

HOW SHOULD WE ASCRIBE THE THIRD STANCE?

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Abstract: Epistemologists often describe subjects as being capable of adopting a third kind of categorical doxastic stance regarding whether something is the case, besides belief and disbelief. They deploy a variety of idioms to ascribe that stance. In this paper, I flesh out the properties that the third kind of categorical stance is supposed to have and start searching for the best ways to ascribe it. The idioms ‘suspends judgment about whether’ and ‘is agnostic about whether’, among others, are found to be unfit to play the desired role. In the end, I suggest that ‘is in doubt as to whether’ is our best choice among the alternatives surveyed here.

1 Introduction

Traditional epistemology typically presents us with a taxonomy of three doxastic attitudes or stances that one can have regarding whether p , where p is any proposition. One can believe that p , disbelieve that p , and then there is yet a third option which is presented in different ways, such as: ‘suspend judgment about whether p ’, ‘withhold belief about whether p ’, ‘be agnostic about whether p ’, among others.¹

¹The way in which epistemology textbooks are written gives us a good idea of how pervasive and deeply ingrained this tripartite taxonomy is in the field. For example, here is Richard Feldman: ‘When you consider any statement, you are faced with a set of alternatives: You can believe it, you can disbelieve it, or you can suspend judgment about it. [...] At any given time, if you consider a proposition, you will end up adopting one of these three attitudes’ (Feldman 2003, p. 16). For the use of ‘withhold’ taking a proposition directly as complement—as in ‘withholding p ’—see Chisholm (1989) and Bergmann (2005). Turri (2012) uses ‘withholding judgment’ instead. Smithies (2012), Jackson (2019), among others, use ‘withholding belief’. Van Fraassen (1989) and Hájek (1998) use ‘suspending belief’, and both of them also use ‘being agnostic about’. Friedman (2013a, 2013b), among others, uses ‘suspending judgment about’.

The three attitudes of the traditional taxonomy are thought of as alternative *categorical* stances that one can have regarding whether p . They thus constitute a coarser taxonomy than the one featuring degrees of confidence, credences, or partial beliefs. Whereas there are just three categorical attitudes that one can have regarding whether p , there are infinitely many degrees of confidence that one can have regarding whether p , typically measured by real numbers in the unit interval $[0, 1]$.²

How should we characterize belief, disbelief and the third stance, at least to a first approximation? We might say the following. To believe some proposition is to take it to be true. To disbelieve a proposition is to take it to be false. And to adopt the third stance regarding whether it is true is to be ‘on the fence’ as to whether it is true or false. A person who is on the fence is a person who does not take sides. In adopting the third stance regarding whether p , then, one neither takes p to be true nor takes it to be false. Again, these are just first approximations—though they already do justice to our habit of thinking that there are three alternative (or rival) categorical stances that one might have regarding whether p , for any proposition p .³ I hope to do a better job at characterizing the third stance below.

Saying that the traditional taxonomy features three different kinds of doxastic stances regarding whether p does not imply that they are different types of attitudes *when considered in isolation from their propositional contents*. After all, disbelief that p is typically thought of simply as belief that *not- p* .⁴ And, yet, that doesn’t stop us from saying that disbelief is one of the attitudes that one can have *regarding whether p* .

Some epistemologists have recently attempted to establish what suspended judgment *is*, often under the assumption that suspended judgment

and ‘being agnostic about’ interchangeably.

²Two observations are important here. First, this contrast between the two taxonomies is not supposed to imply that there are no entailment relations between ascriptions of categorical attitudes and ascriptions of degrees of confidence. Second, the contrast is not supposed to imply that there isn’t such a thing as the degree to which one holds a categorical attitude—see Williamson (2000, p. 99) for this point.

³For one thing, we better have a way of deflating the idioms ‘takes p to be true’ and ‘takes p to be false’, so as to be able to ascribe belief/disbelief to infants, cats, dogs or any other creature such that it sounds wrong to say that it has the concepts of truth and falsehood, or that it predicates truth and falsehood of propositions.

⁴Typically, but not always—see e.g. Smart (2020) for an alternative view.

ment and the third stance from the traditional taxonomy are the same thing.⁵ Others have attempted to systematize the different ways in which one can be neutral or adopt a middle-ground between belief and disbelief, including suspended judgment.⁶

In this paper, I pursue a different route. First, I attempt to describe what the third stance is supposed to be, or what its functional role is, including how it relates to the rest of our cognition, our action and speech acts (§2). The relevant characterization takes the form of (something like) a Ramsey sentence.⁷ Second, I proceed to inquire into what the best ways of ascribing the third stance are, when it is so characterized, using the English lexicon and grammar.

This second step involves, among other things, addressing the question of whether the idiom ‘suspends judgment’ is fit for the job of ascribing the third stance, to which my answer is negative (§3). I address that same kind of question regarding the idioms ‘suspends belief’ (§4), ‘is agnostic’ (§5), ‘is undecided’ (§6), and ‘is in doubt’ or ‘is in doubt as to’ (§7). For reasons that will be made clearer below, the latter are found to be preferable to the other options: to ascribe the third stance is to ascribe a certain kind of *doubt*.

Reasons to pursue this alternative path are not wanting. Expressions such as ‘suspended judgment’, ‘suspended belief’, ‘agnosticism’ are technical terms in epistemology. Epistemologists have some degree of freedom to fix the meaning of those expressions in different ways, then, implicit as the fixation of meaning may be (not necessarily through explicit stipulation). There is therefore a danger that different epistemologists talk past each other when they use the same expression to exchange ideas and arguments. Some of them may latch onto the lexical features of ‘suspended judgment’, say (quite literally, *judgment* must be *suspended* for that expression to apply—more on this below), whereas others will deploy that same expression to ascribe the third doxastic stance from the traditional taxonomy of attitudes. That in turn may lead to endless disagreements over issues such as:

⁵See for example Friedman (2013a), Raleigh (2021), Wagner (2022).

⁶See for example Feldman and Conee (2018), Miracchi (2019), McGrath (2021), Zinke (2021), Ferrari and Incurvati (2022).

⁷See Ramsey (1929) and Lewis (1970) for the notion of a Ramsey sentence.

- Is suspended judgment about whether p compossible with belief that p ?
Yes if believing that p does not require judging that p and ‘suspension of judgment’ means *suspension of judgment*. *Not* if ‘suspension of judgment’ stands for a state of being on the fence as to whether p or *not- p* .
- Can one be in the state of suspended judgment as a result of a knock in the head or brain surgery?
Not if ‘suspended judgment’ refers to a state that must have been reached through the subject’s cognitive act of suspending judgment.
Yes otherwise.
- Etc.

These are not necessarily pseudo-problems or pseudo-questions. But the interrogatives just presented might easily be used to pose different questions.⁸

Here we lower the risk of getting into such verbal disputes by addressing a terminological problem head on (how to ascribe the third stance), in that we are searching for an idiom that is able to play some previously established role.

2 Characterizing the third stance

We should be able to characterize the third stance so as to make sense of the traditional taxonomy of categorical stances. What more exactly could such a doxastic stance be, in such a way that it constitutes one of the three alternative or rival stances that one might have regarding whether p , for any proposition p ?

⁸To the extent that an interrogative can have one true answer when disambiguated in one way, and an alternative true answer when disambiguated another way, that same interrogative admits of more than one set of answers or partition of the space of possibilities, and so it can be used to express different questions. There are different ways of working this out within the available semantics for interrogatives, using for example Hamblin’s (1973) or Karttunen’s (1977a) proposals about which set of propositions constitutes the question expressed by a given interrogative in context.

Once we have such a characterization, we can start looking for the best ways to ascribe it. Of course, we already know that the third stance is supposed to be a stance of being ‘on the fence’ as to whether p . But that metaphor isn’t by itself enough to tell us which expressions do a better job at ascribing that stance.

In this section, I will propose one such characterization in the form of a big conjunctive sentence. I will rely on it as a guide to determining which expressions are better suited to ascribe the third stance. The question is that of which expressions play the same role or at least a similar role as the expression ‘the third stance’ plays in the target sentence (‘the third stance’ is to be seen as a *placeholder* for another expression here).

I will label the conjuncts of the target sentence with roman numerals, so that I can comment on each of them separately below. Some philosophers will see redundancy among these conjuncts, but others won’t. It goes as follows:

Sentence (R)

- (i) In adopting *the third stance* regarding whether p , a subject neither takes p to be true nor takes p to be false, she neither represents the world she is in as being such that p nor as being such that *not-p*, in that both p and *not-p* are possible from her perspective, and
- (ii) In adopting *the third stance* regarding whether p , the subject is neither disposed to rely on p as a premise in practical and theoretical reasoning, nor disposed to rely on *not-p* as a premise in practical and theoretical reasoning, and
- (iii) *The third stance* regarding whether p can be expressed through the utterance of an interrogative such as ‘Is it the case that p ?’, and also through the utterance of something of the form ‘It might be that p , but it might be that *not-p*’, and
- (iv) A subject’s doxastic stance regarding whether p at time t may be *the third stance*, even though she is not thinking about whether p at t , and she has never had any explicit thoughts about whether p before t , and
- (v) It would be incoherent for a subject to adopt *the third stance* regarding whether p and believe that p at the same time, and it would

also be incoherent for a subject to adopt the third stance regarding whether p and disbelieve that p /believe that $not-p$ at the same time, and

- (vi) Where a total body of evidence E supports neither p nor $not-p$, the *third stance* regarding whether p is the stance that is vindicated by E .

There is no assumption here that sentence (R) says everything essential there is to say about the third stance, of course. But it says enough for present purposes. Some important clarifications about sentence (R) are now in order.

First, as already mentioned, the expression ‘the third stance’ features as a *placeholder* or a dummy expression in (R). We want to substitute other expressions for it later, in an attempt to determine which one makes a good fit with the rest of (R) and gives rise to a true sentence—one that is just like (R), except that it features this other expression instead of ‘the third stance’. Since (R) is not prefixed by an existential quantifier (unlike the usual Ramsey sentence), ‘the third stance’ would be a *free* variable here, if a variable at all. We may not want to treat it as a variable and have it bound by an existential quantifier, however, so as to avoid reifying stances.

Conjuncts (i), (ii), and (iii) are mainly supposed to capture the idea that a subject who adopts the third stance is ‘on the fence’ regarding whether a proposition is true or false. Some authors make the point by characterizing the third stance (using their favorite expression for it) as a state of *neutrality*.⁹

We need not interpret (i) and (ii) as entailing that it is impossible for one to adopt the third stance regarding whether p while at the same time believing or disbelieving that p , since we may relativize doxastic attitudes to *fragments* or ways of representing things (different fragments can facilitate access to different chunks of information).¹⁰ Without getting into much detail about how to individuate fragments, the idea is that one can adopt the third stance regarding whether p relative to one fragment, while believing or disbelieving that p relative to another.¹¹

⁹See for example Sturgeon (2010) and Friedman (2013a).

¹⁰See Lewis (1982) and Stalnaker (1984, Ch. 5) for the origins of this idea.

¹¹For example, one might be on the fence regarding whether *there is a word in English*

Accordingly, we can relativize ascriptions of the third stance throughout (R) to fragments, with the result that it will then be impossible for one to adopt the third stance regarding whether p relative to fragment f while at the same time believing or disbelieving that p relative to the very same fragment f .

Conjunct (iii) captures, among other things, the fact that both the act of asserting that p and the act of asserting that $not-p$ are at odds with having the third stance regarding whether p . Believers and disbelievers have answers to the question of whether p (at least from their own point of view), but that question is still an open question to the third-stancer. A believer can make her stance manifest by answering ‘Yes’ to the question of whether p , and a disbeliever can make her stance manifest by answering ‘No’ to that question. In contrast, the third-stancer makes her stance manifest by raising that very question, or rather by showing that both possibilities are open for her, namely, that p and that $not-p$.

The three categorical stances from the traditional taxonomy are supposed to be on a par with each other along a number of dimensions. They belong after all to the same taxonomy, being sub-categories of a larger category (the category of *categorical doxastic stances*). Subjects can believe or disbelieve that p at a given time t even though they are not thinking about whether p at t , and they haven’t had any explicit thoughts about whether p before t , either. Some authors will prefer to put the point by saying that beliefs can be held implicitly,¹² or that some beliefs are *dispositional* beliefs (as opposed to both, *occurrent* beliefs and *dispositions* to believe).¹³ Consider for example the belief you had even before reading this paragraph that *you were reading this paper*. You believed that *you were reading this paper* already back then, even though you had never had any explicit thoughts about this. Similarly, we should allow for the possibility that the third stance is held in an implicit manner, or that it is sometimes dispositional or non-occurrent. Such is the motivation

that ends in ‘mt’ when prompted by the following question: *Is there a word in English that results from filling in the blanks in ‘mt’?*, and yet believe that same proposition when prompted by the following question: *Isn’t the word ‘dreamt’ a word of English, and doesn’t it end in ‘mt’?* The example is taken from Elga and Rayo (2021).

¹²For different ways of drawing the distinction between explicit and implicit belief, see for example Harman (1986, p. 13) and Lycan (1988, Ch. 3).

¹³See Audi (1994) for the distinction between dispositional beliefs and dispositions to believe.

behind (iv).

Conjuncts (v) and (vi) are *evaluative* characterizations of the third stance, as opposed to purely descriptive ones. They put forward fundamental aspects of the (epistemic) rationality of the third stance. Obviously the third stance regarding whether p fails to cohere with both, believing that p and disbelieving that p /believing that *not-p*. One would be in conflict with oneself if one were to take p to be the case and be at the same time on the fence regarding whether p is the case. Of course, there are also other kinds of incoherent states involving the third stance, for example, a state where one believes that p , adopts the third stance regarding whether q and yet believes that *if p then q*. But the basic coherence principle stated in (v) will do for our present purposes.

Finally, (vi) expresses the thought that the third stance is the doxastic response that is vindicated by a total body of evidence that leaves the issue of whether p unsettled, in the sense that it supports neither p nor *not-p*. I use ‘is vindicated by’ instead of ‘is made rational by’ just so (R) on its own doesn’t commit us to a purely evidentialist account of epistemic rationality, which some epistemologists would then object to. We can also put the point by saying that the third stance regarding whether p is the one that fits a total body of evidence that supports neither p nor *not-p*. The idea is that there may or there may not be a match between the polarity of the doxastic stance and the polarity of the evidence vis-a-vis the question of whether p , even if epistemic rationality is not solely of function of whether there is such a match. The case described in (vi) is the case of a match.

A doxastic stance that simultaneously satisfies all the free sentences of (R) (in assuming the value of ‘the third stance’) would deserve to be included in the classical taxonomy of categorical attitudes, alongside belief and disbelief. For such a stance contrasts with or rivals belief and disbelief in a number of different senses: it is a stance whereby one neither takes p to be true nor takes it to be false, in contrast to both taking it to be true and taking it to be false (i), it constitutively involves the absence of those dispositions that are characteristic of belief and disbelief (ii), it is expressed through speech acts that are quite unlike the assertions through which belief/disbelief are expressed (iii), it fails to cohere with both belief and disbelief (v), and it is neither vindicated by a body of evidence that vindicates belief, nor by a body of evidence

that vindicates disbelief (vi). Furthermore, such a doxastic stance won't be so wildly different from belief and disbelief as to belong to a different category, seeing as it has commonalities with belief and disbelief such as the one described in (iv).

It only makes sense, then, to fetch a taxonomy of doxastic attitudes whose items are belief, disbelief, and the third stance, when the latter is characterized as in (R). The epistemologist's habit of thinking that there are three kinds of categorical doxastic stances regarding whether p is in perfectly good standing if the third stance satisfies all the conjuncts of (R). Now the question is, however, what is the best way to ascribe that third stance? Some typically chosen expressions will be found not to be a good fit to play that role.

3 Reasons not to use 'suspends judgment'

Consider a sentence such as 'Homer suspends judgment about whether *there are intelligent aliens*'. The bit 'suspends judgment' is made out of two elements: the transitive verb 'suspend' and the noun 'judgment'. On the face of English grammar and the lexical meanings of these expressions, it seems that our sentence describes Homer as suspending (debarring, withholding) either (a) a process or act of judgment, or (b) the possible products of such a process or act, namely the judgments that *there are intelligent aliens* and that *there aren't intelligent aliens* respectively.¹⁴ For either of (a) and (b) can be referred to by the noun 'judgment'.

If we are not to deviate much from the grammar and lexical meanings of those expressions, then, 'suspends judgment' and its nominalization 'suspended judgment' are not the right choices to ascribe and refer to the third stance. Roughly put, the problem is that 'suspends judgment' creates the wrong kind of contrast class: it contrasts to 'judges', as opposed to contrasting to 'believes' and 'disbelieves'.

Of course, were we to assume that 'Homer believes that p ' and 'Homer judges that p ' are synonyms, then 'suspends judgment' does form a contrast class to 'believes'. But the many differences between 'believes' and 'judges' speak against that assumption. For example, whereas

¹⁴Here is an informative dictionary entry on the verb 'suspend'.

a sentence like ‘Homer judges that p ’ typically conveys the idea that Homer came to think that p through a process of inquiry or deliberation/weighing the evidence, ‘Homer believes that p ’ is much less specific about the provenance of Homer’s attitude.¹⁵ We might ascribe belief to Homer when he simply sees or remembers that p , regardless of how he formed the belief that p in the first place. And, where Homer has been brain-washed into acting and cognizing as if p is true, we may find it correct to describe him as believing that p , but not as judging that p .

It is standardly assumed that judgment involves having explicit, person-level thoughts toward what is judged as being/not being the case. And so, for example, Quassim Cassam (2010) interprets ‘judges that p ’ as referring to an act of putting the proposition that p forward in one’s mind as true. No such condition needs to be satisfied in order for ‘believes that p ’ to be satisfied by an individual.

Just like ‘judges’ contributes something different from what ‘believes’ does, so does ‘suspends judgment’ contribute something different from what our dummy expression ‘adopts the third stance’ is supposed to contribute. Many authors will take it that ‘Ana suspends judgment about whether *there is free will*’ is true only if Ana has performed a cognitive act whereby she entertained or explicitly thought about the issue of whether there is free will. Accordingly, Paul Boghossian writes: ‘Suspending judgment about h , then, requires something *active*—considering whether h and then rejecting taking a view on the matter’.¹⁶

It is quite natural to understand ‘suspends judgment’ in just this way. For that very reason, however, that expression isn’t quite fit to ascribe the third stance—the stance that is supposed to contrast with belief and disbelief and is characterized through (R). It would be unfair to complain about Boghossian’s notion of suspension of judgment, for example, on the grounds that we can truly describe a person as being on the fence about whether *God exists* while the person is asleep and not at all thinking about whether *God exists*.¹⁷

¹⁵Here is a dictionary entry on ‘judge’—notice how some of the verb specifications refer to deliberation and weighing the evidence. A similar entry can be found [here](#).

¹⁶Boghossian (2008, p. 447). See also McGrath (2021) for a notion of suspending judgment along these lines. McGrath decides to use ‘is agnostic about whether’ to ascribe the doxastic attitude that is an alternative to belief and disbelief. More about the latter expression below.

¹⁷Similarly, Cassam writes: ‘When I am asleep I still believe that $2 + 2 = 4$ but I do

We are ascribing the third stance about whether *God exists* to the sleeping person (that is her stance on the issue). Since she is not thinking about whether *God exists* at the time of our ascription, or even at any time shortly before that time, she is not suspending judgment about whether *God exists* in Boghossian's sense. That in itself is not a problem. It *becomes* a problem the moment we start using 'suspends judgment' to ascribe the third stance, however. 'Suspends judgment' seems to refer to an act or process—and yet such an act or process might be totally absent from cases that call for ascriptions of the third stance (people asleep, people distracted, people thinking about other things).

Consider the sentence that we get when we substitute 'the subject suspends judgment about whether p ' for 'the subject holds the third stance regarding whether p ' in our sentence (R). Conjunction (iv) would turn into (iv_s): a subject may suspend judgment about whether p at t even though she is not thinking about whether p at t and she never had any explicit thoughts about whether p before t . But it is again quite natural to take it that 'She suspends judgment about whether p ' is true at time t only if the subject is thinking about whether p at t , or was thinking about whether p before t . So (iv_s) sounds false.

The corresponding renderings of (i) and (ii) from (R) sound no better. A subject can suspend judgment about whether p , in the literal sense of stopping/preventing herself from making a judgment, and still take p to be true (false), act as if p is true (false), rely on the premise that p (*not-p*) in practical and theoretical reasoning.

Consider the following example. Ana suspends judgment about whether *there is free will* while debating the issue in the philosophy seminar, where both reasons pro and con the existence of free will are explicitly brought to her attention. Aware as she is of those reasons, she neither judges that *there is free will* nor judges that *there isn't free will*. And, yet, the whole rest of her behaves and cognizes as if she is in a world where there is free will, her suspended judgment in the philosophy seminar notwithstanding (for example, she ascribes culpability to the evil politician for violating some basic human rights, believing that *he could have chosen to do otherwise*).

Similar considerations apply to the expression 'withholds judgment'. 'Suspends judgment' and 'withholds judgment' create the wrong

not judge that $2 + 2 = 4$ ' (2010, p. 83).

kind of contrast class, in that they contrast with ‘judges’, as opposed to contrasting with ‘believes’ and ‘disbelieves’. (They build the wrong contrast class not on their own, of course, but only when they are deployed to individuate the categorical doxastic stance that constitutes an alternative to belief and disbelief in the traditional taxonomy of attitudes).¹⁸

4 Reasons not to use ‘suspends belief’

‘Suspends belief’ seems to fare better, since it doesn’t create the wrong kind of contrast class right off the bat—for it deploys the noun ‘belief’, instead of ‘judgment’ in combination with ‘suspends’. In fact, it clearly contrasts with ‘believes’. Given that much, the expression ‘suspends belief’ looks like a more promising substitute for ‘adopts the third stance’ when compared to ‘suspends judgment’.

To suspend belief is to stop or to prevent a state of belief from taking place, to cause oneself not to form a belief either way on a given issue. In this more literal interpretation, then, ‘suspends belief’ also seems to refer to something active. Of course, we can allow for the relevant cognitive act of suspension to be sub-personal, or for it not to involve any explicit thoughts about the relevant propositions (it is easier to make room for that when it comes to ‘suspends belief’). Still, ‘suspends belief’ shouldn’t be used to ascribe the third stance, which is after all a *stance* regarding whether p , rather than an act or process. A cognitive act or process is not the same as a doxastic stance (the former *happens*, the latter is a *standing state*). What ‘suspends belief’ describes is more short-lived than what the third stance is supposed to be. The third stance can be as lasting as the stances of belief and disbelief can be.

What about the nominalized form ‘suspended belief’? We can try substituting ‘a state of suspended belief’ for ‘the third stance’ in (R), for example. Wouldn’t the target substitutions come out true? The truth of ‘She is in a state of suspended belief about whether p ’ still requires that belief has been suspended by her/her cognitive system at some point before the ascription was made, which makes it misleading *qua* ascription

¹⁸Many authors have made the mistake of using ‘suspends judgment’ and ‘withholds judgment’ to ascribe the third stance, myself included—see Rosa (2021, 2023).

of the third stance. What we want our locution to do is *just* to ascribe the third stance regarding whether p , regardless of whether it resulted from a process of suspension.

Compare the ascriptions of the other stances. I take it that we wouldn't use 'She is in a state of suspended disbelief and suspended third stance regarding whether p ' to do the things that we do with 'She believes that p '. In coming to believe that p , she transitioned into a cognitive state that is neither a state of disbelief toward p nor a state of having the third stance regarding whether p . But that does not mean that she/her cognitive system also did these other things: suspending disbelief and suspending the third stance. There need not have been any process of suspension of other doxastic states in order for her to count as believing that p . So why would something like that be required for a true ascription of the third stance?

The idiom 'is in a state of suspended belief' not only gives us more than what we want from an expression to ascribe the third stance (the unwanted surfeit of a process of suspension). It also seems to give us less. There arguably are cases where a subject suspends any kind of opinion on a given issue, in such a way as to end up with absolutely no doxastic stance on it—say, because the topic is so repelling to her (the avoidance mechanism might be sub-personal or unconscious, too). So 'is in a state of suspended belief' applies to cases where we do not want to ascribe the third stance. The subject simply rejects having any opinion on the issue, for whatever reason.

So neither 'suspends belief' nor 'is in a state of suspended belief' is quite fit to ascribe the third stance.

5 Reasons not to use 'is agnostic'

How about using 'is agnostic about whether p ' to ascribe the third stance? Apparently, it was Thomas Huxley (1893) who coined the term 'agnostic', and he did so with the intent to refer to someone who admits her own ignorance on a given issue, as opposed to someone who professes to have knowledge about it.

Many other authors tried to stay true to the spirit of Huxley's terminology—see for example Rosenkranz (2007) and Avnur (2019). In

terms of doxastic attitudes, then, an agnostic on the topic of whether p is someone who holds pessimistic beliefs about her own epistemic standing with respect to p —for example, a belief to the effect that *she is not in a position to know whether p* , or that *her evidence is not good enough to decide the issue*, or something of that sort.

The idea that ‘she is agnostic about whether p ’ in this original sense can be used to ascribe the third stance does get some things right. Consider conjunct (v) from (R): it would indeed be incoherent for a subject to adopt the third stance regarding whether p and believe that p at the same time. It does seem incoherent for a subject to believe that *she is not in a position to know whether p* while at the same time believing/disbelieving that p , for example. That is some sort of akrasia or inter-level incoherence.¹⁹

But the problem is that agnosticism in that sense consists of *belief*, and one that rivals other stances that one might have *regarding what one’s epistemic standing with respect to p is*—for example, a belief to the effect that *one is in a position to know whether p* , or a belief to the effect that *one’s evidence supports p (not- p)*. The doxastic alternatives to a pessimistic higher-order belief are, for example, optimistic higher-order beliefs regarding one’s epistemic standing with respect to p , rather than beliefs regarding whether p itself. The higher-order belief involved in the attitude of agnosticism doesn’t directly rival the attitude of believing that p . Not unless it is constitutive of believing that p that one believes that *one is in a position to know whether p* , etc. (Similar points apply with respect to disbelieving that p).

If what ‘agnosticism’ refers to is not itself a stance *regarding whether p* , but rather a stance *regarding one’s epistemic standing with respect to p* , then ‘is agnostic about whether p ’ is not a good candidate for ascribing the third stance regarding whether p . That expression might apply to one even though one takes p to be true (or false), in which case we obtain falsehoods when we substitute ‘is agnostic about whether p ’ for ‘adopts the third stance regarding whether p ’ in conjuncts (i) and (ii) of our sentence (R).

Of course, maybe Huxley intended ‘agnosticism’ to refer not only to a pessimistic stance *regarding one’s epistemic standing with respect to*

¹⁹See Worsnip (2018) for a defense of inter-level coherence requirements, and also Smithies (2019), especially Chapters 9 and 10.

p —but also to an ensuing lack of belief and disbelief toward p itself. Thus understood, ‘agnosticism’ refers to a combination of factors: the pessimistic higher-order belief and the absence of lower-order belief and disbelief.²⁰ But that does not make it so that ‘agnosticism’ refers to a stance regarding whether p .

One way to illustrate the point is by considering minds that do not have, or maybe don’t even have the capacity to have the relevant kinds of higher-order beliefs—and yet they are capable of having the third stance regarding whether p .

Say you have a cat who has been exposed to a series of perceptual experiences of you either throwing or not throwing a red rubber ball against the wall after you made a ball-throwing movement. In some of those cases, you did throw the ball against the wall—but in others you didn’t. In many cases of the latter sort, you have tricked the cat, because it thought you were going to throw the ball (as manifested in its behavior, jumping or sprinting towards the wall).

Now say you are in front of the cat, and it sees you making that same ball-throwing movement. The cat recognizes a pattern here—the pattern of your hand movement.²¹ But the episodic memories that it has of that kind of situation are divided between memories of you throwing the ball after making that movement and memories of you not throwing the ball after making that movement. Accordingly, the cat is on the fence as to whether *you are going to throw the ball this time* (that is why it hesitates, instead of sprinting towards the wall). But presumably the cat does not have views on whether *its evidence gives support to the proposition that you are going to throw the ball this time*, or whether *it is in a position to know this*. Similar things can be said of small children.²²

Lastly, consider conjunct (vi) from sentence (R): where a total

²⁰Accordingly, Rosenkranz’s ‘basic agnosticism’ (2007, pp. 62–63) consists not only of a stance that is expressible through the assertion that one is neither in a position to know that p nor in a position to know that *not- p* , but also involves suspension of judgment about whether p , meaning the absence of belief and disbelief that p . But we already saw that ‘suspends judgment’ isn’t a good choice to ascribe the third stance. Relatedly, Raleigh (2021) also conceives of a stance, labeled ‘suspended judgment’, where the subject neither believes that p nor disbelieves that p *because* she believes that *she cannot yet tell whether p* .

²¹For a seminal work on visual pattern recognition and its connection to perceptual learning in both humans and non-humans, see Sutherland (1968).

²²Evidence that small children are in doubt about whether this-or-that is so-and-so is

body of evidence E supports neither p nor $not-p$, the third stance regarding whether p is the stance that is vindicated by E . A total body of evidence can fail to support either of p and $not-p$ while also failing to support either of *one is in a position to know whether p* and *one is not in a position to know whether p* . That would be a case where the third stance regarding whether p is vindicated by the evidence, though agnosticism about whether p isn't (because agnosticism involves believing that one is not in a position to know whether p). In fact, that would be a case where the third stance regarding whether *one is in a position to know whether p* is *also* vindicated by the evidence.

Substituting 'is agnostic about whether p ' (in the originally intended sense) for 'adopts the third stance regarding whether p ' in (R), then, returns a number of falsehoods. That is a good reason not to use 'is agnostic about whether...' to ascribe the third stance.

6 Reasons not to use 'is undecided'

What about 'is undecided about whether p ', or maybe 'is undecided between believing and disbelieving that p '?²³ The problem is that these phrases suggest that the subject *attempted to decide* between two options,

given by their early use of language, where they quickly learn how to pose questions. Typically, children in the age range of 26–40 months start asking 'where' and 'who' questions, and from 42 months of age onwards they start asking 'when', 'why' and 'how' questions. See Charlifue-Smith and Rooke (2008, pp. 269–272) for data on this. Asking a question signals that the cognizer isn't able to settle it herself—hopefully other people will be able to help her and take her out of her state of doubt. Yet, small children need not be able to engage in reflection or metacognition in order to get into such states. There is a large literature in the field of psychology on when metacognitive monitoring starts to occur and be used to regulate other cognitive processes throughout the developmental stage of humans and other primates—see Lyons and Ghetti (2010) and the references therein for some examples. This research is mostly concerned with when and to what extent children engage in metacognitive processes, and it is not assumed here that such processes are a constitutive part of the mechanism that leads them to raise questions.

²³Both Friedman (2013a, 2013b) and also Wagner (2022) characterize suspended judgment as a state of indecision. It is only natural to think of the phrase 'suspended judgment' as denoting some form of indecision, or what results from the failure to decide between the options of judging that p and judging that $not-p$. The third stance, however, is not best thought of as a state of suspended judgment (see again §3).

but then was unable to. And not every case where an ascription of the third stance is called for is a case where the subject tried to make a decision.

The verb ‘decide’ is used in English not only to describe agents as choosing what to do (e.g. ‘She is still deciding whether she should tell him the truth’), but also to describe them as making a final judgment or drawing an inference on the basis of the available evidence (e.g. ‘They decided that the defendant is not guilty’).²⁴ But, as we already saw, the third stance need not ensue from a process of deliberation or reasoning—from an attempt to make a decision. In fact, some instances of the third stance look as non-deliberate as cases of simple perceptual beliefs.

Say you see me walking into a grocery store from your parked car. As I enter the store, you have a brief glimpse at the insides of the store. You notice that I can either turn right or go straight into the first aisle after entering it. But before you see which direction I go, the door closes behind my back. You can imagine me going either way, and both of these scenarios are equally realistic from your perspective. So now you have the third stance regarding whether *I turned right* (I might also have gone straight into the first aisle for all you can tell). We can add more details to the story, so as to make it clear that you were not deliberating or reasoning about the issue, that you were not trying to decide whether I turned right or not—say, you were engrossed in a conversation over the phone and thinking about what the person at the other end of the line was saying, heeding only marginal attention to your visual input.

There are many other examples of this sort, where ascriptions of the third stance are called for, whereas it is strained to use ‘is undecided about whether...’ to describe them.

7 What about ‘is in doubt’?

Lastly, consider idioms such as ‘is in doubt as to whether *p*’ and ‘is in doubt about whether *p*’. For example: ‘Jones is in doubt as to whether *it will rain*’ and ‘Mary is in doubt about whether *the universe is deterministic*’.

²⁴Here is a dictionary entry.

We can also nominalize those constructions using something like ‘the state of being in doubt about whether p ’. These idioms are admittedly a bit more convoluted—but they seem to do a better job at ascribing the third stance than the ones discussed above.

To be in doubt as to whether p is to be on the fence regarding whether p is true or rather false. Assuming that you are in doubt as to whether *the defendant is guilty*, for example, it follows that you neither take the proposition that *the defendant is guilty* to be true, nor take it to be false. Both scenarios are possible from your perspective: that she is guilty and that she isn’t, and you’re not disposed to rely on either assumption in your reasoning and decision making. Furthermore, raising the question through an interrogative such as ‘Is the defendant guilty or not?’ is a perfectly good way of expressing your state of doubt regarding whether *the defendant is guilty*.

That takes care of conjuncts (i)–(iii) from (R). But what about (iv)? In particular, doesn’t ‘is in doubt as to whether p ’ also seem to refer to processes of deliberation or person-level reasoning, and it therefore requires the subject to think/have explicitly thoughts about whether p in order for the ascription to be true?²⁵

Indeed, it seems that the target idiom often has those implications. But it does not invite speakers to draw them as easily or as often as ‘suspends judgment about whether p ’ and ‘is undecided as to whether p ’ do. That is due to the fact that no expression in the phrase ‘is in doubt as to whether p ’ refers to mental processes—it features no verbs that describe such processes, or even nominalizations of such verbs (compare: ‘the decision process’ (✓) and ‘the suspension process’ (✓) to ‘the doubtfulness process’ (✗)).

You can be in doubt as to whether *I turned right* in the scenario from the previous section, for example, without having had any explicit thoughts on the issue. Just like some non-explicit states of *belief* come about as direct effects of perceptual experiences, so some non-explicit states of *doubtfulness* come about as direct effects of perceptual experiences. And a subject who is asleep can be accurately described as being in doubt as to whether *God exists* (when she is not at all actively thinking

²⁵I thank Richard Lohse and Thomas Raleigh for pressing the point when I first presented this paper at the workshop Perspectives on Neutrality on July 9, 2022, at the University of Konstanz.

about the issue).

Substituting ‘is in doubt as to whether p ’ for ‘adopts the third stance regarding whether p ’ in (v), and ‘the state of being in doubt about whether p ’ for ‘the third stance regarding whether p ’ in (vi), also seems to engender truths. It would certainly be incoherent for someone to be in doubt as to whether p and believe that p at the same time, and it would also be incoherent for someone to be in doubt as to whether p and disbelieve that p at the same time. Furthermore, where a total body of evidence E supports neither p nor $not-p$, the stance of being in doubt about whether p is a stance vindicated by E , if anything is. (Compare to ‘is agnostic about whether p ’, again: E may support neither p nor $not-p$, nor the proposition that *one is not in a position to know whether p*).

8 Concluding remarks

It seems, then, that the idioms ‘is in doubt as to whether p ’ and ‘the state of being in doubt about whether p ’ are not only good substitutes for the dummy expressions of (R), but they also seem to perform better than the other options explored above. The suggestion here is that these are the best ways to ascribe and refer to the third stance from the traditional taxonomy of categorical doxastic stances, within the constraints of the English language (other than using the very technical term ‘the third stance’).

I suggest that the use of the suggested idioms, instead of ‘suspends judgment’, etc., may improve our chances of making progress in epistemology, for example, by allowing us to avoid some of the ambiguities or pseudo-problems such as those mentioned in §1. Be that as it may, the proposal is now out.

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