how to fully make sense of my first order knowledge in this case. For instance, perhaps the moral claims are literally true, or perhaps expressivism is the right account of ethics. But—because of confirmational holism—each of these high-level philosophical views can be made compatible with my first order knowledge, given the right auxiliary assumptions (Longino 1990; Stanford 2023). And I am much more confident in the first-order claim than any of the abstract philosophical ones, making it a fixed point by which philosophical claims and auxiliary hypotheses are evaluated. In sum, it's perfectly reasonable to think that I can have knowledge of specific, first-order claims about the wrongness of factory farming, even if I have low confidence in any specific set of abstract meta-ethical or epistemological theories.

Jackson's example of epistemic permissivism illustrates the second kind of case: cases where intellectual humility precludes belief, but where intellectual courage is called for.¹⁷ Epistemic permissivism is a theory about epistemic rationality. It is part of the *explanans* being offered for how epistemic rationality works. It is meant to explain our judgments about epistemic rationality, or about when people believe in an appropriate manner. Disagreement about the view concerns whether the theory is correct, not necessarily about specific claims concerning the explananda intuitions. Again, due to confirmational holism, the connection between the theory of epistemic permissivism and any particular intuition is not straightforward. Moreover, most of the intuitions to be explained by a theory of epistemic rationality are ones that both permissivists and their opponents—uniqueness theorists—agree about. There are only a small set of problem cases where the two views appear to diverge.

Whether we should accept permissivism or uniqueness depends on the weight of arguments and reasons that we have gathered and evaluated during philosophical inquiry. There is no obvious route toward treating this as direct perceptual knowledge. Nor are there obvious defeater-defeaters: there are no widespread social structures that support belief in uniqueness that are explained by non-epistemic social and political factors. One's private evidence is very unlikely to directly pertain to the abstract theoretical claims in question here. Thus, commitment to epistemic permissivism is subject to the kinds of defeaters discussed above: disagreement, the pessimistic induction, and underdetermination. And these defeaters are undefeated. Hence, epistemic rationality and intellectual humility require low confidence in epistemic permissivism. If we want to make sense of the idea that epistemic permissivism can

¹⁷For an overview about epistemic permissivism, see (Koepec & Titelbaum 2016).

be a “core commitment” a philosopher has, we need a different attitude than belief.

The theory of endorsement vindicates the idea that we can rationally have core (but non-belief) commitments about controversial philosophical claims. The theory reflects the requirements of intellectual humility. We should recognize that we are fallible and limited, that the philosophy is difficult, and that—given the skeptical worries—our philosophical theories are at risk of being false. Hence, we should not believe them. At the same time, endorsement also offers an alternative understanding of having a spine, because it helps make sense of intellectual courage during inquiry. It does so because endorsement’s sensitivity to inquisitive reasons explains how resilient commitment can be rational, even where belief would be irrational.

As I have argued before, some kinds of intellectual courage involve sensitivity to inquisitive reasons (Fleisher 2023). Sometimes, inquirers endorse and pursue theories that are less probable than their negations based on the available evidence. In doing so, they risk various kinds of significant harms to their careers, reputations, and livelihoods. For instance, Barry Marshall and Robin Warren courageously pursued—and ultimately vindicated—the bacterial theory of peptic ulcer disease, despite the consensus at the time that the theory was false, and despite significant professional impediments. Intellectual courage is a matter of pursuing epistemically valuable ends despite significant risk of harm. For such acts to be courageous, the chance of achieving the good epistemic ends must be adequate to justify the risk. For intellectual courage displayed outside of inquiry—for instance, in journalism—risk of harm is justified in virtue of the strong evidence agents have for the truth of their claims. However, courageous inquirers often pursue theories that cannot be justified merely on the weight of evidence: the evidence supports the theory’s falsity. Thus, we need a different kind of epistemic reason to explain how the inquirer is justified in taking the risk. Inquisitive reasons play this role: the fact that pursuit of a theory would promote successful inquiry provides strong additional epistemic reason, beyond the available evidence, for endorsing the theory. And endorsement is the appropriate attitude of resilient commitment that such an intellectually courageous inquirer should have toward the theory they are pursuing.

Thus, endorsement helps make sense of intellectual courage: an intellectually courageous inquirer endorses her favored theory, partially on the basis of the inquisitive reasons in its favor. A belief-based account cannot accommodate this kind of courage, since it involves sensitivity to non-evidential reasons. Thus, the only way to (epistemically) rationally display the relevant spinefulness—the relevant kind of steadfast commitment for inquiry—is to be an endorser. A believer of a theory who encounters significant contrary evidence must either give up their belief or continue to believe in an irrational manner. The endorser of a theory can maintain their commitment, on the basis of inquisitive reasons, even in the face of strong contrary evidence, and even when competing theories are more likely to be true by the subject’s own

lights.¹⁸

4 Sincere philosophical assertion

Endorsement, like other alternative attitude accounts, has inspired worries about sincerity. These concern both sincerity of the attitude of endorsement itself, and the sincerity of asserting what one endorses. I will consider each issue in turn, starting with sincere assertion.

Belief is typically considered a requirement for sincere assertion. Indeed, on many views a sincere assertion *just is* an assertion of something the speaker believes (Pagin & Marsili 2021). One reason for this view is that assertions are taken to express beliefs, or to represent the speaker as believing. At the very least, there does seem to be an important connection between assertion and belief, because assertions are used to give testimony. When testifying that *P*, I typically aim for my audience to come to believe *P*, and this will typically only be appropriate if I believe *P*. All of the uses of “typically” here are necessary because there are many outliers, e.g., lies, bullshit, etc. But these are usually taken to be not only outliers, but to be in some way deficient. The prototypical *permissible* cases of testimony involve knowledge (and so belief) transmission. Moreover, lying, a paradigmatic form of insincere assertion, involves asserting propositions that the speaker does not believe. And lies are effective only when the audience takes the speaker to believe the asserted proposition. For all these reasons, the belief-based view of sincere assertion is attractive.

On my account, advocacy role assertions are warranted when the speaker rationally endorses the asserted proposition, which of course does not require believing that proposition. Hence, the objection to the endorsement account is that it licenses insincere assertions. Philosophers who assert propositions that they endorse but do not believe violate the belief-based sincerity condition on assertions. According to the objector, the endorser represents themselves as having an attitude that they do not, in fact, have.¹⁹

According to the endorsement account, I would be warranted in asserting “A belief is justified only if an agent forms it using a reliable competence” because I rationally endorse that claim. I endorse virtue reliabilism, but I don’t

¹⁸Jackson offers an interesting alternative strategy for vindicating philosophical commitment in light of the skeptical worries: she suggests belief that *P* can be rational even when one has low credence in *P*. Thus, belief in philosophical commitments can be rational despite the skeptical worries. There is not space to fully consider this proposal here. But I will briefly mention two advantages of the endorsement account. First, it does not require commitment to a controversial view about belief being “weak,” i.e., compatible with low confidence. Second, as I just argued, the endorsement account can appeal to inquisitive reasons to explain why low-confidence belief is valuable and justified.

¹⁹Goldberg considers a version of this kind of objection in order to motivate his alternative account of sincerity (Goldberg 2013a). Other versions of assertion-based sincerity objections are found in (Singh 2021) and in (Basu in press; Buckwalter 2022; Sarihan 2023). The latter three papers offer objections primarily aimed at the idea that it is permissible to publish claims when you don’t believe them, as advocated by (Dang & Bright 2021; Fleisher 2020; Plakias 2019). But they function as objections to the endorsement account, also.

believe it, because of the skeptical worries. If the traditional account is right, then my assertion would seem to represent me as having a belief that I do not, in fact, have. Thus, the endorsement account licenses insincere assertions.

In response, I will argue that the simple, belief-based view of sincere assertions is false. Sincere advocacy-role assertions require endorsement of the asserted proposition, not belief.

The endorsement account of philosophical assertion is a broadly Gricean account, though updated by appeal to the work of Stalnaker (1984) and Roberts (2012).²⁰ On my account, the requirements on warranted and sincere assertion depend on the mutual beliefs and expectations of conversational participants. Assertions function as proposals to update the common ground of a conversational context. The update here amounts to answering a specific question under discussion. The common ground consists of the mutually accepted propositions, and is grounded in the beliefs and expectations of conversational participants. When a speaker asserts an answer to a controversial question, this functions as an advocacy role assertion. If the update proposed by the assertion was accepted, this would settle one of the fundamental questions at issue in the philosophical debate. The speaker doesn't expect that this will be the result: they expect their interlocutors to disagree with them. So, while the function of the advocacy assertion is still to update the common ground, the expected actual effect is (valuable) debate and disagreement. Crucially, if the conversation is not dysfunctional, *everyone is aware of all this*. So, the audience for the advocacy role assertion does not take the speaker to represent themselves as believing the claim. Instead, they will take the speaker merely to endorse the claim.²¹

On my account, sincere advocacy role assertions require endorsement: that is the attitude that the speaker represents themselves as having. Sincere evidential role assertions will typically require belief, for similar reasons. This account of sincerity fits well with Gricean accounts of assertion in philosophical contexts.²² Still, one might worry that this is an ad hoc maneuver. Other cases of sincere assertion require belief. What principled reason is there to think philosophical (advocacy) assertions are different?

In response, I want to remind us of something that has gone largely unremarked in this debate: sincerity is not just a requirement of assertions. Sincerity is a feature (and requirement) of all sorts of actions. There are many other kinds of speech acts governed by sincerity requirements, including promises, directives, and performatives (Eriksson 2011).²³ One can also sincerely partic-

²⁰Goldberg (2013a) similarly offers a Gricean account of sincere assertion, one which I think is largely correct. The endorsement account adds a few details, and the considerations I offer below will provide some independent motivation for such an account.

²¹This "awareness" and "taking" here will typically involve implicit beliefs, especially regarding endorsement itself.

²²Though endorsement, and the view of sincerity here, is compatible with other accounts of assertion given suitable modification.

²³This is perhaps an instance of philosophers focusing on assertions (and other declaratives) to the exclusion of other kinds of speech acts (Kukla & Lance 2009, p.11–12). For further discussion of sincerity for other kinds of acts, see (Unnsteinsson 2023).

ipate in various kinds of activities. One can be sincere (or insincere) in making an attempt to cook, to clean, or to dance. For many of these cases, there is no requirement that the sincere agent *believe* a target proposition. While there often do seem to be requirements on what kinds of attitudes a sincere agent has, these attitudes can't always be a belief in a target proposition. For some actions—e.g., dancing—it's not clear that there *is* a target proposition. Even if there is an identifiable target proposition, it's not clear that belief in that proposition is the required attitude of sincerity. Directives are a particularly difficult case to make sense of, but the attitude required seems to involve some kind of desire or wanting. If I say to you "Go home!", but I secretly want you to stay, I have been insincere. This is true even if I believe that you will in fact go home. The sincerity condition for this directive involves what I want or desire, not what I believe.²⁴

Sincerity, according to the relevant dictionary sense, is a matter of avoiding deception and dissimulation (Oxford English Dictionary 2023). Thus, I think it is best understood as a matter of intention: intending not to be deceptive, or not to misrepresent oneself. Eriksson explores a similar account, where sincerity is a matter of communicative virtue (2011, p. 226). On an intention-based account, a sincere person intends to be a cooperative agent, and to avoid deceiving their cooperators. For speech acts, this means being a cooperative speaker. Hence, Gricean accounts are well-placed to make sense of sincerity for speech acts, and not simply for assertions. All this is to say that an account of sincerity that depends on the intentions of speakers, and the beliefs and expectations of audience members, is not merely an ad hoc maneuver to save the endorsement account. It is motivated by an account whose resources are necessary for explaining the sincerity of actions in general.

One might still worry that the added complication of distinguishing advocacy role assertions from other sorts will lead to confusion. That is, a speaker might take themselves to be in a philosophical context where their interlocutors expect advocacy assertions to only express endorsement, but they may be wrong. Moreover, a speaker may experience context collapse: their intended audience might be different from their actual audience (Dethier 2022; Frost-Arnold 2021). Thus, following the endorsement account—which licenses unhedged advocacy role assertions—will lead to confusion, even if we think sincerity can be satisfied in some cases.²⁵

I agree that there is potential for confusion. However, I think the benefits of philosophical debate and disagreement outweigh the potential costs of occasionally having this kind of confusion. To return to a familiar point, it is hard to imagine philosophy without robust disagreement that is facilitated by committed advocacy and assertion. Moreover, I agree that the potential for confusion here should be managed by changes to our practice. But the question is which changes will better facilitate the goals of both philosophy and

²⁴Spelling out precisely how the condition works in this case turns out to be vexing for reasons that don't concern us here. See (Unnsteinsson 2023).

²⁵Sarhan (2023) offers an objection much like this concerning publishing without belief.

discourse more generally. I think the better option is to retain and expand the practice of endorsement—including advocacy role assertion—while combining this with more careful management of our contexts.²⁶ This means promoting a widespread understanding of the difference between internal philosophical contexts (like journals and conferences), and the kinds of contexts that involve addressing non-philosophers.²⁷

5 Sincerity of attitude

Another worry for the endorsement account concerns the sincerity of the attitude itself. The worry is about whether an endorsement is the kind of commitment that really reflects an agent’s true views, and the reasons they really find internally compelling. One version of the worry rests on the idea that being sincerely committed to the truth of a claim involves making it part of how I represent the world (Jackson in press). My beliefs just are my attempt to accurately represent the world. An endorsement, on the other hand, is sensitive to non-evidential considerations. A related version of the worry suggests that a sincere commitment is one that I maintain in all parts of my cognitive life, and which structures my thoughts and actions in all domains. The thought is that, if I am unwilling to defend the commitment, when push comes to shove, I’m not really sincere in holding it (Singh 2021). (This latter point is obviously related to the spinelessness objection).

Barnett (2019) raises a similar worry.²⁸ For Barnett, a sincere commitment is one that embodies a subject’s personal take on things, or how the world seems to them.²⁹ Deferring to other people means giving up something regarding their own autonomy of judgment. A sincere representational commitment, he thinks, should reflect how the world seems to the subject, not how it seems to others. And moreover, facts about how things seems to individuals are valuable: both for discourse and debate, and for “wisdom of the crowd” effects. For these reasons, Barnett advocates for a an alternative attitude that

²⁶Dethier (2022) argues for a similar solution to this kind of problem.

²⁷As noted above, Basu (in press), Buckwalter (2022), and Sarihan (2023) raise related sincerity worries about *publishing* claims one does not believe. The foregoing account of sincerity helps to assuage some of these concerns. However, these philosophers also worry about the kinds of bad incentives that our current publishing practices encourage. They think that a requirement of believing published claims would help solve these problems. Singh (2021) makes a similar claim about how a sincere commitment requirement helps to discourage “defections” in honesty. However, I suspect that the perverse incentives for publishing would not be solved by a belief requirement. Instead, these problems would be exacerbated, since people will have strong motivated reasons to take on beliefs they should not take on. Instead, I think that the problems with our publishing system must be addressed systemically and socially. Moreover, I think widespread adoption of the endorsement account will only aid such efforts, as the account helpfully distinguishes endorsements based on what will promote successful inquiry, and commitments based on motivated reasoning and other biases.

²⁸Originally to (Goldberg 2013a), but he has pressed this objection to endorsement in conversation.

²⁹See also Frances on takes (2013, p. 131).

represents the subject's own, personal *inclination*. Inclination represents a subject's personal take on the matter, isolated and independent from what other people think. It involves explicitly leaving out higher-order evidence about disagreements. Endorsement is not so isolated: it includes evidence gleaned from other people's inclinations. Barnett thus worries that endorsement mingles an agent's own inclination with others', making it less purely a result of each individual's own take and potentially undermining wisdom of the crowd effects.

The account of sincerity discussed in the previous section helps to alleviate these worries. A sincere act is one that involves intending to contribute to a cooperative endeavor without deception or misrepresentation. If that's right, then we can see sincere endorsement as involving virtuously and cooperatively taking part in the practice of inquiry. Endorsement is an attitude of committed advocacy toward a theory, one that is justified on the basis of both evidence and inquisitive reasons. An endorsement is sincere when the agent bases it on the right kinds of reasons, and their intention in taking the attitude is to promote successful collective inquiry.³⁰

Endorsing sincerely also involves limiting one's commitment to a specific context (or contexts) of inquiry. The fact that the endorsement is compartmentalized to a particular context is part of what makes the attitude an appropriate way to contribute to cooperative activity and communication. This limitation allows a subject to cooperatively promote successful inquiry, without infecting decision-making in other domains with commitments to improbable propositions. In many cases it would be a failure of epistemic rationality, and intellectual humility, to add one's commitments to controversial philosophical propositions to one's belief set. This would be a failure to be virtuously cooperative in these other domains. Thus, contrary to Jackson and Singh's claims, the compartmentalization of endorsement is a sign of sincerity, not insincerity, because it is a sign of cooperative intentions and virtuous inquiry.

Similarly, appeal to this understanding of sincerity helps us with Barnett's worries about preserving one's own personal take on the evidence. The right kinds of reasons for endorsement involve both the agent's evidence, and their inquisitive reasons. Both of these are genuine reasons of the agent, that are part of their take on the world. The set of relevant reasons here is simply more expansive than evidence: they concern both reasons to think the theory in question is true, and inquisitive reasons to take pursuit of that theory to be valuable for inquiry. Furthermore, evidence from disagreement is not excluded. Unlike for inclination, the agent is able to consider her total evidence (and total epistemic reasons) for a theory in deciding what to endorse. Thus, an agent's research activity is structured not just by her personal evaluations of the evidence, isolated from other researchers. The endorser is cooperatively receptive to other people's views. And their total evidence is available to guide

³⁰A full-blown intention is probably not actually required. I suspect it is enough that agent merely aims to promote inquiry in virtue of the functional role it is playing for them, and within the social setting of inquiry.

their endorsement, and thus to guide their research activities.

At the same time, the fact that the agent is inclined toward a particular theory, based on her own personal evaluation, need not be lost on my theory. I think Barnett has identified something important in the notion of an inclination. I just don't think that this is the attitude we need for an alternative attitude account of philosophical commitment. Instead, I think that inclination serves as a kind of inquisitive reason. A philosopher's inclination helps to determine which theory would be best to pursue. If a particular theory just seems right to me, after thinking through the problems that motivate it, this will help motivate my research into the question. It will also make me vigilant in finding objections to other theories, and could potentially make me better at recognizing new evidence in the theory's favor. This added motivation and sensitivity to certain kinds of evidence give me strong reason to pursue the theory. In addition, I can report my inclination in circumstances of judgment aggregation to help with wisdom of crowds affects, even where this inclination departs from what I endorse. Hence, we can account for the importance and value of inclination by treating it as inquisitive reason. This has the added benefit of ensuring that our attitude of philosophical commitment is sensitive to our total evidence (and total reasons).

In summary: the attitude of endorsement can be perfectly sincere. What is required for a sincere philosophical commitment is an intention to contribute to the cooperative endeavor of inquiry without deception or misrepresentation. A rational endorsement will count as sincere in this sense. This is true even where endorsement is compartmentalized to specific domains of research, and where it includes sensitivity to reasons concerning other people's disagreement.

6 Conclusion

I have argued that the theory of endorsement explains the resilient commitment and advocacy of their own views that philosophers so often engage in. It makes sense of having such commitments despite the reasons that defeat justification for beliefs in the same propositions. Moreover, I have argued that the theory of endorsement survives two significant objections: that endorsement is spineless and that it is insincere. I argued that the theory of endorsement explains how an agent can both respond with appropriate intellectual humility and at the same time show proper intellectual courage. This defuses the charge of spinelessness. I also suggested that sincerity is a requirement for many kinds of actions, and not just for assertion. Thus, we need an account that explains sincerity for different acts and in different contexts. An account of sincerity based on intentions to cooperate without deception or misrepresentation responds to this independent motivation. Such an account also explains how endorsement—and endorsement-licensed assertion—can be sincere. This defuses the sincerity objections.

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