**Provisional attitudes**

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*1 Introduction*

Historically, epistemologists working in the Cartesian tradition have focused on the epistemic pedigree of *all-or-nothing* doxastic attitudes such as belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgement. Formally-inclined epistemologists, by contrast, have studied the epistemic properties of *graded* doxastic attitudes (aka degrees of belief or credences), which can be roughly regarded as the levels of confidence individuals – formally representable via real-valued functions – invest in the truth of the targeted proposition *p*. Both outright or full belief and degrees of belief are *determinate* doxastic attitudes, in that they encode a determinate stance on the proposition’s truth-value. When one fully believes that *p*, one is committed to *p*’s truth in such a way that doesn’t leave open the question of *p*’s truth-value, whereas when one has a certain degree of belief in *p*’s truth one is committed to a determinate, numerically identifiable, estimate of *p*’s truth-value (or, on an alternative picture of degrees of belief, one is committed to regarding *p*’s truth to be evidentially supported to a certain determinate extent).

While not necessarily mutually exclusive, these two approaches have long been taken as offering an exhaustive blueprint of the doxastic mind. However, recent times have witnessed a burgeoning of interest in what we can call *provisional attitudes*, namely doxastic attitudes that we can hold towards a propositional content *p* that differ from both outright belief and degrees of belief in that they encode a merely provisional – as opposed to determinate – stance on *p*’s truth-value. The goal of this entry is to introduce the reader to the nature and normative features of provisional attitudes, and to outline the roles they play in our epistemological theories.

*2 Provisional attitudes: some varieties*

The very notion of a provisional attitude can be traced back to Kant’s lectures on logic. Kant maintains that a *provisional judgement* that *p* is the attitude one takes when it *prima facie* appears to one that *p* is the case (Kant 2004: 313) prior to and with the aim of conducting a thorough investigation into the question of *p*’s truth-value (Kant 2004: 129). Kant contrasts provisional judgements with both *determinate judgements*, which are the attitudes one takes when one closes one’s inquiry on sufficient grounds, and *suspension of judgement*, which is the attitude one has when one doesn’t let one’s provisional judgement turn into a determinate one (Kant 2004: 311).

Looking at the current literature, we can disentangle different senses of “provisional”.

In order to capture the idea that one can *have a defensible view* about the question whether *p* without believing *p*, Goldberg (2013, 2015) introduces the notion of *attitudinal speculation*. On Goldberg’s view, one attitudinally speculates that *p* when one regards *p* as more likely than not-*p* relative to one’s evidential situation while, at the same time, regarding that evidence as falling short of warranting belief in *p*. (Goldberg 2013: 283). Barnett (2019) questions Goldberg’s account. For one, there can be cases where there are three options available, say *p*, *q*, *r*, I regard *p* to be .4 likely to be true, whereas *q* and *r* as .3 likely to be true. From Goldberg’s account, it follows that I hold *p* as a view, but this seems incorrect precisely because I take the likelihood of *p* quite low. For another, there can be cases in which one recognises that one’s total evidence makes *p* likely to a somewhat low degree while, at the same time, still leaning towards *p*’s truth.

In part as a remedy to these shortcomings, Barnett (2019) posits the existence of *inclinations*, attitudes of seeming to one that *p* that one takes by reasoning conditionally on a body of evidence that differs from the evidence one currently possesses. Such *insulated* reasoning comes either in an *additive* or in a *subtractive* variety. Here’s an example of the former: on the supposition that my Gibson’s guitar will be ready this afternoon, it seems to me that I’ll play a Gibson at the concert this evening. Here’s an example of the latter: as a trial juror, although I’ve heard the witness’s testimony, on the supposition that such testimony is inadmissible it seems to me that the defendant is innocent.

Barnett’s notion of inclinations captures the idea that one’s stance on a given question can be provisional in virtue of its being the output of a reasoning which takes something else than one’s total possessed evidence as input. We turn now to examine a second sense of “provisional” which is linked to the role that the doxastic attitudes can play in reasoning and deliberation.

Staffel (2019, 2021a, 2021b) notes that although in many cases our deliberation about what the evidence supports is constituted by a rather quick and effortless reasoning that outputs a certain belief, there are other cases in which our assessment of evidence involves a fluctuation in our opinions about what the evidence indicates. Consider, for instance, the case of a detective who has to determine whether the butler committed the murder. After gathering the evidence, the detective starts auditing its probative force. Considering an initial subset of the gathered evidence, the detective is 60% confident that the butler did it. As the detective’s reasoning process unfolds, they move on to consider other pieces of evidence and they become 70% confident that the butler did it. However, a fresh look at the evidence so far examined indicates that certain things do not add up, and the detective becomes 50% confident that the butler did it, pending examination of yet other pieces of evidence they would gather at the crime scene. Cases like this motivate the existence of what Staffel calls *transitional attitudes*, namely attitudes that reflect the reasoner’s provisional take on what the evidence supports at different stages of one’s evaluation of that evidence. Transitional attitudes fluctuate across degrees of confidence as one’s reasoning proceeds and they are not used for action and assertion unless in special circumstances. Staffel contrasts transitional attitudes with *terminal attitudes*, namely attitudes we have at the end of the deliberation process upon which we act both verbally and non-verbally.

Staffel’s transitional attitudes differ from both Goldberg’s attitudinal speculation and Barnett’s inclinations. For one, transitional attitudes are not view-taking attitudes precisely because one goes through several transitional attitudes as one reasons towards one’s view on the matter at hand. For another, while Barnett’s inclinations are attitudes we take conditional on a body of evidence that differs from the evidence we possess, Staffel’s transitional attitudes are attitudes we take to keep track of the probative force of the evidence we possess.

Provisional attitudes also bear a tight connection to inquiry. Focusing on the kinds of propositions or theories one adopts in research contexts, Will Fleisher (2018, 2021a, 2021b) introduces the attitude of *endorsement*. One endorses that *p* when one is resiliently committed to *p*, takes oneself to be obligated to defend it, and shapes one’s research program on such a proposition with the aim to promote successful inquiry. While endorsement differs from belief in that the latter closes one’s inquiry whereas the former doesn’t, when one endorses *p* one exhibits a certain settledness in inquiry which makes endorsement a less tentative attitude than Staffel’s transitional attitudes: one’s endorsement that *p* plays a research-shaping role in inquiry within a certain domain.

Palmira (2019, 2020, forthcoming) identifies the existence of an inquiry-guiding attitude we take towards a proposition *p* when we are inclined towards answering the question whether *p* in the affirmative, irrespective of whether or not we are in a research context. Palmira calls this attitude “hypothesis”. When one hypothesises that *p*, one’s inquiring efforts are directed towards closing the question of *p*’s truth-value in the affirmative, one is disposed to use *p* in reasoning about how to inquire into the question whether *p* and is also disposed to conjecture, as opposed to asserting, *p*. Hypothesis and suspension of judgement are similar in that they are not inquiry-settling attitudes, yet they differ since one’s hypothesis that *p* is asymmetrical between *p* and not-*p* whereas one’s attitude of suspension of judgement about whether *p* is neutral about such polar verdict. Hypothesis and belief are similar since they both are asymmetrical between *p* and not-*p*, yet they differ since one’s hypothesis that *p* is not inquiry-settling whereas one’s belief that *p* is. While one’s endorsement that *p* plays a research-shaping role in inquiry within a certain domain, one’s hypothesis that *p* plays an inquiry-guiding role with respect to the question of *p*’s truth-value only.

*3 The rationality of provisional attitudes*

Provisional attitudes differ from determinate attitudes such as belief and credences also on normative grounds.

On Barnett (2019)’s view, inclinations are the attitudes one can have by adding or subtracting pieces of evidence. So, one can be rationally inclined towards *p* by insulating one’s reasoning from the evidence one currently possesses in such a way that one’s inclination gets rationalized either by more or by less evidence than one’s own. This represents a departure from standard evidentialism, which is the view that one’s doxastic attitudes are rationalised by the support offered by one’s total body of possessed evidence.

Staffel (2021b) also advocates a departure from standard epistemological theorising. Epistemology has traditionally focused on what she calls *pro toto* rationality, namely the rationality enjoyed by terminal attitudes, in light of a complete assessment of the support provided by the total amount of evidence bearing on a given proposition one possesses. Yet, cases of reasoning about complex problems suggest the need for a different notion of rationality, what Staffel (2021b) calls *pro tem* rationality, that attaches to transitional attitudes. To illustrate, suppose that Sarah is trying to calculate the cost of a large restaurant bill. She runs the numbers mentally, and gets 357,77€ as a result. It seems plausible to say that, at this stage of her reasoning, Sarah is rational to be 35% confident that the total of the bill is 357,77€. As she double-checks her initial answer, Sarah calculates separately the price of each course of the meal by writing it down on a piece of paper and adds the tip at the end after asking her friend Selma if it’s okay to leave a 20% tip. Sarah gets the same result as before, and is now rational to be 60% confident that it is 357,77€. Sarah then goes on to use her pocketsize calculator, which confirms the previous result. It is now rational for Sarah to be 80% confident that the total amount of the bill is of 357,77€. To respect the fact that our rationality judgements about Sarah change as we go through her reasoning process, Staffel (2021b) argues that we should make the rational status of transitional attitudes relative to the deliberative stage the reasoner is at *for the time being* (this is what “pro tem” means). Once we acknowledge the existence of pro tem rationality, we can map the traditional distinction between propositional and doxastic rationality (or justification) onto it: the propositional pro rationality of transitional attitudes depends on both the cognitive process one is using to settle the question at hand and the target transitional attitude’s sensitivity to the evidence one has considered up to the stage of reasoning at which one forms the attitude. If these conditions are met, and one’s transitional attitude is properly based on that evidence, then one’s transitional attitude is also doxastically rational.

Fleisher’s characterisation of rational endorsement starts from the distinction between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* epistemic reasons (See Fleisher 2018, 2021a and Steel 2010. Fleisher 2023 now calls the latter “inquisitive” reasons): while intrinsic reasons are the standard type(s) of reasons that epistemologists have discussed in the context of the debate about reasons for belief (e.g. evidence), extrinsic epistemic reasons are not indicators of truth but promote truth in the long run by contributing to healthy inquiry. For instance, the fact that a certain theory would be testable and would also produce a lively, genuine and deep debate within a research community give us extrinsic reasons to endorse it. Endorsement aims at promoting successful inquiry and being sensitive to both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons is conducive to this aim. For this reason, Fleisher maintains that the standard whereby we should adjudicate the rationality of one’s endorsement that *p* is given by *inclusive* epistemic rationality, which includes both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons (Fleisher 2018, 2021a).

Palmira (2020, forthcoming) shapes the normative profile of hypothesis in relation to its inquiry-guiding role. On Palmira’s view, one’s hypothesis that *p* is rational just in case it is a manifestation of the best feasible way to form a doxastic attitude regarding *p* that promotes the best feasible ways to advance towards settling the question of *p*’s (or of any other suitably related proposition’s) truth-value. This makes the rationality of hypothesis depend on forward-looking considerations: insofar as one’s (competently formed) hypothesis that *p* brings about the best way of progressing towards settling the inquiry into *p*’s truth-value, one is rational to hypothesise that *p* even if one’s evidence doesn’t support *p*. This shows that rational hypothesis is unconstrained by the evidence one possesses. Palmira (forthcoming) further spells out the idea of progressing towards settling a given question in terms of dispositions to advance towards knowledge, restricting such dispositions to what Lasonen-Aarnio (2021) calls “feasible alternative dispositions”, namely dispositions that are constrained by the cognitive discriminatory, attentional, computational and memory bounds we have, as well as by certain limits of a social nature we have to face when we are part of a group of inquirers.

*4 Applications*

Provisional attitudes have been variously invoked in the debate on the rational response to peer disagreement. The discovery of a disagreement with an epistemic peer is taken both to undermine the rationality of one’s beliefs and to require the adoption of a consensus view on the topic under scrutiny. Goldberg (2013), Barnett (2019), Fleisher (2021b) and Palmira (2019) focus in particular on the potential sceptical implications of this two-fold thesis for philosophy. Goldberg (2013) and Barnett (2019) claim that there’s a presumption in favour of the sincerity and warrantability of philosophers’ declarative utterances of their theories. However, if systematic disagreement with our peers in philosophy makes our beliefs irrational, and if the epistemic norms governing beliefs also govern assertions, it follows that philosophers are mistaken to advocate their views by asserting them. As a solution to this problem, Goldberg (2013, 2015) claims that one can still rationally champion one’s philosophical view by having an attitude of speculation towards it, whereas Barnett (2019) maintains that one can be rationally inclined towards one’s philosophical views by insulating one’s reasoning from peer disagreement. This would ensure the warrantability of asserting contested philosophical theories, for those assertions would be governed by the same norms governing provisional attitudes. On Palmira’s (2019) view, peer disagreement requires of us to engage in an inquiring activity of re-opening the question and double-checking. Such a duty of inquiry is incompatible with rational belief, but is compatible with rational hypothesis. So, two peers can rationally hypothesise their respective philosophical theories while keeping on inquiring into the contested matter. Fleisher (2021b) pursues a similar line by arguing that the notion of rational endorsement can help *conciliationism* about peer disagreement – roughly, the view that peer disagreement defeats the rationality of one’s beliefs (see e.g. Christensen 2007 and Elga 2007) – to avoid self-defeat.

Staffel (2021b) extends the application of provisional attitudes from peer disagreement to higher-order evidence in general. Staffel maintains that higher-order evidence is evidence that defeats the doxastic rationality of one’s belief that *p* and makes it rational for one to redeliberate by checking one’s own reasoning. While redeliberating, the peers are not rationally permitted to hold terminal attitudes, but are rationally permitted to have transitional attitudes.

Provisional attitudes can have other applications too. For one, they can help us make sense of the kind of doxastic commitment researchers are rationally entitled to have in communities that are structured according to the Kitcher-Strevens division of cognitive labour (See e.g. Fleisher 2018). For another, one can be rationally permitted to take a provisional attitude towards *p* in cases where the rationality status of one’s belief that *p* appears to be lessened by unpossessed, yet easily attainable, beliefs or evidence (so-called “normative defeat” cases).

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