

## Dogmatic Withholding: Confessions of a Serial Offender

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**Abstract:** This chapter provides an account of what dogmatism is, why the term matters, and how it applies to withholding judgment. Roughly, a person is dogmatic about P when a certain problematic personal investment—a superiority complex, broadly construed—biases their judgment concerning whether P. The term *dogmatism* and its cognates matter because of their social function. To accuse you of dogmatism is to signal how you are to be treated: your judgment or behavior needs to be “brought down to earth,” so that you have a more accurate view of yourself or so you stop treating others as less important or less than. Withholding judgment can be dogmatic in the same way that belief is dogmatic: belief (withholding) is dogmatic just when the relevant problematic personal investment results in biases that keep a person stuck in that belief (withholding).

**Key Words:** dogmatism, withholding judgment, suspension, dogmatic withholding, bias, inquiry, reasons-responsiveness

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This paper is partially an attempt to understand myself. I noticed that I take far fewer stands on political disputes than most other people. Issues such as student debt, gun control, abortion, taxation rates, and immigration seemed to involve sorting out controversies concerning, e.g., morality, philosophy, economics, and sociology. How is it that so many people are sufficiently informed to have a reasonable viewpoint on such complex issues? I worried (and still worry) that most people who take political stands do so irrationally, ignoring most relevant evidence. Since I “adeptly” avoided the irrational political commitments that befall so many other people, I inferred that

there must be something excellent about me: I must be especially skilled at appreciating the complexity and arguments on all sides of an issue. I was secretly proud that my withholding judgment<sup>1</sup> about these political issues was, as I saw it then, intellectually virtuous.

Ohhh, how easy it is to assume the best of ourselves. I now have a less flattering take on my own tendency to withhold when others commit: I withhold dogmatically. Here I use ‘dogmatically’ and its cognates as a pejorative: to say that a belief or withholding is dogmatic is to evaluate it negatively. If I claim that you are dogmatically committed to your own political position, you do not feel flattered and may very well feel insulted. Of course, philosophers often define ‘dogmatism’ so that it can be a good thing. I myself (2010) have defended a view that Pryor (2000) and many others refer to as ‘dogmatism’, but that sense of dogmatism is at best tangentially related to the sense at issue in this chapter. Here I am focused on a common, everyday usage of the term that is, by definition, a negative evaluation. Dogmatism is an intellectual vice.

Paradigmatic dogmatism manifests itself in dogmatic belief. Hallmarks of dogmatic belief include believing against the evidence or failing to consider easily available opposing evidence. These failures of reason-responsiveness<sup>2</sup> and inquiry keep people stuck in their belief. I worry that similar failures also keep me stuck in withholding judgment. For example, even when I carefully consider evidence, I have some tendency to withhold judgment even when one side is clearly correct. This can be problematic politically if it prevents a clearly correct intervention from being implemented.<sup>3</sup> Dogmatic withholding, if it exists, would seem to share many characteristically bad features with dogmatic belief.

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<sup>1</sup> I use ‘withholding judgment’ to refer to the third doxastic state beyond belief and disbelief, because it is the term I was raised with in epistemology. The term with the fewest misleading connotations might be ‘abstaining belief’ (per conversation with Hans Rott), though suspension is regularly used too (as in the title of this volume).

<sup>2</sup> A failure of reasons-responsiveness is just a failure to correctly respond to one’s epistemic reasons. I elaborate in n5 and §4.

<sup>3</sup> Dogmatic withholding bears some similarities to a media bias sometimes called ‘bothsidesism’ ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/False\\_balance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/False_balance)), especially since both can result from an attempt to avoid bias. Bothsidesism occurs when a journalist or media outlet treats the arguments for and against a position as if they were balanced, even though one side clearly has the upper hand. Yet neither dogmatic withholding nor bothsidesism entails the other, and there are at least two important differences between them. First, dogmatic withholding concerns what’s going on in a person’s head

In this paper, my primary goal is just to make the phenomenon of dogmatic withholding more salient, clear, and well understood. In the philosophical literature on bias and epistemic virtue/vice, I have yet to find any explicit discussion of dogmatic withholding. Jason Baehr (2011), Tom Kelly (2022), and Nathan King (2021) develop views that seem amenable to the idea of dogmatic withholding even though they don't explicitly consider it.

On the other hand, Heather Battaly (2018) and Robert Roberts & Jay Wood (2007) define dogmatism in terms of belief, which means that dogmatic withholding is conceptually incoherent unless it boils down to some sort of dogmatic belief or another. Battaly and Roberts & Wood do not argue against the possibility of dogmatic withholding. It seems not to have been on their radar. Perhaps I am being overly optimistic, but if withholding isn't reducible to dis/belief, I expect those who define dogmatism in terms of belief to agree that their definitions of dogmatism need a small tweak once the similarities between dogmatic belief and dogmatic withholding are made explicit. My primary goal, then, isn't really to *prove* that dogmatic withholding exists. It is to make it more salient, clear, and well understood, so that future theorizing can better take it into account. If you are going to reject dogmatic withholding as genuine, you should at least first understand what you are rejecting.

In sections 1 and 2, I sketch an account of dogmatic belief that P as involving a problematic personal investment in the question of *whether P* and either or both of two biases: biased reason-responsiveness or biased inquiry. In section 3, I argue that withholding can involve both this problematic personal investment and bias, and so likewise can be dogmatic. In section 4, I clarify the sort(s) of negative evaluation involved in dogmatism. Depending on which norms govern inquiry, it is possible that some dogmatic individuals are epistemically—but not completely—above reproach. While the fourth section doesn't contribute to the paper's primary goal, it does deepen the account of dogmatism at the heart of the paper.

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(how or why they withhold judgment) whereas bothsidesism concerns what they do publicly (how they present evidence for and against a position). Second, dogmatic withholding is narrower with respect to motivation. It involves certain dispositions or motivations (§2), whereas bothsidesism need not result from any particular dispositional or motivational profile.

## 1. Dogmatic Belief: The Basic Idea

### 1.1. Manifesting Dispositions

Dogmatic belief is belief that manifests dogmatism, where dogmatism is a disposition to think and inquire in certain bad ways. To understand dogmatic belief better, we need to answer three questions: What is a *disposition*? What is it to *manifest* a disposition? And what are the relevant bad ways of thinking and inquiring?

Some notorious characters known as *metaphysicians* will gleefully poke holes in any definition of 'disposition' I give you. Their glee irks me. So, rather than defining 'disposition', I just characterize it by considering some generalities and examples. First, *dispositions aren't necessarily guarantees*. I am disposed to overindulge on chocolate. An array of delicious chocolate is set before me, ready for the taking. Through conscious effort, I might indulge only moderately and so, on this occasion, overcome my disposition to overindulge.

Second, *dispositions can come in degrees*. An extremely strong disposition might involve overindulging on any kind of chocolate, in any kind of context, and actively bringing it about that I always have chocolate available to me. Less extreme dispositions might be highly specific or limited to certain contexts. Perhaps I'm inclined to overindulge only in milk chocolate that has a nutty filling. Or perhaps I am more disposed to overindulge when I have something to celebrate than when it is just a normal day. It is also possible that you and I are disposed to overindulge in chocolate in exactly the same circumstances, and yet I am more disposed as evidenced by overindulging more often in those circumstances.

Third, while dispositions aren't guarantees, *they generally probabilify and explain*. My disposition to overindulge in chocolate when it is available increases the probability that I will do so when I find myself in such a situation, and the stronger the disposition, the more probable my overindulgence. Suppose that my disposition to overindulge explains why I ate the whole array of chocolate in one sitting. We say that my eating the whole array *manifests* my disposition to overindulge in chocolate. I **manifest** a disposition just when I do what I am disposed to do *directly because* I am disposed to do it. Usually, when I do what I am disposed to do, I manifest the relevant disposition. Exceptions apply.

Suppose you made the array of chocolate just for me and, knowing me well, assume that if I don't overindulge then I must not like the chocolate. I might overcome my disposition to overindulge only to notice your hurt feelings. I might then

overindulge solely to assure you that I did, indeed, very much like your chocolate. In this case, I do what I was disposed to do (overindulge) without manifesting that disposition. My disposition to overindulge explains why I overindulged only in an *indirect* way. My disposition partly explains why your feelings would be hurt if I don't overindulge, and I overindulge only to prevent those hurt feelings. With these exceptions noted, let's just focus on cases in which, whenever a person does what they are disposed to do, they manifest the relevant disposition.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.2. Bias and Superiority Complexes

Dogmatic belief manifests dogmatism, which is a disposition to think and inquire in certain bad ways. I've clarified what dispositions are and what it is to manifest them. Now, let's identify the relevant bad ways of thinking and inquiring. I take it that there are two bad elements in dogmatism. The first bad element is *bias concerning whether P*. This bias can come in one or both of two forms. It can involve a failure to respond to evidence/reasons.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, for example, you are biased so that you have some tendency to believe P regardless of how strongly your available evidence supports ~P. On the other hand, the relevant bias concerning *whether P* might involve a biased inquiry, so that your available evidence is likely to end up supporting belief that P to some extent regardless of what evidence is "out there" to be had. Perhaps your best friend only searches for articles that support P and, when articles that support ~P are brought to his attention, he scrutinizes them far more carefully than he scrutinizes the articles that support P. The evidence available to him is going to be a biased sample of evidence there is to be had.

The second element of dogmatism is a *problematic personal investment in whether P*. My working hypothesis is that this problematic personal investment must involve a kind of superiority complex concerning whether P. I will consider an intra-personal

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<sup>4</sup> For a more thorough introduction to dispositions, see Choi and Fara 2021.

<sup>5</sup> What really matters is a failure to respond to *epistemic reasons*. For the purposes of this chapter, I treat *evidence* and *epistemic reasons* as synonymous, but they are in fact distinct. Withholding judgment is required when the evidence concerning P and ~P is tied or nearly tied. To explain this fact, we need to appeal to a default, non-evidential epistemic reason to withhold judgment. This view is compatible with the idea that epistemic justification supervenes on evidence; however, it denies that all epistemic reasons consist in evidence. See my forthcoming, especially §3 and n10, for an explanation and defense of this view.

superiority complex in §3.2, but for now, focus on an *inter*-personal case in which the dogmatic individual takes themselves to be superior to others in some respect. In many cases, this superiority will manifest itself in arrogance or haughtiness,<sup>6</sup> but it can also manifest in self-deprecating humility: “It is only by the grace of God that I can figure this out when others cannot.”

To have a superiority complex, it is not enough to think you are superior or identify with that superiority. An Olympic gold medalist may take great pride in being the best sprinter in the world. But if she recognizes her superiority while remaining humble, kind, and supportive, then she doesn’t have a superiority complex. To have a **superiority complex**, you must identify with a way that you take yourself to be superior, and there must be something problematic about that identification or the way it expresses itself in your life. That’s it. The following sorts of things are each sufficient for the problematic aspect of superiority complexes: you irrationally take yourself to be superior when you aren’t; you take excessive pleasure or pride in your (perhaps genuine) superiority;<sup>7</sup> or your (perhaps genuine) superiority leads to arrogance, haughtiness, condescension, or dismissiveness of others.

### 1.3. Dogmatism and Dogmatic Belief

Two further clarifications will lead us to our formal characterization of dogmatism and dogmatic belief. First, for genuine dogmatism, I assume that the superiority complex must itself partially explain why a person has the relevant biases or must at least reinforce or sustain those biases. Superiority complexes do, in general, at least sustain biases. If you take yourself to be especially good at figuring out whether P, it is easier to discount another’s point of view, be satisfied with the evidence currently available to you, be overly skeptical of counterevidence to your own position, and so on. But nothing in this chapter hinges on whether there must be an explanatory relation between the superiority complex and the bias.

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<sup>6</sup> Following Tanesini (2016: 82), arrogance is intra-personal and haughtiness is *inter*-personal. The arrogant person thinks too highly of themselves or, e.g., takes excessive pride or pleasure in their actual strengths; the haughty person thinks too highly of how they compare to others or, e.g., takes excessive pride or pleasure in their superiority.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Excessive’ pride or pleasure is not merely a *lot* of pride or pleasure, it is *too much* pride or pleasure, so much that it is *inappropriate* in the circumstances.

Second, a person isn't dogmatic if they have a momentary lapse. To count as dogmatism, a person's bias and superiority complex must be ingrained enough in a person's intellectual character that they dispose the person to think and inquire in ways that are characteristic of the bias and superiority complex. In a nutshell, then, here is my account of dogmatism:

**Dogmatism concerning P:** a combined ingrained superiority complex and ingrained bias concerning the question *whether P*, such that the former contributes to the latter.

Dogmatism is, therefore, a complex or compound disposition with a certain structure. It is complex/compound insofar as it is constituted by other more specific dispositions. The ingrained superiority complex is a disposition to think (and perhaps feel and/or behave) in certain ways. The ingrained bias is a disposition to respond to reasons and/or inquire in certain ways. Dogmatism consists in both more specific dispositions. It is structured insofar as the superiority complex dispositions somehow cause or sustain at least some of the bias dispositions.

A person is dogmatic concerning whether P just when they have dogmatism concerning P:

**Dogmatic Person:** a *person* is dogmatic concerning whether P just when their ingrained superiority complex contributes to their ingrained bias concerning whether P.

And, finally, here is our formal characterization of dogmatic belief:

**Dogmatic Belief:** A *belief* is dogmatic just when the belief manifests dogmatism.

Now that we understand my account of dogmatic belief, let's see if there is any evidence for it. In what follows, when I say a person has some bias or superiority complex, I assume it is ingrained in their intellectual character and that, when both are

present, the superiority complex contributes to the bias. This will allow us to consider a range of examples more quickly. With these assumptions in place, consider the following paradigmatic instance of dogmatism:

**Dogmatic Doug (biased with superiority complex):** Doug regards himself as more enlightened than others because of his religious (or perhaps anti-religious) views, and he is condescending toward people who disagree. His search and scrutiny are both biased: the only evidence that he actively searches for is evidence that supports his religious views and the only evidence that he actively scrutinizes is evidence against his position (e.g., when his friends brought alleged counterevidence to his attention). Even so, the balance of his evidence is strongly against his religious beliefs, and yet he mistakenly takes this evidence to support those beliefs.

The Dogmatic Doug Case is evidence for my account of dogmatic belief insofar as my account correctly predicts whether Doug is dogmatic.<sup>8</sup> In the case, Doug is clearly dogmatic. My account entails that the relevant kinds of superiority complex and bias are jointly sufficient for dogmatism, and Doug satisfies those conditions. He is doubly biased. He searches for evidence in a way that is biased toward his own religious views, and he believes his religious views despite the evidence's overall strongly supporting their falsehood. He also has a superiority complex insofar as he looks down on others when they have different religious views. My account correctly entails, then, that Doug is dogmatic.

It is worth stressing that Doug's dogmatism doesn't depend on his having *false* (anti-)religious views. Even if he holds the correct views, he holds them dogmatically. Whether a belief is dogmatic doesn't hinge on whether it is correct; it hinges on *how* or *why* the belief is held. Both theists and atheists can be dogmatic, even if one side is correct.

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<sup>8</sup> I talk as if cases are evidence for things. But, in my view, it is more accurate (and wordy) to say that the evidence is *our intuitions* concerning whether the account implies the correct result about the case.



## 2. Dogmatic Belief: Further Clarification and Defense

### 2.1. Dogmatism Requires a Biased, Invested Person

Dogmatic Doug is evidence that the relevant kind of superiority complex and bias are *jointly sufficient* for dogmatism. We get evidence that the bias and superiority are *individually necessary* by considering cases that involve one but not the other. Consider first a case in which a person has a superiority complex but isn't biased:

**Jack-Ass Jerry (superiority complex but no bias, so not dogmatic):** Jerry is a principled scientist and dutifully compiles evidence concerning climate change in a way to minimize the chance that it is misleading. His beliefs about climate change perfectly fit his evidence. These intellectual achievements lead him to belittle others who have incorrect views, less sophisticated arguments for the correct views, as well as those who are bored by the topic.

Jerry is a jerk, but he isn't dogmatic. Morally he's subpar, but epistemically he's a rockstar. Since he perfectly inquires into whether P and perfectly responds to the relevant reasons, he isn't dogmatic. The Jack-Ass Jerry case is evidence that bias is necessary for dogmatism.

Now let's consider a case in which a person's belief is biased, but she lacks a superiority complex.

**Bored Betty (biased belief without superiority complex, so not dogmatic):**

Betty's beliefs about climate change are doubly biased: she relies on a sample of evidence that is biased in favor of a particular side, and she tends to evaluate the evidence for that side as weightier than it really is. These biases ultimately result from how boring she finds this topic. She only acquires the evidence that is easiest to acquire and understand, and the evidence for the opposing position tends to be more complex and show up less in her Facebook feed. Her identity and self-worth are completely independent of her views on this topic.

Like dogmatists, Betty is stuck (or, if you prefer, rigid) in her beliefs about climate change, but she is stuck for different reasons. Nathan King explains:

[Betty is] rigid in her view not because she especially *cares* to hold fast to her beliefs (as a dogmatist does), but because she is simply too *lazy* to consider alternatives. Intellectual rigidity comes in at least two varieties, dogmatism and laziness, that vary according to their motivations. (2021: 214)

The Bored Betty case reinforces the idea that dogmatism involves some sort of personal investment in whether P. It may also provide evidence that biased *beliefs* aren't enough for the kind of bias in dogmatism. Bored Betty's *beliefs* about climate change are biased, but it doesn't follow that *she* is biased. What biases her beliefs is not *her* bias, but certain features of her context (what's easy to understand and most available to her). She is taking the path of least resistance. Had the path of least resistance led her to an opposing conclusion, she would have accepted the opposing conclusion. *She* isn't biased about climate change even though her beliefs are.

The Bored Betty case, then, tells us two things: that dogmatism requires a biased person—that is, a person whose bias is *ingrained* into their intellectual character—and not just biased beliefs, and that the person must be personally invested in the question of whether P.<sup>9</sup> The case does *not* show, however, that the personal investment must be problematic or, more specifically, a superiority complex. We need to consider more cases to get evidence for these more specific elements of dogmatism.

To see that the relevant personal investment must be problematic, consider:

**Virtuous-ish Valentina (biased *person* without superiority complex, so not dogmatic):** Valentina is a scrupulous thinker who cares about politics and poverty, but like everyone else, she is subject to implicit biases that are undetectable to her. As it happens, her beliefs about the causes of poverty are due to the outgroup homogeneity effect: as an affluent person, she tends

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<sup>9</sup> To be sure, Betty's laziness is ingrained in her cognitive character. But that ingrained laziness is not itself an ingrained bias toward belief. It disposes her to take the path of least resistance, and it is only an incidental feature of her context that the path of least resistance happens to lead her to belief.

to view all poor people as more similar than they are, and so she overattributes poverty to the laziness she sees in the poor people she knows best. She is always gracious when criticized and takes charges of bias seriously; however, she also recognizes that her efforts to mitigate her own biases take time and aren't always successful.

In many ways, Valentina seems like a very pleasant person who is a paragon of open-mindedness and intellectual virtue; however, implicit bias is the thorn in her heel. This implicit bias is part of her intellectual character and how she thinks. Her beliefs about poverty are biased and, moreover, these beliefs manifest *her* bias. *She* is biased and not just her beliefs. In contrast to Bored Betty, Virtuous-ish Valentina is personally invested in the question at issue. And yet, she isn't dogmatic. The Virtuous-ish Valentina case reveals that a biased personal investment isn't sufficient for dogmatism.

## 2.2. *Superiority vs Inferiority Complexes*

My working hypothesis is that the problematic personal investment required by dogmatism is a superiority complex. Roberts & Wood observe that "Intellectual security or self-doubt is one possible motivation for dogmatism, and this might explain the compulsion to make converts" (2007: 195). I agree, and this agreement raises the question of whether dogmatism might involve an inferiority rather than superiority complex. I lean toward no.

Sometimes deep insecurity can lead to a superiority complex as a—potentially maladaptive—defense mechanism. Suppose I am very insecure and anxious about whether my belief that P is true. I might try to reduce this insecurity and anxiety by trying to convince myself that my judgment concerning P is excellent and superior, thereby convincing myself that there is nothing to worry about. And this insecurity-induced superiority complex might very well lead me to make converts, which might further reassure me that my belief is correct. For I might reason that, if P weren't correct, then I wouldn't have been able to make these converts.

I take it, then, that insecurity can explain the superiority complex that partly constitutes dogmatism. But can insecurity and self-doubt *themselves* serve as the problematic personal investment that partly constitutes dogmatism? Consider a case in which a person's bias is accompanied by an inferiority rather than a superiority complex.

**Inferior-Feeling Fiona:** Fiona tends toward deep depression, and her identity is wrapped up in whether her religious beliefs are true. Although she is not able to admit this to herself, she feels threatened when her religious beliefs are challenged, no matter the context or how the challenge is delivered. These feelings have physiological effects, causing her heart to pound and her muscles to tense, as her body prepares to fight, flee, or freeze. These reactions lead her to avoid contexts that might force her to attend to such challenges, preventing her from acquiring any evidence against her beliefs. She is actually brilliant, but she feels so inferior to others that she blames her avoidance strategies on being too stupid to think clearly about her religious views.

Fiona is a tragic figure, but I don't think her tragedy involves dogmatism. Dogmatism concerning P requires a superiority complex concerning whether P, and poor Fiona is much too hard on herself to feel superior. Other people's intuitions about *whether Fiona is dogmatic* have been mixed. Even if I'm right about Fiona, my view faces an important question: if ingrained inferiority complexes can contribute to ingrained bias, why isn't that sufficient for dogmatism?

### *2.3. The Unity of Dogmatism*

In my view, dogmatism isn't a natural kind. I don't think our use of dogmatism is in the business of trying to carve nature at its joints. Its utility is social, not metaphysical. The accusation of dogmatism is a signal that a person is to be treated in certain ways: *the dogmatic person needs to be brought down to earth*. Part of this treatment is to reduce trust in the person's testimony on related topics, but it often involves more than that.

When a person's superiority complex involves an overly flattering view of themselves, they may need to be brought down to the bitter reality of their own mediocrity or weakness. But recall that a person may correctly perceive their own genuine superiority and still have a superiority complex. This can occur when a person's genuine superiority leads them to inappropriate feelings (e.g., disdain for others) or inappropriate behaviors (e.g., belittling others). While their judgment is on

target, such a person's feelings and behaviors need to be brought down to earth so that they stop treating others as less than or less important.

If dogmatism always involves a superiority complex, it is clear why it would be regularly associated with feelings and attitudes that connote imagery of some person's being little or low. If Doug is dogmatic, consider some of the adjectives that might typically describe his behavior (disdainful, demeaning, condescending, belittling) and the imagery those adjectives connote: disdainful (you are *below* my notice or esteem), demeaning (you are of *little* significance), condescending (I must *descend* to your level), and belittling (you are *little*). When Doug treats you as little or low, he generally treats himself as bigger and higher. His behavior needs to be brought down to earth or, switching metaphors, he needs to be "brought down to size".

In the mildest forms of dogmatism, bringing someone down to earth may involve no more than calling attention to what they are missing. If their genuine superiority concerning critical thinking skills is leading them to become haughty and not bother with seeking out opposing evidence, you may need only inform them of how their haughty behaviors make you feel and how their inquiry may be biasing their sample of evidence. In the worst forms of dogmatism, it may be impossible to bring a person down to earth and, in these worst cases, they are to be opposed or excluded to ensure that their dogmatism doesn't infect others or incite violence.

One caveat is worth stressing here. Even if a dogmatic person is to be treated in certain ways, it does not follow that it is appropriate for *you* to treat them in those ways *this very moment*. Context matters. If I am dogmatic, it may not be "your place" to bring me down to earth if we've never met. And even if we are good friends, maybe my birthday party is not the best time to try and bring me down to earth.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to bringing the dogmatic person down to earth, *the person who suffers from inferiority complexes needs to be lifted up*. The right responses to Inferior-Feeling Fiona involve support, such as care, concern, validation, and encouragement. As we noted in the previous sub-section, inferiority complexes can explain superiority

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<sup>10</sup> A second caveat is worth mentioning. While dogmatism has characteristically bad effects, it might be useful too. Consider how the US handles criminal proceedings. The prosecution is biased toward the defendant's being guilty, and the defense is biased toward the defendant's being innocent. The hope is that a good way to get to the truth is to let these groups *with opposing biases* duke it out. Similarly, perhaps your dogmatism will help balance out my opposing dogmatism, such that others can arrive at a deeper understanding of the truth—or at least be entertained—by watching us duke it out.

complexes. When that happens, our response to such people should involve both lifting up and bringing down. We might have to first support and validate the person, so that they can retain a positive self-image in the face of constructive criticism.

The term *dogmatism* is unified by its social function, by the information it provides concerning how the relevant person is to be treated. When I accuse you of dogmatism, I am implying that the rest of us should be prepared to engage in certain kinds of responses to you. We should prepare ourselves to deal with biased beliefs and behavior that are due to a superiority complex, and so we should aim, when the context is appropriate, to bring you down to earth. When bringing you down to earth is impossible and your dogmatism is extreme or dangerous, we should be prepared to oppose or exclude you.

Consider two versions of **Melancholy Momma**, which illustrate a sort of minimal possible difference between dogmatism and other forms of invested bias. In both versions of the case, the evidence is overwhelming that Sonny committed the murder and Momma still believes that Sonny is innocent. In the first version, Momma says things like “You just don’t know him like I do” and “I’ve known him a lot longer than you”, which suggests that she takes herself to have special insight into the character of her son and the likelihood that he committed the murder. In the second version, she just repeats things like, “I just can’t accept it”, which doesn’t suggest that she takes herself to have any special insight concerning whether her son committed the murder.

I take it that Momma is dogmatic in the first version but not the second. The charge of dogmatism is a signal that she may not be able to accept that her son committed the murder until she recognizes that her special relationship isn’t providing special insight into whether Sonny committed the murder. In addition to normal kinds of support for mothers in these situations, bringing Momma’s judgment *down* to earth may help her accept what her son has done. In the second version of the case in which *she just can’t accept* what the evidence says about her son, there’s really nothing we can do but hold her hand and help her *build* the courage to face what her son has done.

I’ve argued that dogmatism requires a superiority complex; however, I refer to this conclusion as *a working hypothesis*, because I don’t want you to get hung up on that detail. If you think Inferior-Feeling Fiona and both versions of Melancholy Momma are dogmatic, then you can still agree that dogmatism requires a (problematic) personal investment into whether P. You can just revise my working hypothesis to allow dogmatism to consist in a wider range of (problematic) personal investments, such as

inferiority complexes. I would consider this revision a friendly amendment rather than an objection to my account.

### 3. Dogmatic Withholding

#### 3.1. *The Basic View*

Let's review. A belief that P is dogmatic when the belief manifests the person's dogmatism concerning *whether P*. A belief manifests dogmatism when the relevant ingrained superiority complex contributes to ingrained biases that have some tendency to keep a person stuck in belief regardless of what evidence is available to the person or out there to be had. This account of dogmatic belief easily generalizes to dogmatic withholding.

**Dogmatic Withholding:** A *withholding* is dogmatic just when the withholding manifests dogmatism.

Withholding manifests dogmatism in the same way as belief: when the ingrained superiority complex contributes to ingrained biases that have some tendency to keep a person stuck in withholding regardless of what evidence is available to the person or out there to be had. Consider:

**Sensationalized Autobiography:** Tucker finds self-worth in being able to see both sides of the debate. He regards the most confident defenders and deniers of most political issues as likely biased toward their own points of view, and he is glad he is not like *those* people. If his current evidence seems to clearly support one side over the other, he searches for more evidence "just to make sure his sample of evidence isn't biased toward that point of view". Furthermore, his own assessment of the evidence is systematically skewed toward thinking that the evidence is more balanced than it is (regardless of which way the evidence points).

In Sensationalized Autobiography, I take it that my withholding is dogmatic in a fairly paradigmatic way.

Recall that my primary goal in §§1-3 is just to make the phenomena of dogmatic withholding salient, clear, and well understood. We have now largely completed that task, except for the clarifications concerning superiority complexes in the next subsection. Here I just want to briefly address three worries about the idea of dogmatic withholding.<sup>11</sup>

**Worry 1:** “Withholding about P is a special kind of belief, e.g., the belief that you can’t tell whether P is true (cf. Raleigh 2021); therefore, dogmatic withholding is dogmatic belief.” *Reply:* I don’t see any problem here. If withholding is just a special kind of belief, then it might be especially easy to defend the existence of dogmatic withholding. But my account of dogmatic withholding is intended to work even if withholding judgment is a doxastic attitude distinct from belief and disbelief.

**Worry 2:** “A withholding that P which may *seem* dogmatic will likely be associated with dogmatic belief in related propositions, such as dogmatic belief *that the evidence concerning whether P is balanced*. Perhaps what appears to be dogmatic withholding that P is best thought of as dogmatic belief in some related proposition.” *Reply:* Dogmatic beliefs and withholdings usually occur in a system of closely related dogmatic doxastic states. One implication is that Dogmatic Doug can’t avoid the charge that his a/theistic belief is dogmatic simply because he is dogmatic about the methodology he uses to support his religious beliefs. Likewise, you can’t avoid the charge that your withholding is dogmatic simply because you dogmatically believe that the relevant evidence is counterbalanced. Dogmatic doxastic states are like ants. Where you see one, many more are sure to follow.

**Worry 3:** “The mere fact that few, if any, people have talked about dogmatic withholding is evidence that there is something problematic about the concept.” *Reply:* In my view, we talk about dogmatic withholding less frequently because it occurs less frequently and is less dangerous. It wouldn’t surprise me if philosophy is a sort of haven for dogmatic withholders and overthinkers more generally; however, in general, dogmatic dis/believers are more prevalent than dogmatic withholders in, e.g., political and religious disputes. People who dogmatically withhold tend to hold either that there isn’t much evidence either way or that both sides are making good points. These

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<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Iskra Fileva for raising the three worries.



tendencies limit how upset they get at dis/believers. Murderous agnostics haven't really been a thing.

As a further response to the third worry, I have found the concept of dogmatic withholding beneficial. I recognized systematic differences in how often I withheld judgment about things like politics and religion. The possibility that one could be biased toward or dogmatic about withholding judgment wasn't the sort of thing anyone ever talked about, and so it wasn't a salient possibility to me. My dogmatic withholding went undiagnosed for years. Now that I have a label for what is different about me and my judgments concerning contentious matters, I better understand myself and the kinds of mistakes that I am predisposed to make. Sometimes having a label helps us better understand the facts that are already staring us in the face.

Dogmatism isn't about whether a stand is correct, but why or how one takes that stand. In §1.1, we noted that both theists and atheists can be dogmatic even when they are correct. In this section, we see that agnostics can be dogmatic too. Beliefs, disbeliefs, and withholding judgment can all be dogmatic because they can all manifest dogmatism.

## *2.2. Intra-Personal Superiority Complexes*

The autobiography in §2.1 is sensationalized insofar as I exaggerated my sins to make the illustration clearer. One sensationalized part is the bit about me looking down on others or being glad I'm not like *those* people. Maybe I've done that, but my superiority complex tends to be of a different sort. Paradigmatic superiority complexes like those of Jack-Ass Jerry and Dogmatic Doug tend to be *inter*-personal and *explicitly* comparative. They involve thoughts, feelings, and/or identification with contents to the effect that *I am better than other people in some respect*. To use fancy jargon, paradigmatic superiority complexes involve superiority comparisons *de dicto* (roughly: the superiority is explicitly represented in the thought's content).

My superiority complex tends to be *intra*-personal and *non*-comparative. I tend to see myself as superior to how I really am. In the fancy jargon, my thoughts and feelings about superiority are only *de re*. They aren't the puzzling thought "I am happy that I am smarter than I really am". Rather, I am happy at how good I am at evaluating the evidence, when I am not as good as I take myself to be. I take great satisfaction in a degree of skill that I do not actually possess. This intra-personal superiority complex

involves overestimating my abilities and identifying with, as well as finding pleasure and self-worth in, the degree of skill I incorrectly take myself to have.

My intrapersonal superiority complex is, perhaps, morally less problematic than the interpersonal variety. For example, it doesn't lead me to take satisfaction in the idea that I'm better than you. Yet it does lead me to discount your opinion and arguments since the prior probability that you would have the degree of skill that I take myself to have is fairly low (*a la* regression to the mean). My discounting of your opinion and arguments applies primarily in the private affair of belief revision or lack thereof. Publicly, I would express great respect for your position, since my bias is toward thinking that both you and your opponents are making good points. The problem is that I tend to weight your opinion/arguments and your opponent's opinion/arguments as equally weighty evidence regarding whether P even when one side has the upper hand. While my thought and behavior manifest a kind of respect for you and your argumentative skill, I treat the fact *that you have taken a side* as itself evidence that you aren't quite as good as me at appreciating the arguments on the other side. And so, I have some tendency to stay stuck in withholding judgment.

#### 4. The Nature of the Negative Evaluations

This section clarifies the relevant biases and explores the extent to which dogmatism must consist in an *epistemic* flaw. A person is biased when they have a disposition to *systematically depart* from a *norm* in a specific *direction* (cf. Kelly 2022: 63). To clarify this characterization, we need to clarify each of the four italicized terms. First, if a person is disposed to violate some norm only because they are disposed to make a random variety of mistakes, then they aren't biased. The disposition must involve a departure that is *systematic* (cf. Kelly 65).

Second, bias always has a *direction*, either for and/or against something. That direction tells you what the bias is for/against. When it comes to dogmatism concerning whether P, there are three possible directions to that bias: toward belief, toward disbelief, and toward withholding judgment. These three possible directions partly explain why theists, atheists, and agnostics can all be dogmatic.

A person might be disposed to systematically make certain mistakes where these mistakes keep them stuck in believing P without those mistakes counting as bias. Perhaps a student is systematically confusing necessary and sufficient conditions. That might keep them in the grip of a bad philosophical theory, but their systematic mistake

isn't tracking the theory. It's tracking confusion about necessary and sufficient conditions. It is only incidental that the mistake keeps them stuck in believing the bad theory. Hence, their belief in the theory might be unreasonable (violate or depart from the relevant epistemic norm) without being biased.

Third, we need to clarify what it is to *depart* from a norm. Some belief departs from an epistemic norm only if the epistemic norm *applies*, i.e., only if the belief is epistemically evaluable. Suppose that I have some tendency to believe that a pink rabbit is on campus despite the weightier reasons for disbelieving it, where this belief is not caused by my intellectual character but rather the drugs you slip into my coffee every morning. (Didn't your mother ever tell you that it's not nice to slip drugs into people's coffee?) Let's assume that the drug causes me to have the relevant belief in a way that circumvents my general capacities for reasons-responsiveness and inquiry. In such a case, my pink-rabbit belief doesn't manifest a bias of *mine*. It is caused and sustained in an a-rational way, a way that arguably isn't subject to any epistemic norm, and so the a-rational belief doesn't *depart* from any epistemic norm. Departure requires two things: that the norm apply to a case—that the norm get a grip—and that the case not conform to the norm.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, biases involve departures from *norms*. We noted that the bias relevant to dogmatism can come in either or both of two forms: biased reasons-responsiveness and biased inquiry. These different biases are distinguished by which norm they violate or depart from. Biased reasons-responsiveness departs from this norm:

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<sup>12</sup> Here's another case. Suppose that I have considered P; I withhold judgment about P; some very complicated conjunction of my knowledge entails that P; and yet the line of reasoning to P is too complicated for me (and even Einstein) to understand. There are at least three different interpretations of this case, each of which seems somewhat plausible to me. Take your pick. First, perhaps my withholding judgment about P isn't dogmatic in this case because the complication prevents the relevant epistemic norm from getting a grip on me and so prevents me from being biased. Second, perhaps the relevant epistemic norm does get a grip on me, but the complication or my intellectual limitations disable the complicated conjunction of my knowledge from providing an epistemic reason for believing P. Thus, while my evidence supports believing P, my epistemic reasons support withholding judgment (recall n5 above on the difference between evidence and epistemic reasons). Third, perhaps epistemic rationality is just very unforgiving: the relevant epistemic norm does get a grip on me, I do have decisive epistemic reason to believe P, and so my withholding judgment is both irrational and biased.

**Pairwise Permissibility:** it is epistemically permissible to take doxastic attitude  $\phi$  just when, for each alternative A, the total epistemic reason for  $\phi$  is no less weighty than the total epistemic reason for A. Otherwise,  $\phi$  is epistemically prohibited.<sup>13</sup>

For simplicity, suppose that the only epistemic options with respect to P are belief, disbelief, and withholding that P. Pairwise Permissibility is an epistemic norm. It tells you, e.g., to withhold judgment about P only when the epistemic reasons for withholding judgment aren't outweighed by the epistemic reasons for belief or disbelief. A *reasons-responsiveness bias* is a disposition to systematically take one particular doxastic option (believe, disbelieve, or withhold) even when the reasons for that option are outweighed.

On the other hand, I am not sure which norm governs inquiry. Pairwise Permissibility governs doxastic states (belief, disbelief, withholding). Inquiry often results in a doxastic state, but inquiry itself is a type of action. Thus, whatever norm is flouted by biased inquiry, it isn't Pairwise Permissibility.

Inquiry can be purely mental, so that it involves attending to a different aspect of your perceptual field. If you are trying to figure out whether someone is mad at you, you might shift back and forth from focusing on their tone and the content of what they are saying. Inquiry might also involve a trip to the library and years of study. Yet inquiry is not just any action. It is action that has an aim (e.g., figuring out whether P) that is more closely related to epistemology than most other aims of action (e.g., quenching your thirst). This makes me unsure exactly which norm is systematically violated in cases of biased inquiry. Moreover, it makes me unsure *what kind* of norm is systematically violated. Is biased inquiry a disposition to systematically depart from:

1. an epistemic norm;
2. a practical or moral norm;
3. some hybrid or combination of epistemic and moral/practical norms; or
4. distinctive norms that are unique to inquiry?

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<sup>13</sup> This version of Pairwise Permissibility ignores some technicalities that don't concern us in this chapter. See my forthcoming: §2n4 for the official version. And see my forthcoming, especially §2, for a defense of Pairwise Permissibility.

I do not know the answer to this question. (I dogmatically withhold judgment. You didn't think I would have everything figured out, did you?)

Here I just want to observe that the answer to this question can affect whether dogmatism has to involve some sort of epistemic failure. Suppose I accuse you of dogmatism. What negative evaluations *must* follow? Well, on my working hypothesis, I am accusing you of a superiority complex. Yet this superiority complex may involve no epistemic failure at all. You might be arrogant due to your greater experience *which you genuinely possess*, and this arrogance might lead you to belittle me. These failures are moral, not epistemic. *If you are biased with respect to reasons-responsiveness*, then you would be failing epistemically. Yet, on my account, dogmatism requires *either* biased reasons-responsiveness *or* biased inquiry. It does not require both. So suppose that, when I accuse you of dogmatism, I have in mind only that your *inquiry* is biased. Well, if the norms of inquiry are just moral norms or some other practical norm (as suggested by Feldman 2004: 180), then your dogmatism may consist in merely moral or practical failures. This raises the possibility that you could be dogmatic but epistemically above reproach.

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter provided an account of dogmatism which took for granted that the term is a pejorative or a negative evaluation. On my view, to be dogmatic is to have an ingrained personality complex that contributes to ingrained bias concerning inquiry and/or reasons-responsiveness. The superiority complex and bias are ingrained insofar as they amount to dispositions to think and act in certain problematic ways. Consequently, dogmatism is a disposition that can keep us inappropriately stuck in dis/belief or withholding judgment. When our dogmatism causes us to stay inappropriately stuck in belief, our belief is dogmatic. When it causes us to stay inappropriately stuck in withholding judgment, our withholding is dogmatic. Prior to this chapter I am not aware of any explicit discussion of dogmatic withholding. But it seems to be a real phenomenon that deserves further philosophical reflection.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Thanks to the audiences at the 2024 American Philosophical Association, Central Division and the *Thinking about Suspension III* workshop in Hegne, Konstanz 2024. Many conversations improved the ideas in this paper, including conversations with Ryan Davis, Jonathan Parsons, Luis Rosa, Philip Swenson, Verena Wagner, Alexandra Zinke, and the contributors to the relevant discussions on *Board Certified Epistemologists*. Iskra Fileva deserves especial gratitude. This paper exists only because she invited me

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to contribute to the Central APA symposium on dogmatism and open-mindedness. She also raised multiple worries that needed to be addressed in the paper.

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