Withhold by Default: A Difference Between Epistemic and Practical Rationality

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In addition to believing and disbelieving some proposition P, we can also withhold judgment about it. Withholding judgment is not the mere absence of belief and disbelief. It is an attitude of neutrality, captured roughly by the idea of resisting both belief and disbelief (Bergmann 2005: 420) or having a state of confidence intermediate between belief and disbelief (McGrath 2021: 471-2). Others sometimes refer to this attitude as 'suspending judgment' and/or 'agnosticism' (e.g., Friedman 2013; Wagner 2022; McGrath 2021). In this paper, I explain a plausible normative judgment about withholding judgment and clarify the implications of this explanation for normativity more generally.

The plausible normative judgment is:

> **The Epistemic Ties Datum:** when the epistemic reasons for belief and disbelief that P are equally weighty, then you are epistemically required to withhold judgment about P (and so belief and disbelief are prohibited).

Perhaps a reliable informant tells you P, and a different and equally reliable informant tells you ~P. The former is a reason for belief and the latter is an equally weighty reason for disbelief that P. If these conflicting testimonies are your only relevant evidence concerning whether P is true, then, intuitively, you are epistemically required to withhold judgment about P (i.e., withholding judgment toward P is the only permissible doxastic attitude to take toward P in those circumstances).[1]

To explain this Datum, we need to appeal to a difference between epistemic and practical rationality. The difference is *not*, as others argue, that epistemic and practical rationality *weigh* reasons differently. The main difference is in their default biases. (See note 15 for a second, less salient difference.) Practical rationality is biased *toward permissibility*. Actions are permissible by default, and it takes some specific feature of the situation to make an action prohibited or required (e.g., the costs and benefits that apply). In contrast, epistemic rationality is biased *toward withholding judgment's being required*. Withholding judgment about P is required by default, and it takes some specific feature of the situation (e.g., the relevant evidence) to make it permissible to believe or disbelieve P.

Epistemic rationality's default bias toward withholding judgment helps explain the Epistemic Ties Datum. When there are equally weighty reasons for belief and disbelief, these reasons cancel each other out and the default bias toward withholding judgment is the "last reason standing". As the last reason standing, it requires withholding judgment.

[1] When I say that it is *epistemically permissible* for some agent to believe that P, other epistemologists would prefer to say that the agent has *propositional epistemic justification* to believe that P. If Epistemic Uniqueness is true (see section §2), then a doxastic attitude's being epistemically permissible/justified also entails that it is epistemically required.

This paper's broader significance for normativity is that it clarifies the role that default biases have in explaining deontic status, as well as the single way to weigh reasons that is shared by both epistemic and practical rationality.

In §1, I explain and rebut an objection to the idea that epistemic and practical rationality weigh reasons in the same way, as well as present the basic idea of my explanation in more detail. The subsequent three sections each clarify and defend a different component of this explanation: the single way to weigh reasons (§2), the default bias toward withholding judgment (§3), and the idea that equally weighty reasons cancel each other out (§4). The idea that reasons cancel out has a surprising implication, which I'll introduce at the end of §2. I provide one argument for this implication in §4 and a second in §5.

1. The Difference Between Epistemic and Practical Rationality

Selim Berker (2018) and Chris Howard (cf. 2020: 2230-1) argue that an (alleged) **Combinatorial Contrast** reveals that epistemic reasons are weighed differently than practical reasons. The contrast concerns what happens in the case of ties. Practical reasons (for action) exhibit **permissive balancing**, i.e., when the reasons for each option are tied, each option is permissible. If you save a life when you press either of two buttons, then it is permissible to press either button. In contrast, epistemic reasons (for doxastic attitudes) allegedly exhibit **prohibitive balancing**, i.e., when the reasons for each option are tied, some options are prohibited. If you have equally weighty reasons to believe and disbelieve—e.g., competing testimony from equally reliable sources—then you are required to withhold judgment (and so belief and disbelief are prohibited).

If the Combinatorial Contrast is genuine, then we must reject:

> **Single Way to Weigh:** reasons for action and doxastic attitudes are weighed in the same way to determine deontic status.

The weighing of reasons concerns how they interact to determine deontic status. If the same combination of relative weights determines different deontic statuses for different types of rationality, then those types of rationality weigh reasons differently. The Combinatorial Contrast tells us that the same combination of relative weights (equally weighty reasons for each alternative) result in more permissions for practical than epistemic rationality. Hence, if the Combinatorial Contrast is genuine, then practical reasons for action are weighed in a different way than epistemic reasons. (I consider and reject Stewart Cohen's different objection to Single Way to Weigh in note 6.)

The Combinatorial Contrast is, at best, unmotivated. The ties in the practical and epistemic cases aren't parallel. In the practical case, the reasons for *both of two* options are tied (push first button, push second button). In the epistemic case, the reasons for *two of three* options are tied: the reasons for belief and disbelief are tied, but what about the reasons for withholding judgment? For all Berker and Howard show, it could be that withholding judgment is required because the reasons for withholding judgment *aren't* tied with the equally weighty reasons for belief and disbelief.

We shouldn't try to explain the Combinatorial Contrast, which falsely or unjustifiably claims that there is a difference in how practical and epistemic reasons are *weighed*. Instead, I suggest that we find a difference in how practical and epistemic reasons are weigh*t*ed, such that the difference explains:

The Epistemic Ties Datum: when the epistemic reasons for belief and disbelief that P are equally weighty, then you are epistemically required to withhold judgment about P (and so belief and disbelief are prohibited).

I argue that we should explain this datum by appealing to a difference in default biases, or default reasons. Practical rationality is not biased toward any particular action over any other. Its bias, if anything, is to let you do whatever you want (Tucker 2022a: 373-5). The only things that make an act prohibited are the particular features of the case at hand, e.g., the costs and benefits that apply to that case. When the particular features of the case are neutral between the options, then each option is permissible. None are required.

In contrast, epistemic rationality is biased toward withholding judgment. Independently of any particular features of the case, such as the evidence pertaining to whether P, there is a presumption in favor of withholding judgment's being required (and so belief and disbelief's being prohibited). When the particular features of the case are neutral between the options, then you are required to withhold judgment. This difference in default bias is a difference in weight values—or, at least, the difference is to be measured in terms of weight. The stronger the bias or presumption for withholding judgment, the more weight there must be for (dis)believing P before (dis)believing is permissible.

Epistemic rationality can *single out* one of three options (withholding) as the default choice, because it always selects from a fixed, or at least limited, menu of options. For the sake of the paper, I assume that epistemic rationality always selects between exactly three options for a given proposition P: belief, disbelief, and withholding.[2] In contrast, practical rationality selects from a highly variable menu of options. Sometimes the options are to go left, right, or stay put. Sometimes they are to keep your promise or to break it. Sometimes you have 3 options and sometimes 3 million. Given the variability of practical options, it is hard to see how practical reasons could *single out* an option by default, i.e., single out an option before taking into account the specific features of the case.

If there are default epistemic reasons to withhold judgment, then they can contribute to an otherwise attractive explanation of the Epistemic Ties Datum. Intuitively, when the reasons for belief and disbelief are equally weighty, they cancel each other out. But then the only remaining reason is the default reason for withholding and, as the only remaining reason, it requires us to withhold. The Epistemic Ties Datum is thereby explained.

Consider an analogy. Suppose that an object comes into existence at t_1. At t_2, the only forces exerted on the object are a downward force of 10 newtons and an upward force of 10 newtons. At t_3, is the object moving up, down, or neither? Trick question: there is not enough information to answer it. You cannot calculate the upward/downward vector of the object until you know the object's "default bias", until you know whether it was going up, down, or neither when it first came into existence. The forces at t_2 cancel

[2] To the extent that it is psychologically possible to have combinations of these three attitudes (e.g., believe and withhold judgment about P at the same time), then there would be more than three total options. There would be an additional option for each possible combination. Since such combinations of doxastic attitudes are generally incoherent, we usually won't be permitted to have more than one at a time. My basic picture can be extended to address these additional options. My basic picture holds, e.g., that evidence that P is a reason for believing P and a reason against disbelieving P. Generally speaking, then, we should expect evidence that P to be a reason for *just believing P* and a reason against *both believing and disbelieving P*.

each other out, so the default bias will carry the day. It will remain in whatever vector it began in.

2. The Single Way to Weigh Reasons

If we are to explain the Epistemic Ties Datum, we need a clear account of how to weigh reasons for more than two options. We need a clear account, that is, of the single way to weigh reasons for action and doxastic attitudes. In my view, weighing reasons for both action and doxastic attitudes takes place within pairwise competitions. Permissibility is the prize for winning a *tournament*, a pairwise competition with each alternative. This idea is captured by:

> **(Simple) Pairwise Permissibility:** it is permissible to φ just when, in each pairwise competition with each alternative A, the total reason for φ is no less weighty than the total reason for A. Otherwise, φ is prohibited.

Suppose we are evaluating the epistemic rationality of believing P. There are two alternatives to believing P, namely disbelieving and withholding judgment about P. Pairwise Permissibility tells us that belief is permissible just when the reason for believing P is not outweighed by the reason for disbelieving P *and* not outweighed by the reason for withholding judgment about P.

Pairwise Permissibility most directly tells us how to weigh reasons to determine whether an option is permissible. Yet it also tells us how to weigh reasons to determine whether an option is *required* (i.e., whether φ is the only permissible option). We just apply Pairwise Permissibility to φ and each of its alternatives. If Pairwise Permissibility says that φ is permissible and each alternative is prohibited, then φ is required.

The parenthetical "Simple" qualifier indicates that it needs refinement to be perfectly general. The refinement is needed to explain the full range of permissible *actions* and, especially, how it can be permissible to perform worse self-interested actions (e.g., going out for a night on the town) over permissible and *better* altruistic actions (e.g., donating the money to an effective charity). We might need the refinement in epistemology too if we opt for a permissive epistemology that allows for *epistemic options*, cases in which an agent has more than one epistemically permissible doxastic attitude (e.g., a case in which it is epistemically permissible to believe or withhold judgment about P). Yet, for simplicity, I assume:

> **Epistemic Uniqueness**: for any proposition P, there is at most one doxastic attitude that it is permissible to take toward P.[3]

This assumption guarantees that we can work with the simple version of Pairwise Permissibility and thereby ignore some technical terminology unfamiliar to most epistemologists.[4]

Pairwise Permissibility is a version of what Berker calls *permissive balancing*. If the reason for φ and the reason for some alternative ~φ are equal/tied, then both φ and ~φ are

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[3] See Kopec and Titelbaum (2016) for an overview of the relevant literature.

[4] The official principle is:

> **(Official) Pairwise Permissibility:** it is permissible to φ just when, in each pairwise competition with each alternative A, the *justifying* weight for φ is no less than the *requiring* weight for A. Otherwise, φ is impermissible.

For defenses of the official version or something like it, see Muñoz 2021 and Tucker 2023a. *Simple* Pairwise Permissibility is what results from the official version when you assume that a reason's justifying and requiring weight are always equivalent (as epistemologists usually do, perhaps unwittingly).

permissible (rather than one or more of them being prohibited). Recall that Berker and Howard claimed that epistemic rationality balances *prohibitively*, i.e., that ties between reasons sometimes give you prohibitions rather than permissions. In §1, we saw that this alleged combinatorial contrast was, at best, unmotivated. Now we have an account of weighing reasons which entails that the contrast is false. Pairwise Permissibility is the single way to weigh reasons, and it makes both epistemic and practical reasons balance permissively.

Last but not least, Pairwise Permissibility implies that reasons work primarily within *pairwise* competitions. If there is a reason for believing P when belief competes with disbelief, it does *not* follow that there is a reason (much less a reason with the same weight) for belief when it competes with withholding. Since reasons function primarily within pairwise competitions, it is at least a conceptual possibility that they are contrastive. A consideration/reason for φ is **contrastive** (in some case) just when the consideration's weight for/against φ can vary as you vary the alternative, or contrast.

Suppose that we are trying to determine whether some evidence E for P makes it permissible to believe P. Since there are two alternatives to believing P (disbelieving, withholding P), Pluralist Permissibility tells us that we need to think about how E functions in two separate pairwise competitions. We need to think about the extent to which E has weight for belief *against (or rather than or over) disbelief*. And we also need to think about the extent to which it has weight for belief *against withholding.* E will be a contrastive reason if, e.g., it has a weight of 10 units for belief against disbelief, but a weight of only 5 units for belief against withholding.

Pairwise Permissibility doesn't tell us that contrastive reasons actually exist. Nor does it entail, more specifically, that there is some reason for belief that has a different weight for belief against disbelief than it has for belief against withholding. It is a perfectly general tool that works whether or not contrastive reasons actually exist.

In §4.2, we'll see that contrastive reasons are required to make sense of the idea that equally weighty reasons for belief and disbelief cancel each other out. To whatever extent you find the cancelling out idea intuitive, to that extent you have a reason for believing that contrastive reasons exist. I provide a second argument for contrastive reasons in §5.

Stewart Cohen (2016: 430), Schroeder (2015: 163), and Snedegar (2017: ch 6) give accounts of weighing reasons that are similar to Pairwise Permissibility,[5] but only Snedegar seriously explores the idea that epistemic reasons might be contrastive. Thus, he arguably gets closer to anyone else in explaining the Epistemic Ties Datum. His downfall, as we'll see in §3.2, is that he misses the role that default biases play in making withholding judgment required. I mention a further difference between our views in §5.

3. Epistemic Rationality's Bias Toward Withholding Judgement

3.1. Withholding Conservatism

[5] Brunero (forthcoming: §4) rejects Pairwise Permissibility. He raises various objections, most of which I address in §§3-4. He replaces Pairwise Permissibility with **Aggregate the Alternatives:** belief that P is permissible if and only if the reason to believe P is at least as weighty as the combined weight of the reasons to disbelieve P and withhold judgment about P (Brunero EV p. 9, 11; cf. Schroeder 2015: 165). My main objection to his alternative is that it blatantly violates what seems to be a **Commonsense Constraint** on the aggregation of reasons: the reasons for incompatible alternatives do not aggregate, they compete (cf. Tucker 2023b: 548). Pairwise Permissibility respects this constraint, because it says that we should weigh the reason for belief against the reasons for disbelief and withholding judgment *one at a time*.

Given Pairwise Permissibility, why do ties between reasons for belief and disbelief entail that belief and disbelief are prohibited? If disbelief were the only alternative to belief, then both belief and disbelief would be permissible (because Pairwise Permissibility says that ties generate permissions). Yet there is another alternative, withholding judgment. Pairwise Permissibility tells us that (dis)belief will be prohibited *if* the total reason for (dis)belief is outweighed by the total reason for withholding judgment.

The goal of this section and the next is to show that, indeed, the total reason for (dis)belief is outweighed by the total reason for withholding judgment. In this section, I clarify and defend the idea that epistemic rationality requires withholding judgment by default—i.e., that there is a default reason for withholding judgment that weighs against any reason for belief or disbelief. In the next section, I argue that, since the reasons for belief and disbelief cancel out, the default reason for withholding is the only reason that *isn't* cancelled out. It thus breaks the tie and requires withholding over both belief and disbelief.

My official statement of the default requirement view is:

> **Withholding Conservatism:** for any proposition P within the domain of epistemic evaluation, withholding judgment about P is epistemically required by default.

In slogan form, Withholding Conservatism says to *withhold judgment until you have good reason not to*. To understand the official view, we need to better understand the relevant senses of 'by default' and 'within the domain of epistemic evaluation'.

Any reason or deontic status that applies **by default** applies *before* taking into account any information that can vary from case to case. For something to apply by default (with respect to epistemic rationality), it must apply in the same way and same degree to *every case* that epistemic rationality evaluates. Your evidence can differ between different propositions, and your evidence for a single proposition can change over time. Hence, default reasons apply *before* taking into account any relevant evidence. Default reasons apply before even prior probabilities, as prior probabilities vary from proposition to proposition (the propositions *2+2=4* and *2+2=5* have different prior probabilities). So Withholding Conservatism is compatible with the claim that *2+2=4*'s prior probability of 1 epistemically requires you to believe that proposition. This would just be a case in which the prior probability outweighs the default requirement to withhold.

A proposition P is **within the domain of epistemic evaluation** just when epistemic rationality evaluates doxastic attitudes to that proposition. Perhaps some conditions must be met before epistemic rationality evaluates your (potential) doxastic attitudes to those propositions, e.g., that you have at some point considered the proposition, you continue to have the conceptual capacity to represent the proposition, etc.

A natural thought is that practical and epistemic rationality evaluate a (potential) response only if, in some hard to specify sense, it is something that you can do in that situation. If the pool is three miles away, I can't jump in the pool right now. So, if Elon Musk offers me a billion dollars to jump in the pool right now, I don't have any reason for doing so, it is not something that is permissible for me to do, and I'm not required to do it. The action is outside the domain of practical rationality—at least until I get sufficiently close to the pool that it is possible for me to jump in (but, sadly, by then Musk's offer will have expired).

Five minutes ago you had never considered the propositions *that Tom Brady's favorite color is neon yellow* or *that the southern-most monkey has no more than one older sibling*. Now that you have considered these propositions, epistemic rationality is evaluating your (potential) responses to them. Perhaps epistemic rationality now requires that you disbelieve the first proposition and withhold judgment about the second. But, before you considered them for the first time, epistemic rationality simply did not evaluate which doxastic attitudes it was permissible or required to take toward them. Before consideration, those propositions were outside the domain of epistemic evaluation. Why? Presumably, we don't count as being able to doxastically respond to a proposition until we've first considered it. This presumption is analogous to not having the option to jump into the pool until we get sufficiently close to it.[6]

Withholding Conservatism does not entail that you are default required to withhold judgment *about every proposition* (full stop), because some propositions (e.g., those you've never considered) may be outside the domain of epistemic evaluation. It entails only that you are default required to withhold judgment about every proposition within the domain of epistemic evaluation. Different versions of Withholding Conservatism can disagree about the size, or weight, of this default bias. If it is a small default bias with a weight of 1 unit, then believing P will be permissible as long as, say, the evidence favors belief by at least 1 unit. If it is a moderate default bias with a value of 10 units, then belief will be permissible as long as, say, the evidence favors belief by 10 units. You might opt for this more moderate bias if, e.g., you allow a rumor that P to provide genuine evidence that P is true but not enough to overturn the default requirement to withhold judgment (cf. Brunero forthcoming EV, pg 18).

Since these default biases have (or are at least measured in terms of) weight, I think of them as **default reasons** (reasons that apply whenever epistemic rationality applies).[7] To correctly determine deontic status, Pairwise Permissibility tells us that you have to take into account the *total* reason for each option, which includes *both* default reasons and **non-default reasons**, i.e., those reasons that are specific to the case (e.g., which prior probabilities and evidence apply).

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[6] These points address Stewart Cohen's (2016: 433-8) objection to Single Way to Weigh. Single Way to Weigh claims that reasons determine the deontic status of acts and doxastic attitudes in the same way. Cohen assumes that the deontic status of actions is determined solely by the relative weights of reasons (we'll assume in accordance with Pairwise Permissibility). Yet he denies that the deontic status of doxastic attitudes is determined solely by the relative weights of reasons. When our existing knowledge entails some complicated proposition P1 (e.g., an arbitrary disjunction of our knowledge), we are *not* required to believe P1 if we have never before considered it (435). This example is supposed to show that we can have much greater reason to take a doxastic attitude (belief) than any of the alternatives (disbelief, withholding), and yet, contra Pairwise Permissibility, not be required to believe P. Yet that's not what the example shows, and there is no disanalogy between epistemic and practical rationality here. No matter what Musk offers you, you don't have any reason and you aren't required to jump into to the pool if you aren't sufficiently close to it. No matter whether or not your knowledge entails P1, you have no reason to and aren't required to believe it when you've never before considered it. Neither practical nor epistemic rationality evaluate responses that aren't, in the relevant sense, possible for you to do in the situation.

[7] Here is a second argument for treating default biases as or explained by default reasons. Below I claim that the default reason is the fact that withholding judgment is your only way to avoid truth-related error. This fact can appropriately serve as a (motivating) reason for which you withhold, and it can appropriately so serve only if it is a genuine (normative) reason. Thanks to Selim Berker for discussion on this point.

(If you don't want to think of default biases as reasons, then you must make two adjustments to the preceding, because you can't ignore the weight of a default bias just because you don't think of it as a reason. First, you'll need to make one adjustment to Pairwise Permissibility: replace the two instances of 'the total reason' with 'the total weight'. Then the total weight for φ would be given by the combined weight of any default bias for φ and any (non-default) reason for φ. Second, strictly speaking, the contrast between epistemic and practical rationality would not be that they weight *default reasons* differently, but that they weight *default biases* differently.)

What explains why there is a default reason or default bias to withhold judgment? Different views about epistemic normativity are going to give different answers to this question, and my explanation of the Epistemic Ties Datum isn't committed to any of them. Here I will just sketch the view that I favor.

In ethics, reasons of respect are sometimes contrasted with reasons of promotion. We have a reason to *promote* some value when we have a reason to bring more of that value about. For example, we have a reason to promote the wellbeing of suffering strangers insofar as we have a reason to make them better off. Reasons of *respect* constrain how we pursue what's valuable, including the value we are respecting. Suppose that life-preserving measures would preserve a person's autonomy and allow them an additional year of life that would be good for them on the whole. If the person nonetheless freely expressed their wishes not to be resuscitated if their heart stops, respecting their autonomy can require us to forgo such life- and autonomy-preserving measures.

The default reason for withholding judgment is a reason of respect. In particular, it is a reason concerned with *respecting the truth*. This reason constrains our pursuit of what's valuable, including our pursuit of believing the truth and disbelieving falsehood. Why think that respecting the truth has anything to do with withholding by default?

Truth values give rise to a kind of in/correctness that applies to beliefs and disbeliefs but not to withholding. We err if we *believe something false* or *disbelieve something true*, but there is no analogous kind of error with respect to withholding judgment. Taking a stand on whether P—i.e., believing or disbelieving P—is what opens us up to error with respect to truth.

Consider assertion. Respect for the truth seems to require that we assert neither P nor ~P *unless* we have some special reason to think that P is true/false. Until then (psst…by default), we should assert neither P nor ~P. The knowledge norm of assertion (the idea that you appropriately assert P/~P only if you know P/~P) is compatible with this view of respect, but weaker assertion norms are too. To respect the truth in our assertions is to have a kind of error aversion, a sort of caution against taking the incorrect stand on whether P. Ditto for doxastic attitudes.

I suggest, then, that *the fact that withholding judgment is your only way to avoid truth-related error* is a default reason for withholding judgment. Its status as a reason is explained by epistemic rationality's aversion to error. The more error averse that epistemic rationality is—i.e., the more caution that respect for the truth requires—the weightier is the default reason. We manifest this respectful caution when we withhold by default. Of course, we can be too cautious. That happens when we continue

withholding judgment even when the total reason for dis/belief outweighs the total reason for withholding.[8]

3.2. Some Advantages of Withholding Conservatism

Now that we understand Withholding Conservatism, let's see whether it is better than the existing explanations of the Epistemic Ties Datum.

If some reason for withholding judgment is to explain the Epistemic Ties Datum, then that reason needs to be present whenever the reasons for belief and disbelief tie. Schroeder (2015) appeals to practical reasons for not believing, such as the costs of believing P if it turns out to be false. (For a defense of the claim that such costs are practical rather than epistemic reasons, see McGrath 2021, especially pg. 464.) It is controversial whether practical considerations can make a difference to the epistemic permissibility of believing P.[9] Yet, even if they can make a difference, they aren't always present and so they cannot explain the Epistemic Ties Datum. Snedegar also appeals to practical reasons for not believing, but he seems more sensitive to the fact that they won't always be present (126-7), which is why he focuses on the "Meta-Reason" proposal discussed below.

A default for withholding judgment avoids both of these disadvantages. Default reasons are always present when the reasons for belief and disbelief are tied—indeed, they are present no matter how the reasons for belief and disbelief compare. And since epistemic default reasons aren't themselves practical reasons (e.g., they manifest respect for the truth and don't have anything to do with costs and benefits), my explanation works whether or not practical reasons partially determine epistemic deontic status.[10] To be sure, if practical reasons *are* relevant to epistemic deontic status, Pairwise Permissibility has no problem taking them into account.

Roeber (2016: 440-1) and Snedegar (2017: 126-8) argue that we can explain the Datum by appealing to the following reason for withholding judgment:

> **Meta-Reason:** the fact that the reasons for belief and disbelief are equally weighty.

Meta-Reason has the virtue of being (trivially) present whenever the reasons for belief and disbelief are tied. But it cannot provide a good explanation of the Epistemic Ties Datum.

Meta-Reason is arguably a reason, but not the sort that can make a difference to what is epistemically permissible or required. It is derived from or redundant with the individual reasons to believe and disbelieve. Once you take into account both the reason

[8] In specific cases you might get evidence which guarantees that P is true, and so believing P can't lead you astray in those specific cases. Yet the default reason applies no matter what the specifics are. Prior to taking into account any specifics of the case, such as what the proposition or the evidence for that proposition is, withholding judgment is your only way to avoid truth-related error that is guaranteed no matter the specifics. This special immunity from error has default weight even if it is outweighed by evidence that guarantees P's truth.

[9] See, for example, Brown (2013), Roeber (2018), and Anderson & Hawthorne (2019).

[10] Here is another way to show that default reasons to withhold fit better with traditional, anti-pragmatic epistemology. The costs of believing vary independently of which evidence applies. If such costs affect what is rational to believe, then epistemic rationality does *not* supervene on evidence. A default reason for withholding is arguably a type of non-evidential reason, but since it never varies, the existence of such a reason is compatible with the idea that epistemic rationality supervenes on evidence (or reliability or proper function or whatever else the traditionalist cares about).

for belief and the reason for disbelief, you *already* have taken into account the fact that they are equally weighty. To separately take into account Meta-Reason would amount to a kind of illicit double counting. As Berker puts it: "derivative reasons are just shadows of the reasons from which they are derived and should not be considered independent normative units in the weighing process" (450; cf. Snedegar ch 6, nt. 13).[11]

Withholding Conservatism avoids this objection to Meta-Reason, because it appeals to a reason that is *not* derived from our reasons for belief and disbelief. All reasons for belief and disbelief are *non*-default, as they depend on the specific details of the case (e.g., which prior probabilities and evidence apply). Withholding Conservatism appeals to a default reason for withholding judgment, and default reasons apply *before* taking into account the specific details of the case. Hence, they must be *in*dependent of the reasons for belief and disbelief. As independent reasons, they are independent normative units that must be taken into account when reasons are weighed to determine deontic status.

You might worry that, even if default biases exist, they cannot provide a plausible explanation of the Datum. The tied reasons for belief and disbelief might be weak (tied at 1 units) or weighty (tied at 100 units). If the default reason for withholding is always weightier than tied reasons to believe and disbelieve, then the weight of the reasons for withholding must be implausibly large (at least 101) or vary in an ad hoc way so that it is always just as weighty as it needs to be (Cohen 2016: 433; Berker 2018: 450; Brunero forthcoming: §4).

The next section resolves this worry. We'll see that the default reason for withholding judgment does not need to be weightier than the reasons to believe and disbelieve *when those reasons cancel each other out*. The default reason requires withholding judgment, not because it is the weightiest reason, but because it is the "last reason standing". To explain the Epistemic Ties Datum, all I need is for the default reason to have at least infinitesimal weight for withholding judgment. Hence, I am not committed to saying that the weight of the default reason is implausibly large or varies in an ad hoc way.

Finally, you might complain that any appeal to default biases is bound to be too exotic or ad hoc to take seriously. This complaint is understandable given how rarely default biases are discussed; however, *every* first order epistemological theory must assign some default status to doxastic attitudes, even if there is no bias toward one attitude over the others. Alternatives to Withholding Conservatism might hold, for example, that belief, disbelief, and withholding are all permissible or all prohibited by default. *Default statuses*—whatever they are—tell us the deontic status of each option when the specific details of the case don't favor one attitude over any of the others. The *weight value of* the default status tells us how weighty opposing reasons must be before they outweigh the default status, whatever it is. The question is not *whether* doxastic attitudes have some default status. The question(s) is *what* those default statuses are and how weighty they are.

[11] Brunero (forthcoming: EV pg 18) claims that the relevant reason to not believe P is the risk the belief is mistaken. This proposal is also subject to a double-counting worry. Brunero holds that the more evidence that P is true, the less risk there is in believing P (e.g., note 37). But then the difference between evidence and risk is like the difference between how full a glass is (how much evidence there is for P) and how empty the glass is (how risky it is to believe P). You already take into account how much risk there is when you say that the evidence for P has a weight of only, say, 10 units (rather than 100), so you double count that risk when you appeal to it as a reason to not believe.

Recall the alternatives to Withholding Conservatism, the idea that practical reasons or some Meta-Reason explains the Epistemic Ties Datum. If anything, these alternatives are less simple than my own view. They first assume that the default statuses are no more biased toward one doxastic attitude over any other, and then they posit the existence of something else (practical reasons, Meta-Reason) that provides the reason for withholding judgment. On my view, we don't need to posit anything else. We just let the default bias itself be the reason for withholding judgment.

Admittedly, I have not *proved* that a default bias toward withholding judgment both exists and partly explains the Epistemic Ties Datum. You may have an alternative explanation of the Datum. Yet, before you assume that your alternative explanation is better than mine, just keep in mind that my view has five advantages. My explanation appeals to a reason for withholding judgment that is:

Capable: a default reason for withholding judgment is present whenever reasons for belief and disbelief are tied and so is at least a candidate to explain the Epistemic Ties Datum;

Flexible: the default reason explanation works whether or not practical reasons can make a difference to which doxastic attitudes are permissible or required;

Independent: a default reason is independent of reasons for belief and disbelief and, therefore, can be an independent unit in the weighing "process";

Principled: the weight of the default reason does not need to be implausibly large or vary in some ad hoc way; and

Simple: every normative epistemic theory must assign default statuses in some way, and when the default is assigned as *biased toward withholding judgment*, then the default status itself can be the reason for withholding judgment that explains the Epistemic Ties Datum.

4. Cancelling Out

4.1. Cancelling Out: The Basic Idea

The Epistemic Ties Datum holds that equally weighty reasons for belief and disbelief entail that withholding judgment is required. My explanation is that equally weighty reasons for belief and disbelief cancel each other out, and so the default reason for withholding judgment is the last reason standing and thereby requires withholding judgment. I defended the idea that there are default reasons in the previous section. In this section, I explain how equally weighty epistemic reasons for belief and disbelief cancel each other out.

Pairwise Permissibility tells us that permissibility boils down to pairwise competitions: φ is permissible just when the total reason for φ is no less weighty than the total reason for each alternative. Cancelling out is counterbalancing in each of these pairwise competitions. Considerations *counterbalance* in some pairwise competition, roughly, just when they oppose and are equally weighty in it.[12] Counterbalanced considerations can be tied at 0, 50, 100, or any other weight value.

[12] Two technical details are worth mentioning in case you are familiar with the ethics literature on how to explain *moral options*, cases in which more than one option is morally permissible. First, if two opposing considerations are incommensurable or on a par, then they aren't tied/equally weighty, and so they don't count as counterbalanced in this sense. Second, if epistemic reasons can have more justifying than requiring weight, two opposing considerations **counterbalance** in a pairwise competition just when, in that

Two opposing reasons or considerations **cancel out** if and only if they counterbalance each other in *every* relevant pairwise competition. More generally, some set of considerations R1-R*n* cancel out just when those considerations counterbalance in every relevant pairwise competition.[13] When considerations cancel out, they make no difference to the deontic status of the options. Consider a practical case of cancelling out.

You can press either of two buttons or you can refrain from pressing any button. No matter what you choose, a capricious dictator will honor your choice by sparing the lives of the same 10 people from a painful death. But if you refrain from pushing any button, he will torture Vic for 2 hours. If you push the left button, he will torture Vic for 1 hour. If you push the "right" button, he won't torture Vic at all. The consideration *that the option will save the lives of these 10 people* cancels out. No matter what pairwise competition you consider (e.g., left button vs right button, not pushing any button vs pushing the left button), the weight of that consideration is the same for both options. Consequently, that consideration makes no difference to the deontic status of any option. Since the number of lives spared from death cancels out, the only other consideration (how long Vic is tortured) carries the day and you are required to push the right button.

When considerations cancel out, *it does not matter how weighty they are*; they still make no difference to the deontic status of the option. Suppose the dictator will instead spare 1 million lives whatever button you choose. The lives still make no difference to which button you should push. They can be vastly more weighty than the reason to choose the right button (the prevention of an hour or two of torture for Vic), and yet you are still required to choose the right button. The reason to choose the right button requires pushing that button, not because it is the weightiest reason, but because it is the last reason standing. It is the only reason not cancelled out by some other reason.

My claim is that equally weighty reasons to believe and disbelieve P also cancel out. We are ordinarily focused on the pairwise competition between belief vs disbelief, but that is not the only relevant pairwise competition. We are working with the assumption that, when epistemic rationality evaluates your potential responses to a proposition P, there are always exactly three options: belief, disbelief, and withholding judgment about P (§1). Hence, there are three pairwise competitions that matter when we are trying to figure out which, if any, doxastic attitude is required:

belief vs disbelief,

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competition, their justifying and requiring weight values are *tied with each other's* justifying and requiring weight values *and* each consideration's justifying weight *equals its own* requiring weight. For simplicity, the main text assumes that Epistemic Uniqueness is true, which requires that an epistemic reason's justifying weight always equals its requiring weight (cf. §2, including n4).

[13] It is tedious to formalize the general concept of cancelling out which applies to any number of options and considerations; however, you can get a decent grasp of it just by considering two different ways that three considerations, R1-R3, can cancel out.

Example 1: There are two options, A and B, and so only one relevant pairwise competition. Here's one way R1-R3 can cancel out in this two-option case:

A vs B: R1 is a reason for A, R2 and R3 are both reasons for B, and R1's weight is equal to the combined weight of R2 and R3.

Example 2: There are three options A-C and, thus, three relevant pairwise competitions. Here's one way that R1-R3 can cancel out in this three-option case:

A vs B: R1 is a reason for A, R2 is a reason for B, and their weights are equal.

B vs C: R2 is a reason for B, R3 is a reason for C, and their weights are equal.

A vs C: R1 is a reason for A, R3 is a reason for C, and their weights are equal.

belief vs withholding, and
withholding vs disbelief.

To cancel out, the equally weighty reasons for belief vs disbelief must be equally weighty in *all three competitions*. This gives us the third part of my explanation of the Epistemic Ties Datum.

> **Epistemic Cancelling Out:** equally weighty reasons for belief and disbelief counterbalance in each of the three relevant pairwise competitions (belief vs disbelief, belief vs withholding, and withholding vs disbelief).

Start with the familiar competition between belief and disbelief. We have some evidence that P is true (**E_P**), which we'll assume is a reason for believing that P of 100 units. We also have some evidence that ~P (**$E_{\sim P}$**), which we'll assume is a reason for disbelieving P of 100 units. But if E_P and $E_{\sim P}$ have a weight of 100 units in belief vs disbelief, what are their weight values in the other two relevant pairwise competitions, belief vs withholding and withholding vs disbelief? My cancelling out strategy is compatible with a variety of views. I'll defend my official view in §5. For the remainder of the sub-section, make the *momentary assumption* that equally weighty reasons for belief and disbelief are irrelevant to the latter two pairwise competitions. This momentary assumption guarantees that the E_P and $E_{\sim P}$ cancel out. For they are tied at 100 in the first pairwise competition and tied at 0 in the latter two. Thus, they make no difference to deontic status and any default reason for withholding judgment will carry the day and require us to withhold judgment.

Again, it does not matter how weighty the tied reasons for belief and disbelief are. They could be tied at 1 million units. They still don't make a difference to deontic status. The default reason for withholding judgment requires withholding judgment, not because it is the weightiest reason, but because it is the only reason that isn't cancelled out by some other reason.

4.2. Epistemic Cancelling Out and Contrastive Reasons

I bet you find it highly intuitive that equally weighty reasons for belief and disbelief cancel out. If so, then you have at least some reason to accept the implications of their cancelling out even if these implications strike you as surprising or counterintuitive. One implication of cancelling out is that E_P and $E_{\sim P}$ are contrastive reasons. A consideration/reason for φ is **contrastive** (in some case) just when the consideration's weight for/against φ can vary as you vary the alternative, or contrast. Consider E_P. We said that it had a weight of 100 units for belief in one pairwise competition (belief vs disbelief) and, given our momentary assumption, that it had no weight for belief in a different pairwise competition (belief vs withholding). Given the momentary assumption, then, E_P is a contrastive reason. It has a different weight value in the two pairwise competitions that determine whether it is permissible to believe P.

I will replace the momentary assumption with something better in §5. What I want you to see in this sub-section is that there is no way to make sense of Epistemic Cancelling Out without appealing to contrastive reasons. I have focused so far on reasons *for* a doxastic attitude. Since the argument will also mention reasons *against* a doxastic attitude, I should clarify the relation between reasons for and against. (The next two paragraphs rely on Tucker 2022b: 90-1.)

Pairwise Permissibility tells us that reasons function primarily in pairwise competitions. Within pairwise competitions, every reason for φ is a reason against the alternative. Consider an analogy. *Joe is taller than Jack* is equivalent to *Jack is shorter than Joe*. They are two different ways to talk about the same relation of relative height. Whether we use one or the other is determined by pragmatics, by whether we want to focus on Joe or Jack's part of the relation.

In the pairwise competition between belief and disbelief, E_P is a reason *for belief* and a reason *against disbelief*. These are just two ways to talk about the same contribution to the deontic statuses of belief and disbelief. E_P is a reason for belief in that it "pushes" belief toward being permissible and away from being *im*permissible. Recall that disbelief is required only if belief is *im*permissible/prohibited (§2). Since E_P pushes belief away from being *im*permissible, it also pushes *dis*belief away from being required. Whether we talk about E_P being a reason *for belief* or a *reason against* disbelief is determined by pragmatics, by whether we want to focus on how E_P affects the deontic status of belief or the deontic status of disbelief.[14]

We can now show that, if E_P and $E_{\sim P}$ cancel out, then they are contrastive reasons.

Step 1: For the sake of illustration, suppose that the reasons for belief and disbelief have a weight of 100 against each other. Also suppose that the weight of the default reason (or meta-reason or whatever) for withholding is not implausibly large and does not vary in an ad hoc way, so that its weight is no more than, say, 10 units (cf. §3.2).

Step 2: In light of Step 1, the reasons for belief and disbelief are *not* contrastive only if E_P is a reason for belief of 100 units in *belief vs withholding* and $E_{\sim P}$ is a reason for disbelief of 100 units *in withholding vs disbelief*.

Step 3: The reason for belief now threatens to beat any plausibly weighted reason for withholding (e.g., 100 units for belief > no more than 10 units for withholding). But more to the point: to cancel out this weight for belief in belief vs withholding, $E_{\sim P}$ must have 100 units *for withholding* in the pairwise competition between belief and withholding. A similar point explains why E_P must have 100 units *for withholding* in the pairwise competition between withholding and disbelief.

Together these steps show that E_P and $E_{\sim P}$ are contrastive reasons insofar as they bear on withholding judgment. To see this, it may help to summarize what the three steps tell us about each reason in each pairwise competition.

The Three Step Summary

Belief vs disbelief:

- E_P is a reason for belief of 100 units. [Step 1]
- $E_{\sim P}$ is a reason for disbelief of 100 units. [Step 1]
- The default reason for withholding is irrelevant or neutral. [Intuition]

[14] It may seem that Snedegar and I are at odds here, because he denies that reasons against φ are always reasons for every alternative (e.g., Snedegar 2018). That particular usage of the reason for/against distinction is not restricted to pairwise competitions. He and I are in complete agreement that, within pairwise competitions, every reason for φ is a reason against the alternative (2013: 240, nt 22). We are also in complete agreement that pairwise competitions have a privileged role in fixing deontic status (e.g., Snedegar 2017: 60-2).

Upshot: the total reason for belief *equals* the total reason for disbelief.

Belief vs withholding:

- E_P is a reason for belief (and against withholding) of 100 units. [Step 2]
- $E_{\sim P}$ is a reason for withholding of 100 units. [Step 3]
- The default reason for withholding has 10 units. [Step 1]

Upshot: The total 110 units for withholding *outweigh* the total 100 units for belief.

Withholding vs disbelief:

- E_P is a reason for withholding of 100 units. [Step 3]
- $E_{\sim P}$ is a reason for disbelief (and against withholding) of 100 units. [Step 2]
- The default reason for withholding has 10 units. [Step 1]

Upshot: The total 110 units for withholding *outweigh* the total 100 units to disbelieve.

Consider, for example, what Steps 2 and 3 say about the weight of $E_{\sim P}$ in the two pairwise competitions concerning withholding judgment. Step 2 says that it has weight *against withholding* in withholding vs disbelief. Step 3 says that it has weight *for withholding* in belief vs withholding. Together the two steps say that $E_{\sim P}$ has different weight values relative to withholding in different pairwise competitions. In other words, there is no way that equally weighty reasons for belief and disbelief can cancel each other out unless they are contrastive reasons.

You may think my position here is committed to madness. How can $E_{\sim P}$ be a reason *against withholding* in withholding vs disbelief while being a reason *for withholding* in belief vs withholding? Because the same reason can make different systematic contributions in different pairwise competitions.

Consider an analogy with practical reasons. Suppose that your three options are Save 0, Save 1, or Save 2 people. Does the reason *that you would save an additional life in the option over the alternative* have weight for or against Save 1? The answer depends on which pairwise competition we are talking about. That you would save an additional life has weight *for Save 1* in Save 1 vs Save 0. It has weight *against Save* 1 in Save1 vs Save 2.

While you may find contrastive reasons counterintuitive, they are required to explain the intuitive thought that equally weighty reasons for belief and disbelief cancel each other out. That's one way your intuitions may support the existence of contrastive reasons. In §5, I will reveal a second way your intuitions may support their existence. (For defenses of contrastive reasons in ethics, see Snedegar 2017: 61-52; Muñoz 2021; and Tucker 2022b: §6, 2023: §§4-6)

It is worth mentioning that the Three Step Summary provides a second illustration of how Pairwise Permissibility, Withholding Conservatism, and Epistemic Cancelling Out work together to explain the Epistemic Ties Datum. (The first illustration relied on the momentary assumption at the end of §4.1, though I did not call out each thesis by name.) The Summary assigns hypothetical weight values that illustrate the conjunction of Withholding Conservatism and Epistemic Cancelling Out. The Summary also calculates

the "upshots" of each pairwise competition, which tell us how the total reason for each option compares. In the two pairwise competitions with withholding (belief vs withholding, withholding vs disbelief), the total reason for withholding judgment *outweighs* the total reason for belief and disbelief. Given Pairwise Permissibility, it follows that withholding judgment is required.

5. The Halfway House Principle

My explanation of the Epistemic Ties Datum is now complete. This section can be skipped unless you want more clarification and defense of the idea that epistemic reasons for (dis)belief are contrastive. In this section, I explain how epistemic reasons for (dis)belief bear on the pairwise competitions with withholding, which will point us to a second argument that such reasons are contrastive.

In §4.1, we made a momentary assumption concerning how reasons for belief and disbelief bear on the two pairwise competitions with withholding, belief vs withholding and withholding vs disbelief. This section explains how they actually bear on those two competitions. Consider three general possibilities:

> **No Weight (Against Withholding):** Reasons for belief and disbelief have *no weight against withholding*.
>
> **Same Weight (Against Withholding):** Reasons for belief and disbelief have *the same weight against withholding* that they have against each other.
>
> **Some but Less Weight (Against Withholding):** Reasons for belief and disbelief have *weight against withholding but less weight* than they have against each other.

All three of these views are compatible with my cancelling out strategy, but the third possibility (Some but Less Weight) fits best with our normative intuitions.

The first general strategy, No Weight, is the momentary assumption. Unfortunately, it conflicts with our intuition that undefeated evidence can require dis/belief. Suppose that our only relevant evidence is E_P, which we'll assume is very weighty evidence that P. (If it helps to have a more concrete example, you can just assume that E_P is some expert testimony that P is true.) In such circumstances, we are required to believe that P. Pairwise Permissibility tells us that E_P requires believing P only if E_P outweighs the reasons for withholding (in belief vs withholding). To *outweigh* the reason for withholding (even if there is no reason at all to withhold), E_P must have some positive weight against withholding P. These reflections show that No Weight is false. For some evidence to require belief, it is not enough that it have weight for belief against disbelief. It must also have weight for belief *against withholding.*

Snedegar agrees that No Weight is inadequate (118-9). He seems to espouse Same Weight when he endorses this equivalence: "reasons to believe that *p* rather than believe that ¬*p* = reasons to believe that *p* rather than withhold" (2017: 121). The Three Step Summary also illustrates Same Weight. Yet we should reject Same Weight too, as it conflicts with how epistemic reasons for belief and disbelief rank doxastic options.

Here's how our weighty evidence, E_P, ranks the doxastic options with respect to P: belief > withholding > disbelief.[15] This ranking implies that E_P favors belief over

[15] This ranking is a second difference in how epistemic and practical rationality weigh*t* reasons, beyond the difference in defaults. Epistemic reasons for dis/belief *always* rank the three doxastic options with a best, middle, and worst. (In contrast, epistemic reasons *for withholding* never have a middle: they rank

disbelief *more than* it favors belief over withholding judgment. We capture this differential favoring by holding that, while E_P has weight against withholding, it has *less* weight against withholding than it does against disbelief.[16]

Here we find a second set of intuitions in favor of the idea that epistemic reasons for belief and disbelief are contrastive, i.e., that their weight varies as you vary the alternative. Epistemic reasons for belief that P, such as E_P, rank doxastic options as if they are on a spectrum: belief is the best, withholding judgment is in the middle, and disbelief is the worst. We capture this ranking by holding that E_P's weight can vary as we vary the alternative: it has weight against withholding, but less weight than it has against disbelief.

Now that we've considered how E_P bears on belief vs withholding, consider how it bears on the pairwise competition between withholding and *dis*belief. It is not neutral. Remember the second part of E_P's ranking: withholding judgment > disbelief. Presumably, then, E_P has weight *for* withholding in withholding's competition with disbelief (cf. Snedegar 121). When we are not used to thinking in terms of pairwise competitions, it can be surprising to hear that E_P is a reason *against withholding* in belief vs withholding and a reason *for withholding* in withholding vs disbelief. But we saw, in §4.2, that there is nothing fishy about this sort of shift, and it is required to make sense of the intuitive idea that equally weighty reasons for belief and disbelief cancel out.

We inferred that E_P would have weight for belief *against* withholding (in belief vs withholding) but less weight than it has against disbelief (in belief vs disbelief). But *how much* less weighty is E_P against withholding than against disbelief?

Here is a suggested way to think about these relative weight values. Withholding is like the "halfway house" between belief and disbelief. Psychologically, it is an attitude of neutrality that stands "in the middle of" belief and disbelief that P. Evidentially, it is also in the middle. On a spectrum from *maximally weighty total evidence that P* to *maximally weighty total evidence that ~P*, the range of total evidence values that supports withholding judgment is in the middle of the total ranges that support belief and disbelief, respectively. To capture the way that withholding judgment is psychologically and evidentially "in the middle of" belief and disbelief, we can endorse:

> **Halfway House Principle:** If a reason for belief that P against disbelief that P has a weight of *n* units (in belief vs disbelief), then:
>
> - it has a weight of ½*n* units against withholding judgment (in belief vs withholding), and
> - it has a weight of ½*n* units *for* withholding (in withholding vs disbelief).
>
> (The same relationships apply to reasons for disbelief after you swap each instance of 'belief' and 'disbelief' in this principle.)

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withholding as the best and then are neutral between belief and disbelief.) Practical reasons only sometimes rank options so that there is a best, middle, and worst. For example, consider the reason *that each life you save is an intrinsic good*. This reason will rank a best, middle, and worst when you save 10 lives in the first option, 5 in the second option, and 0 in the third and final option. But it ranks all three options as tied if you save all 10 lives no matter which option you choose. This second difference helps explain why equally weighty epistemic reasons for belief and disbelief always cancel out whereas equally weighty practical reasons only sometimes cancel out.

[16] Keshav Singh, Matthew Vermaire, and Selim Berker independently identified a problem with my earlier objection to Same Weight.

For illustration, assume that E_P has a weight of 100 for belief against disbelief. Halfway House then implies that it has a weight of 50 *for belief over withholding* and a weight of 50 *for withholding over disbelief*.

If you can't stomach contrastive reasons, then you won't be able to stomach the Halfway House Principle either, for it proudly declares that reasons to dis/believe are always contrastive. But we should learn to stomach contrastive reasons, because they are needed to capture the intuitive idea that equally weighty reasons for belief and disbelief cancel out. Furthermore, a second consideration seems to speak directly in favor of the Halfway House Principle. This principle captures the way that epistemic reasons for belief rank withholding judgment as in the middle of belief and disbelief: belief > withholding judgment > disbelief.

While I think the Halfway House Principle does the best job of explaining our normative intuitions, there is nothing about cancelling out or my explanation of the Epistemic Ties Datum that requires this principle. Suppose that the evidence that P (E_P) and the evidence that ~P ($E_{\sim P}$) are our reasons for believing and disbelieving P, respectively. To cancel out, these competing reasons must counterbalance each other in all three pairwise competitions: belief vs disbelief, belief vs withholding, and withholding vs disbelief. Suppose they are tied at 100 units in belief vs disbelief. The No Weight, Halfway House, and Same Weight strategies can agree that E_P and $E_{\sim P}$ tie in the other two pairwise competitions; they just disagree about how weighty the tied reasons are. The No Weight Strategy would say they are tied at 0 (§4.1), the Halfway House Principle would say they are tied at 50 (§5), and Same Weight would say they are tied at 100 (as illustrated by the Three Step Summary).

Scrupulous readers may have noticed that I have said nothing so far that vindicates my assumption of Epistemic Uniqueness (the claim that there is always one unique permissible doxastic attitude), which allowed me to ignore some technical terminology that most epistemologists are unfamiliar with (§2). Suppose that there are no reasons for disbelief, the default reason for withholding is 10, and the reason for withholding is 10. Belief and withholding would both win their pairwise competitions against disbelief, but they would tie each other. Pairwise Permissibility would tell us that both belief and withholding are permissible, precisely because it endorses permissive balancing (ties generate permissions). Epistemic Uniqueness would be false.

I don't really care about Epistemic Uniqueness, but it is easy to preserve it. Just assign all *non*-default reasons for belief, disbelief, and withholding so that their weight values always have whole numbers. Then assign the default reason to withhold so that it has an arbitrary decimal. The default reason wouldn't be 10, but instead, say, 10.1. This will ensure that the total reason for (dis)belief never ties the total reason for withholding, and that vindicates Epistemic Uniqueness when combined with all of the above. Assigning numbers to reasons is useful because it allows us to keep track of which reason would win in a pairwise competition. But it is the ordinal rankings that matter. It doesn't matter which numbers we use provided that all the ordinal rankings (across all possible cases) are preserved.[17]

Part of what I like about the framework I've developed in this paper is its flexibility. Pairwise Permissibility tells us how to weigh reasons and is neutral as to what the weights of epistemic reasons are. In order to explain the Epistemic Ties Datum, Withholding

[17] See my see my 2023b: §6 for further clarification on the methodology for assigning a reason's weight.

Conservatism and Epistemic Cancelling Out impose some constraints on how epistemic reasons (including default reasons) are weighted. But the framework is neutral about many other debates, such as whether Epistemic Uniqueness is true and whether pragmatic considerations are epistemically relevant.

5. Putting it All Together

The primary goal of this paper was to develop and defend an explanation of the Epistemic Ties Datum, of why equally weighty reasons for belief and disbelief entail that withholding judgment is required. The Datum is puzzling, especially if we think that epistemic and practical rationality weigh reasons in the same way. Why is it that ties between practical reasons generate *permissions* whereas ties between reasons for belief and disbelief generate a *requirement* (to withhold)?

My answer had three parts. The first is an account of how epistemic reasons are *weighed* to determine deontic status:

> **Pairwise Permissibility:** it is permissible to φ just when, in each pairwise competition with each alternative A, the total reason for φ is no less weighty than the total reason for A. Otherwise, φ is prohibited.

Since we have exactly three doxastic options (belief, disbelief, withholding), Pairwise Permissibility entails that their deontic status is a function of what happens in three pairwise competitions: belief vs disbelief, belief vs withholding, and withholding vs disbelief.

The second part of my explanation is:

> **Withholding Conservatism:** for any proposition P within the domain of epistemic evaluation, withholding judgment about P is epistemically required by default.

This part tells us the deontic status of doxastic options when the specific features of the situation (e.g., the evidence) do not favor one option over the others. In such cases, withholding judgment is required.

Withholding Conservatism also identifies an important difference between epistemic and practical rationality. Practical rationality doesn't single out any option. By default, all options are permissible, and it takes specific features of the case to make an option prohibited. Epistemic rationality, by contrast, singles out withholding judgment as default required. Belief and disbelief are prohibited unless specific features of the case (e.g., the balance of the evidence) overcome the default deficit or bias against them. Although epistemic and practical rationality *weigh* reasons the same way, they *weight* the default biases differently.

The third part of my explanation is the intuitive idea that equally weighty reasons for belief and disbelief cancel out.

> **Epistemic Cancelling Out:** equally weighty reasons for belief and disbelief counterbalance in each of the three relevant pairwise competitions (belief vs disbelief, belief vs withholding, and withholding vs disbelief).

Since equally weighty reasons to believe and disbelieve counterbalance in every relevant pairwise competition, they make no difference to the deontic status of belief, disbelief, and withholding judgment.

Together the three claims explain the Epistemic Ties Datum. *Pairwise Permissibility* holds that φ is permissible only when the reasons for φ are no less weighty than the

reasons for *each* alternative. This claim tells us two things when we assume that the reasons for belief and disbelief are equally weighty. First, it says that belief and disbelief *would be* permissible *were* they only doxastic options. But they're not. There is another alternative, withholding judgment. Second, Pairwise Permissibility tells us that withholding judgment is required (and belief and disbelief are prohibited) *if* the reasons for withholding judgment outweigh both the reasons for belief and the reasons for disbelief. Epistemic Cancelling Out and Withholding Conservatism work together to ensure that this is indeed the case.

Epistemic Cancelling Out tells us that the reasons for belief and disbelief counterbalance in every pairwise competition (belief vs disbelief, belief vs withholding, withholding vs disbelief) and thus make no difference to belief's deontic status, no matter how weighty those counterbalanced reasons are. Each doxastic attitude will have whatever deontic status they have by default. *Withholding Conservatism* tells us that withholding judgment is required by default (and so belief and disbelief are prohibited by default). In effect, Withholding Conservatism identifies a default reason for withholding that is the only reason that isn't cancelled out by some other consideration. Consequently, the (total) reasons for belief and disbelief are *outweighed by* the (total) reasons for withholding. The Datum seemed so hard to explain, because it is easy to miss the pairwise structure of weighing reasons and the role that default biases play in explaining deontic status.

My explanation of the datum has two lessons for those interested in normativity, more generally. The first is that there is hope for a unified account of weighing reasons. Pairwise Permissibility has been used to solve otherwise puzzling phenomena in ethics (see, e.g., Snedegar 2017: 61-52; Muñoz 2021; Tucker 2022b: §6, 2023a: §§4-6). This paper shows that it can be used to solve otherwise puzzling phenomena in epistemology too, namely the Epistemic Ties Datum. Its usefulness in both domains suggests that it is the single way to weigh reasons for ethics and epistemology.

Second, we cannot neglect the role that defaults play in normative explanations. We tend to focus on non-default reasons, those emerging out of the case in question. In epistemology, non-default reasons include which bodies of evidence are available to the subject at that time; in ethics, they include which costs and benefits apply to the various options. This paper reminds us that deontic status is not just a function of such considerations. It is also a function of default statuses and their weights. Defaults can often be ignored in ethics, because practical rationality doesn't, by default, favor any option over any other. Yet they can't be ignored in epistemology. As the Epistemic Ties Datum illustrates, epistemic rationality favors *by default* a specific option (withholding) over the other two (belief and disbelief).[18]

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