Doubt

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Doubt is often conceived as a kind of doxastic stance or attitude that subjects have regarding whether a given proposition is true. Ascriptions of doubt take many different grammatical forms, however, not all of which make the same kind of semantic contribution. Different types of constructions involving 'doubt' (either as a verb or as a noun) are used to ascribe different types of doxastic attitudes.

Featuring as a verb, for example, 'doubt' often embeds a 'that'-clause, as in the following example:

(1) Lena doubts that aliens exist.

In other instances, 'doubt' is used as a transitive verb whose complement is a singular term, as in the following example:

(2) Given Bertrand's lack of honesty in the past, Maria found herself doubting his words this time round.

Arguably, the kind of attitude that (1) ascribes to Lena is the same kind of attitude that (2) ascribes to Maria. The difference seems to be that, in the latter case, we are not told exactly which propositions are such that Maria doubts that they are true (though we know

that such propositions were somehow expressed by sentences that Bertrand uttered or wrote down). What kind of attitude towards the proposition that aliens exist does (1) ascribe to Lena? If not an attitude of outright disbelief that aliens exist, then at least an attitude that leans toward disbelief that aliens exist. When one doubts that p one is at least inclined to deny that p. Doubt is a *negative* attitude here.

But not all ascriptions of doubt ascribe that kind of negative attitude. Consider for instance cases where the noun 'doubt' is used to build a compound verb together with other particles—say 'is in doubt about' or 'is in doubt as to'—which then embeds a 'whether'-clause, instead of a 'that'-clause. Here is one example of this sort:

(3) Shanti is in doubt about whether aliens exist.

Whereas (1) describes Lena as at least leaning towards denial that aliens exist, or taking it that aliens do not exist, (3) does not describe Shanti as favoring any view on the matter. According to (3), Shanti favors neither the hypothesis that aliens exist nor the hypothesis that aliens do not exist—she is rather described as being on the fence or uncertain about whether aliens exist. Clearly, even though 'doubt' as used in (3) is the nominalization of the verb 'doubt' as used in (1), the kind of attitude that (3) ascribes to Shanti is not the same kind of attitude that (1) ascribes to Lena (see also Howard-Snyder (2013) on this).

The noun 'doubt' is not always used to ascribe doxastic stances or attitudes of doubting/being in doubt, however, or at least not directly. For example, its plural form is often combined with the verb 'have', as in:

(4) They are starting to have doubts about the new policy.

That could be true even though the people that 'they' refers to do not so much as doubt that the new policy is a good one (or some related proposition), and neither are they in a state of doubt about whether the new policy is a good one. They might still think or be somewhat confident that the policy is a good one—and yet they are starting to have

doubts about it. It seems, rather, that (5) describes the referents of 'they' as having access to considerations that somehow speak against the new policy, and that they are bringing those considerations to bear on the issue (it is not just that they have access to those considerations, they are also sensitive to the connection between those considerations and the target issue).

Closely related to the latter use, the noun 'doubt' often appears at a position where it can be quantified over, as in:

(5) There is no doubt that global warming was caused by human activity.

(6) Liam has many doubts about the value of philosophy.

In cases such as these, what the quantifier phrases ('there is', 'many') seem to quantify over are again considerations or propositions such that (a) the relevant agents are somehow epistemically related to them, and (b) they speak against the truth of some other proposition. As suggested in Moon (2018), however, tense-variations of (6) (e.g., with 'has been having') are compatible with a reading according to which there is just one consideration that speaks against the value of philosophy, rather than many, that Liam is epistemically related to—but it happens that he has had many *experiences* of doubting the value of philosophy, even if all of those experiences have stemmed from his attending to that one consideration.

Either way, (6) does not ascribe a doxastic attitude to Liam such as the attitude of doubting that philosophy is valuable, or the attitude of being in doubt as to whether philosophy is valuable. As far as the truth of (6) goes, he isn't necessarily in either of these doxastic states.[1] To have doubts about p is neither to doubt that p nor to be in doubt as to whether p (not necessarily).

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[1] Relatedly, Pritchard (2021, p. 517): 'There is a strong sense of doubt—arguably the core notion of doubt—according to which to have doubts about p is thereby to no longer believe it, as the doubt ensures that one is no longer confident of its truth. But there is also a weak sense of doubt whereby to have doubts about p just means to have reservations about its truth.'

Many questions can/have been raised about the dubitative attitudes that are ascribed by sentences like (1) and (3). There are questions about the *nature* of those attitudes, on the one hand, and questions about their *epistemological status*, on the other, intertwined as those two kinds of questions may be.

An example of a question about the nature of doubt is the following: Is doubt regarding whether p/doubt that p compossible with belief that p? At least those who subscribe to the idea that our doxastic states are fragmented will answer 'yes' to that question.[2] One can believe that p relative to one fragment but doubt that p/be in doubt about whether p relative to another. A fragment is here understood as a way of representing things or a way of framing a problem, where different fragments can facilitate access to different bits of information. To give an example borrowed from Elga and Rayo (forthcoming), a subject might be in doubt as to whether *there is a word in English that ends in 'mt'* when prompted to decide the issue through the question *Is there a word in English that results from filling the blanks in '_ _ _ _ mt'?*, and yet believe that same proposition when prompted to decide the issue through the question *Isn't the word 'dreamt' a word of English, and doesn't it end in 'mt'?* Not unrelated to this, Salmon (1995) has defended the view that a subject can believe a proposition when it is presented to her under one (sentential) guise, but doubt that very same proposition when it is presented to her under an alternative guise.

We can also ask whether the kind of doubt that is at play in (3)—namely, a state of being in doubt as to whether a given proposition is true or not—is the third kind of categorical stance that features in the traditional taxonomy of doxastic attitudes, alongside belief and disbelief.[3] The third stance is ascribed through different expressions, depending on who is writing. Often deployed expressions include 'suspends judgment', 'withholds belief',

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[2] See Borgoni et. al (2021) for a recent special volume on the issue of fragmentation. The idea has its roots in Lewis (1982) and Stalnaker (1984).

[3] This taxonomy of categorical doxastic attitudes is very pervasive in contemporary epistemology. It is introduced as common lore in epistemology textbooks—see for example Feldman (2003, p. 16).

'is agnostic'.[4] The three categorical stances are thought of as alternative categorical stances that one might have regarding whether p, for any proposition p. One can (i) believe that p, or take p to be true, (ii) disbelieve that p, or take p to be false,[5] and then there is yet a third option, namely, (iii) to be on the fence as to whether p is true or false. Could that be a state of doubt?

One possible disanalogy between being in doubt and believing/disbelieving is that, in order for one to be in doubt as to whether p, one must have thought or deliberated about whether p, whereas this is not required for one to believe/disbelieve that p. Beliefs are often *implicit* states, in which case the believer lacks any explicit, person-level thoughts about the contents of those beliefs. There seems to be some kind of incoherence in saying 'She is in doubt as to whether the suspect is guilty, though she hasn't given the issue any thought'. One explanation would be that 'She is in doubt as to whether the suspect is guilty' is true only if 'She thought about whether the suspect is guilty' is true. In contrast, a few minutes ago the following might perfectly well have been true of you (the reader): 'The reader believes that they are reading this entry, though they haven't thought about the issue'. Your belief a few minutes ago that you were reading this entry was namely an implicit belief.

Those are some of the questions about the nature of doubt. Epistemological questions, in contrast, are more directly concerned with the justification, rationality or other related dimensions of evaluation/assessment of states of doubt, and how the epistemic status of other attitudes are affected by rational doubt. It should be clear, for example, that it is *incoherent* for one to doubt that p/be in doubt about whether p and believe that p at the same time, regardless of what is to be made of the question concerning the compossibility

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[4]For the use of 'withholds p', see Chisholm (1989) and also Bergmann (2005). Turri (2012) uses 'withholds judgment' instead. Smithies (2012) and Jackson (2019) use 'withholds belief'. Van Fraassen (1989) and Hájek (1998) use 'suspends belief' and 'is agnostic' interchangeably, and Friedman (2013a, 2013b), among others, uses 'suspends judgment' and 'is agnostic' interchangeably.

[5]Though see Smart (2020), who denies that disbelief that p simply amounts to belief that *not-p*.

of these attitudes. Furthermore, the attitude of being in doubt as to whether *p* seems to be vindicated by evidence that is neutral regarding whether *p* is the case, or evidence that supports neither *p* nor *not-p*, and the attitude of doubting that *p* (in contrast to the attitude of being in doubt as to whether *p*) seems to be vindicated by evidence that at least supports *not-p* more than it supports *p*, or evidence that indicates that it is not the case that *p*.

Is knowledge compatible with doubt? Given the points from the previous paragraph, 'doubt' here must mean something other than the state of doubting that *p* or the state of being in doubt as to whether *p*. For knowledge that *p* entails belief that *p* and, as we saw, those attitudes of doubt are in conflict with the attitude of belief. They both fail to cohere with belief, and they are vindicated by evidence that is not good enough for knowledge that *p* (they are vindicated by evidence that does not support *p*). Knowledge seems to be incompatible with the kind of doubt that is ascribed by (1) and (3) from above—at least when the attitudes of doubt that are thereby ascribed are epistemically justified/rational.

A more plausible reading of the question interprets it as asking if knowledge is compatible with the presence of some grounds or reasons to doubt that *p*—i.e., the sense of doubt that is at play in (4)–(6) from above. It should be less controversial that the presence of such grounds is incompatible with (epistemically justified) *certainty* that *p* (see Klein 1992), but there is disagreement as to whether knowledge requires certainty (see e.g., Stanley 2008).

The attitude of making a *supposition* allows us to simulate (some aspects of) what it would like to have a certain belief. Sometimes we just assume that something is the case to see where it leads, or to check whether the target assumption withstands critical scrutiny. When we do so, we reason from the content of our supposition to further conclusions, much as we do from the contents of our beliefs. The cognitive act of supposing that something is the case is fairly unconstrained: we can suppose that *p* when we actually believe that *not-p*, for example, or when we actually suspend judgment about whether *p*.

Just like we can simulate what it would be like to have a belief by making suppositions, we can also simulate what it would be like to be in doubt about whether something is the case through a different kind of cognitive act (different from supposition). That would consist of simulating a state of mind where one is effectively undecided as to whether a given proposition *p* is the case. One leaves it open whether *p* or rather *not-p* is the case, however momentarily, thus also bracketing one's opinion (if any) regarding whether *p*.

Such is arguably the intellectual exercise that underlies Descartes's *method of doubt*.[6] Roughly put, here one starts inquiring into things without assuming that those propositions one takes to be the case are indeed the case. That does not mean assuming that those propositions are *not* the case. For example, it is not as if Descartes went from assuming that *there is fire in the fireplace* to assuming that *there is no fire in the fireplace*. Propositions are rather called into question, and now it is as if one were in doubt as to whether they are true or false. It turns out, however, that it is impossible to doubt some of those propositions—for example, the proposition that *one has doubts*. Indubitability is then conceived as a mark of what one is allowed to accept/believe in Cartesian inquiry.

Regardless of what is to be made of the criterion of indubitability for accepting a proposition in inquiry, the point is that the relationship between doubt proper and methodological doubt is here analogous to the relationship between belief and supposition. When one supposes that *p*, one deploys *p* as a *premise* in reasoning and fictionally embraces the commitments that one would have if one were to believe that *p*. In contrast, when one methodologically adopts doubt regarding whether *p*, one rather leaves it open whether *p* is the case or not and reasons on the basis of other things to see if either of *p* and *not-p* will feature as the *conclusion* of a good piece of reasoning.

A better understanding of the workings of methodological doubt awaits a better understanding of what the rational commitments of the state of being in doubt are. Much

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[6]See Descartes (1964), for example, p. 64. See also Broughton (2002).

of the discussion in the epistemological literature has concentrated on the commitments of the state of belief, addressing questions such as: Are we rationally required to believe the logical consequences of what we believe? Are we rationally permitted to hold mutually inconsistent beliefs? Does believing that p commit one to believing that one's belief that p is rational/justified? Analogous questions concerning the state of being in doubt haven't been as thoroughly explored yet.

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