**Deferring to Doubt**

**1. Doubt**

Stove: You’re walking to work one morning, listening to a podcast. You hear a fictional story about a house that burned down because someone left the stove on. You start worrying that you forgot to turn off your stove. You pause for a moment and think: “I remember cleaning the stove right before I left. If the stove were on, I would have noticed and turned it off. So the stove must be off.” You maintain your belief and move on with your day.

This is an instance in which you engage in what I’ll be calling “doubt.” When we doubt, we’re interested is whether we can recover the belief from what I’ll call *a perspective of doubt*.

A perspective = a set of (truth or accuracy aimed) commitments that permit or forbid certain cognitive transitions.

A perspective of doubt = a perspective that is, in some sense, less committal than your usual one.

A belief can be recovered from a perspective of doubt if and only if the perspective of doubt permits cognitive transitions that result in belief.

**2. Higher Order Evidence**

Sleepy (adapted slightly from Horowitz (2014)): You are a police detective investigating a jewel theft. There are two suspects under consideration and before examining any evidence, you assign 0.5 credence to each one being the thief. Late one night, after hours of cracking codes and scrutinizing photographs, you conclude that the thief was Lucy. In fact, it is Lucy, and you evaluated the evidence properly. You call your partner, Alex. “I’ve gone through all the evidence,” you say, “and I’ve found the thief!” But Alex is unimpressed. She replies: “I can tell you’ve been up all night working on this. Your late-night reasoning has been awful in the past. You’re always very confident that you’ve found the culprit, but under these circumstances, you do no better than chance. So I’m not convinced.” You rationally trust Alex and believe that you’ve done no better than chance on such occasions.

Defeatist Verdict: Your credence should go back down to 0.5.

But: It is *extremely* difficult to motivate this verdict theoretically.

* The revision to 0.5 requires you to violate an extremely plausible constraint on belief-revision – Bayesian conditionalization.[[1]](#footnote-1)

To get a bit of a feel for it – consider what’s wrong with:

*Lucky me:* “When I’m tired, my reasoning will sometimes lead me to the wrong conclusion. But not always. So the question is: how likely is it that I got the right answer *on this particular occasion*? Well, I got things right on this occasion if and only if Lucy is the thief. So is she? Let’s look at the evidence. The fingerprint evidence says…and the letter she wrote says…and if I calculate the distance between the other suspect’s house and the crime scene… so it is almost certainly her! This means I probably got things right on this occasion despite being sleepy. Lucky me!”[[2]](#footnote-2)

What Has Been Said About This: To block the *Lucky me* response we need to appeal to *Independence* principles[[3]](#footnote-3) – something like: when evaluating the likelihood that some conclusion you reached is correct, you need to do so in a way that is *independent of* the reasoning in question. You need to “bracket” some of your evidence or reasoning.

But This is Strange: Why would we bracket evidence, or set aside perfectly good reasoning?

A Proposal: We should think of reduction of confidence in such cases as an instance of abandoning a belief upon realizing that it can’t be recovered from the relevant perspective of doubt. I call this “deferring to doubt.”

**3. The Problem**

Setting aside induction, I can’t recover my belief that the sun will rise tomorrow. But I believe it anyway. So we don’t *always* defer to the perspective of doubt. Why some times but not others?

Christensen/Vavova: The GIRP-not-NIRP View

Accept: *Good Independent Reason Principle (GIRP):* “To the extent that *you have good [undefeated] independent reason to think that you are mistaken* with respect to P, you must revise your confidence in P accordingly” (145)

Reject: *No Independent Reason Principle (NIRP)*: “To the extent that *you [lack] good [undefeated] independent reason to think that you are [correct]* with respect to P, you must revise your confidence in P accordingly” (148).

My Claim: From the perspective of a deliberator (aiming at truth), the idea that you should defer to doubt if you *have* good reasons for thinking you made a mistake, but should not deferif you merely *lack* good reasons for thinking you were correct, will look unmotivated.

The Argument: Suppose I recognize that if I bracket my reasoning about E, the resulting perspective (“the skinny perspective”) recommends abandoning belief in P, but the perspective that makes use of E (“the fat perspective”) has the resources to support a belief in P. I’m deliberating about whether to defer to the perspective of doubt.

Case 1: The perspective I occupy *while deliberating about whether to defer to doubt* is the fat perspective: it permits making use of my reasoning about E. If my aim is accuracy I’ll want to make use of all the epistemic resources available to me (including E), and so my perspective will recommend belief.

* Note: This holds even if the skinny perspective has *good (undefeated) reasons* for thinking I made a mistake. Why? Because my perspective has more commitments than the skinny perspective, commitments that *defeat* the skinnier perspective’s reasons for thinking I’m in error. (Moving truck analogy).

Case 2: The perspective I occupy while deliberating about whether to defer to doubt is the skinny perspective: it. *forbids* making use of my reasoning about E. This perspective *just is* the perspective of doubt, which we’ve stipulated lacks the resources to support belief and recommends agnosticism.

* This holds even if the perspective of doubt *lacks good reason* for thinking it made a mistake.

**4. Why Do We, in fact, Defer to Doubt When We Do?**

***5.1. Epistemic Absurdity***

* Nagel was interested in was the fact that if we take a big step back from our *practical* perspective, we find ourselves with no way of returning: our pursuits look trivial and meaningless. He writes: “We see ourselves from outside, and all the contingency and specificity of our aims and pursuits become clear. Yet when we take this view and recognize what we do as arbitrary, it does not disengage us from life, and there lies our absurdity.”
* What is emphasized less in Nagel is that if we take *small* step backs what we do doesn’t look arbitrary at all.
* But in the presence of a higher order defeater, even taking a *small* step back, forces me to confront the absurdity (in the sense above) of maintaining belief. While most of us have reconciled ourselves to some degree of epistemic absurdity – we know that if we take a huge step back, our beliefs can’t be recovered – the fact that just a small step back prevents recovery of the belief is something that tends to make us uncomfortable.

***5.2. Empirical Speculations***

* Perhaps we’ve been “programmed” to be sensitive to the possibility of certain sorts of errors (Did I reason about this particular matter correctly?) but not the possibility of other sorts of errors (Is there an external world? Will the future be like the past?).
* The sorts of errors we find ourselves sensitive to might be quite a hodgepodge, and there might not be much to say about what the members of the hodgepodge have in common that goes beyond the fact that concerns about some errors are or were, for completely contingent reasons, more useful than others.
* But don’t take any comfort in this hypothesis. Don’t think that you can motivate your tendency to get worried about your reasoning when you’re sleepy, but not be a skeptic, by appealing to such considerations, as those are only plausible when you’re not doubting the existence of the external world, memory, induction.

**6. Conclusion**

Patrick Shanley, in his play *Doubt* describes doubt as “a wordless Being” that “moves just as the instant moves; it presses upward without explanation, fluid and wordless…(viii)”.

My view is that can always choose to *entertain* doubt – we can notice what would follow if we did or didn’t rely on various things that we generally take for granted. But whether to actually *take up* that perspective – to form or abandon the beliefs it recommends – is not something we decide deliberatively: it’s something that just arises, fluid and wordless.

**Appendix 1: What is Conditionalization?**

Conditionalization: the idea that there should be a kind of coherence between your (earlier) time-1 *conditional* probabilities and your later time-2 *unconditional* probabilities.

For example: Suppose in the morning (time-1) you don’t know whether it will rain in the afternoon, or whether there will be a picnic this evening.. You assign 0.5 (50%) probability to each proposition.

(Pr1(Rain) = 0.5 and Pr1(Picnic) = 0.5).

You also think: supposing it rains, it’s only 10% likely that there will be a picnic this evening.

(Pr1(Picnic|Rain) = 0.1)

And you think: supposing it’s sunny, it’s 90% likely that there will be a picnic this evening.

(Pr1(Picnic|Sunny) = 0.9)

Conditionalization says that *if* in the afternoon (time-2) you learn that it’s raining, your credence that there will be a picnic should drop from 0.5 to 0.1.

(If Pr2(Rain) = 1, then Pr2(Picnic) = 0.1)

If, however, you learn in the afternoon (time-2) that it’s sunny, your credence that there will be a picnic should increase from 0.5 to 0.9.

(If Pr2(Sunny) = 1, then Pr2(Picnic) = 0.9).

**Appendix 2: *Very* roughly – The Conditionalization Problem for Defeatism**.

Suppose you’re in a version the picnic situation described in the example above. The wrinkle is, in the afternoon, in addition to learning that it’s sunny, you learn that you’re suffering from some impairment which makes it impossible for you to reason well about picnics.

Now consider your perspective in the morning (time-1) when you’re not impaired. It’s plausible that:

Pr1(Picnic|Sunny+Impairment) = Pr1(Picnic|Sunny) = 0.9.

This is because *prior* to impairment, you don’t take your having an impairment in the afternoon to be evidence one way or another for proposition that there will be an evening picnic.

This means that if you learn in the afternoon that it’s sunny and that you’re impaired, and you conditionalize, you should have the very same opinion you would have if all you learned was “it’s sunny”: 0.9.

**Appendix 3: Objections and Responses**

*Objection 1*: When we’re deliberating about whether to defer to doubt, we’re deliberating from neither of the two perspectives you described: We’re deliberating from a *third* perspective: one that hasn’t yet made up its mind about whether or not to permit the reasoning about E.

Response: Since a perspective is just a set of commitments every perspective (as a matter of logic) either contains the relevant commitments or it does not.

*Objection 2*: I suggest we reframe the role of GIRP-not-NIRP. The idea is not to tell us what to do when we *can’t* recover a belief from a perspective of doubt (i.e. defer to doubt or not). Rather, Christensen and Vavova are trying to help us *recover* belief from certain perspectives of doubt.

Response: GIRP-not-NIRP won’t help us recover a belief from skeptical perspectives of doubt. To see why, first observe that the following *would* help:

Belief-without-Reasons: When you have no reasons to believe either P or ~P, it’s permissible to believe P.

This would allow us to recover a belief from a skeptical perspective, but it’s extremely implausible. GIRP-not-NIRP doesn’t posit this principle. It says instead that (at least in some cases), even if there are no *independent* reasons (=reasons available in the perspective of doubt) to believe either P or ~P, it’s permissible to believe P.

The problem is: *Within* the skeptical perspective there is *no* reason at all, not merely no *independent* reasonto believe p.

1. See Schoenfield (2018, ms.), Levinstein (ms.) and Bradley (ms.). For related points see also Christensen (2010), White (2010) (specifically his comparison of "Lucky Russel" and "Lucky Moore") and Weisberg (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This can be dramatized by imagining a version of the case in which the evidence E entails P, since no matter what else you add to E, it will still entail P. But nothing about what follows requires entailment. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Elga (2007), White (2009, 2010), Christensen (2010, 2011), Lasonen Aarnio (2014), Vavova (2014, 2018), Horowitz and Sliwa (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)