

DOUBT

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1 Ascriptions of doubt and its types

Doubt is often conceived as a kind of doxastic stance or attitude that subjects can 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 as the 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 they 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 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 by Moon (2018), however, tense-variations of (6) (e.g., ‘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 (relatedly, see Pritchard 2021). To have doubts about p is neither to doubt that p nor to be in doubt as to whether p (not necessarily).

2 Questions about the nature of doubt

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 they may be. Let us look at the former ones first.

One question here is 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—could be the third kind of categorical stance that features in the traditional taxonomy of doxastic attitudes, alongside belief and disbelief. The third kind of categorical stance is ascribed through different expressions, depending on who is writing. Often deployed expressions include ‘suspends judgment’, ‘withholds belief’, ‘is agnostic’.

The elements of the traditional taxonomy 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, 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 or disbelieving is that, in order for one to be in doubt as to whether p , it seems that one must have thought or deliberated about whether p , whereas this is not required for one to believe/disbelieve that p . Beliefs can be implicit states, in which case the believer lacks any person-level thoughts on the contents of those beliefs. There appears to be some tension, however, in saying ‘She is in doubt as to whether the suspect is guilty, though she hasn’t given the issue any thought’. 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 yet thought about the issue’. Your belief a few minutes ago that you were reading this entry was namely an implicit belief. The question that remains, then, is that of whether the state of being in doubt can also be an implicit state, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding.

Another 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 (see Lewis 1982, Stalnaker 1984). 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. Different fragments can facilitate access to different bits of information. To borrow an example from Elga and Rayo (2022), 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.

3 Epistemological questions

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 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 of these attitudes. The same can be said of the attitude of doubting that p . Coherence seems to forbid the combination of belief with any of these two forms of doubt.

Furthermore, the attitude of being in doubt as to whether p is vindicated by evidence that fails to settle the question of whether p , or evidence that supports neither p nor *not- p* , and the attitude of doubting that p is 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 . On the face of it, no total body of evidence will vindicate both, the stance of being doubt as to *whether p* and the stance of doubting *that p* .

Is knowledge compatible with doubt? Given the points from the previous paragraphs, ‘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 is 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* for 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 for example Stanley 2008).

4 Methodological doubt

The attitude of making a *supposition* allows us to simulate (some aspects of) what it would be 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. 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 are actually in doubt 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 something through a different type 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* (see Descartes 1964, Broughton 2002). Roughly put, here one starts off one's inquiry without assuming that those propositions that 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 criterion of acceptance/belief in Cartesian inquiry.

Regardless of what is to be made of that criterion of indubitability, the point is that the relationship between doubt proper and methodolog-

ical doubt is here analogous to the relationship between belief and supposition. When one supposes that p , one deploys p as a *premise* in (suppositional) 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 and reasons on the basis of other things to see if either of p and *not- p* can be recovered 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 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 yet been as thoroughly explored.

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