On A Puzzle About Withholding

ABSTRACT: I discuss Turri's puzzle about withholding. I argue that attention to the way in which evidence can justify withholding dissolves the puzzle.

In 'A Puzzle About Withholding',[1] John Turri presents an argument for the conclusion that the following three popular views in epistemology are jointly inconsistent:

> Triad: For every proposition p that a subject S considers, S can adopt exactly three doxastic attitudes towards p: believe it, disbelieve it, or withhold.

> Optimism: Given any proposition p and any body of evidence e, e will justify at least one doxastic attitude towards p.

> Evidentialism: The epistemic propriety of a subject's doxastic attitude is entirely a function of the subject's evidence.

Turri's argument starts by presenting us the following case (my formulation):

> Withholding mathematicians: One hundred eminent mathematicians tell you that you shouldn't withhold on a mathematical proposition p. You have no other source of evidence regarding p.

Turri then argues, first, that you should neither believe nor disbelieve p, and, second, that you shouldn't withhold on p. These two conclusions, taken together, entail that not all of the three aforementioned views can be right. I agree with Turri about his first conclusion: you should neither believe nor disbelieve that p. But I disagree about his second conclusion: you really should withhold on p, despite the fact that the mathematicians tell you not to.

Turri's argument that you shouldn't withhold is brief, and is contained in the following passage (the first two sentences of which contain the argument that you should neither believe nor disbelieve):

> None of your evidence supports believing, so you shouldn't believe. And none supports disbelieving, so you shouldn't disbelieve. The remaining alternative is to withhold. But the mathematicians all say that withholding is *not* the thing to do! If all the mathematicians had said that believing is not the thing to do, then it would have been true that you shouldn't believe. And had all the Mathematicians said that disbelieving is not the thing to do, then it would have been true that you shouldn't disbelieve. It stands to reason, then, that if all the Mathematicians say that withholding is not the thing to do, then you shouldn't withhold.

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[1] John Turri, "A Puzzle About Withholding", forthcoming in *The Philosophical Quarterly*.

I agree with Turri about the first two conditionals: if all the mathematicians agree either that you should believe or disbelieve, then believing or disbelieving is indeed the thing to do. But the conclusion doesn't follow: even if all the mathematicians agree that you shouldn't withhold, you should withhold. To see why, we must take a closer look at the epistemic roles that evidence plays.

Evidence plays two related epistemic roles: it supports propositions and it justifies doxastic attitudes. And there is a pretty direct connection between which propositions a body of evidence supports and which attitudes it justifies. If the evidence supports p, then it justifies believing that p; and if the evidence supports not-p, then it justifies disbelieving that p. What about withholding? Here the relationship is not so tight. There is no proposition that the evidence *must* support in order to justify withholding.[2] Rather, the evidence justifies withholding on p just in case it *fails* to support either p or not-p. True: had all the mathematicians said that withholding is the thing to do, your evidence would have justified withholding—but not because your evidence would have then told in favor of any particular proposition, but rather because it would have failed to tell in favor of either p or not-p.

Armed with this conception of how evidence justifies attitudes, it is easy to see that Turri's argument is invalid. When all the mathematicians tell you that you shouldn't withhold (and that is all the evidence you have), then your evidence fails to support either p or not-p, and so justifies withholding. Now, in addition to withholding on p, one is of course justified in adopting other attitudes: two crucial ones are believing that the mathematicians don't withhold on p and believing that we don't know whether the mathematicians believe or disbelieve p. The fact that we are justified in believing these two propositions should take all the sting out of the puzzle that we should withhold even when the mathematicians tell us not to.

In short, my diagnosis of where Turri's argument goes wrong is that it confuses *what the mathematicians tell us* with *what our evidence justifies*. It is true that, in general, if trusted experts tell us that we should adopt attitude D towards proposition p, then the justified attitude is indeed D. Moreover, it is also in general true that, if trusted experts tell us that we *shouldn't* adopt attitude D towards p, then D is *not* the justified in attitude. In general, but not in the case where they advice us not to withhold (and this is all the evidence we have). In that case, withholding is indeed the justified attitude. Why the difference between belief and disbelief, on the one hand, and withholding on the other? Because of a difference in how evidence justifies attitudes. Evidence justifies

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[2]What about epistemic propositions, such as the proposition that we must withhold? Mustn't the evidence support *this* (or a similar) proposition when it justifies withholding? That view isn't mandatory. Evidence intuitively purely about non-epistemic propositions (such as that the killer was left-handed, say) does not, by itself, support any epistemic proposition such as that we should believe that the butler did it. Of course, it may well be that when reflective and epistemically sophisticated subjects receive that evidence they thereby also receive additional evidence which does support the epistemic proposition—but this, of course, doesn't go against the claim in the text.

believing or disbelieving by telling for or against the corresponding proposition, but justifies withholding by *failing* to tell (on balance) either for or against the corresponding proposition. Turri is to be commended for highlighting this interesting feature of withholding, but recognizing that it is a feature doesn't force us to abandon any popular view in epistemology.