

IN DEFENSE OF EPISTEMIC ABSTEMIOUSNESS

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ABSTRACT: The *principle of suspension* says that when you disagree with an epistemic peer about p, you should suspend judgment about p. In “Epistemic Abstainers, Epistemic Martyrs, and Epistemic Converts,” Scott F. Aikin, Michael Harbour, Jonathan Neufeld, and Robert B. Talisse argue against the principle of suspension, claiming that it “is deeply at odds with how we view ourselves as cognitive agents.” I argue that their arguments do not succeed.

KEYWORDS: epistemology, disagreement, higher-order evidence

In “Epistemic Abstainers, Epistemic Martyrs, and Epistemic Converts,” Scott F. Aikin, Michael Harbour, Jonathan Neufeld, and Robert B. Talisse (hereafter AHNT) argue that the *principle of suspension* “is deeply at odds with how we view ourselves as cognitive agents.”¹ Here is the principle:

(PS) If S disagrees with an epistemic peer about p, then S should suspend judgment about p.

They attribute PS to Richard Feldman.² While Feldman never explicitly states such a principle, it is clear that PS *is* the sort of principle defended in those works.³ And, as AHNT nicely show, something like PS *is* regularly invoked in the philosophical literature on disagreement.

AHNT argue against PS by trying to show that by following PS you will (a) potentially mislead others into holding their beliefs more strongly than they

¹ Scott F. Aikin, Michael Harbour, Jonathan Neufeld, and Robert B. Talisse, “Epistemic Abstainers, Epistemic Martyrs, and Epistemic Converts,” *Logos & Episteme* 2 (2010): 219.

² Richard Feldman, “Epistemological Puzzles About Disagreement,” in *Epistemology Futures*, ed. Stephen Hetherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 216-36; Richard Feldman, “Evidentialism, Higher-Order Evidence, and Disagreement,” *Episteme* 6, 3 (2009): 294-312.

³ In “Evidentialism, Higher-Order Evidence, and Disagreement,” Feldman argues that there are “no special general principles about justified responses to disagreements,” but that “there are facts about the evidential impact of disagreements” (295). Feldman thinks that something like PS follows from evidentialism and other plausible epistemic principles.

should, and (b) be setting yourself up for being misled by others who do not follow PS.

I argue that these arguments do not succeed. In reply to (a), I argue first that this is not a reason to think that PS is a bad epistemic rule, and second that PS doesn't even have this consequence. In response to (b), I argue that PS has no such consequence, since in the imagined cases you will have reason to believe that the person you disagree with is not a peer.

I. Preliminary notes

In the literature on peer disagreement, *peerhood* is characterized differently by different authors. Some characterize two people as peers if, roughly, they have the same intellectual aptitude.⁴ PS would clearly be false on this understanding of peerhood. It would be false because peers can have different evidence, and so the obviously correct thing to do in a case where you believe *p* and your peer believes not-*p*, but you have more and better evidence than your peer, is to continue to believe *p*. On this account of peerhood, for a PS-like principle to be plausible it would have to be changed to apply to epistemic peers with the same, or equally good, evidence.

In light of this consideration, I suggest that for the purpose of discussing AHNT's article, we regard two people as being peers regarding some proposition *p* if they are just as likely to be right about *p*.⁵ This way of understanding peerhood is nice, because it generates the puzzles about disagreement without getting into issues of whether it ever makes sense to say that two people have the same relevant evidence, or have the same intellectual aptitude. On this understanding of peerhood, two people having different intellectual aptitude, or having different evidence, does not *entail* that they are not peers, although it might provide evidence that they are not peers. With peerhood so understood, PS seems like a plausible principle.

PS also does not exactly characterize the principle invoked by Feldman. The reason is that it is clear that Feldman is discussing the problem of what one should believe when one is *aware* that one disagrees with someone one regards as a peer. I do think that AHNT understand PS in this way – as applying to cases of

⁴ E.g. Feldman, "Evidentialism," 294.

⁵ This is Adam Elga's preferred way of understanding peerhood; Adam Elga, "Reflection and Disagreement," *Noûs* 41 (2007): 478-502. See 487 and especially fn21.

acknowledged peerhood.⁶ In light of this consideration, I suggest that the following is an unobjectionable modification to PS:

(PS+) If S disagrees with an epistemic peer about p, S is aware of the disagreement, and S is justified in thinking her peer is a peer, then S should suspend judgment about p.

II. First argument: Misleading Alf

Both of AHNT's arguments are based on the following case:

Betty and Alf are epistemic peers, and they disagree about p – Betty believes p, and Alf believes not-p. They have discussed each other's reasons thoroughly, so that it is clear that they both have approximately the same relevant evidence. And they judge one another to be just as good at evaluating the relevant evidence. Thus they are peers and consider one another to be peers, and so according to PS each should suspend judgment. However, in the given case only Betty suspends judgment. Alf continues to believe not-p, although according to PS this is irrational.⁷

AHNT claim that if Alf keeps his belief that not-p, while Betty suspends judgment regarding p, then Alf may take that as evidence that Betty's evidence is not as good as his. That Alf could gain evidence in this way is supposed to be a mark against PS. I think there are two ways this case might be thought to tell against PS. Both seem to be suggested by AHNT.

The first possibility is that the case is supposed to tell against PS because by following PS, Betty provides Alf with misleading evidence for not-p. The primary problem with *this* claim is that whether Alf is better or worse off epistemically as the result of Betty following PS has no bearing whatsoever on whether PS is a true epistemic principle. That someone may be misled if you follow some suggested norm of rationality does not necessarily show that the norm is a bad one – for such norms are standardly understood as having to do with the *individual's* beliefs, not the beliefs of others. Of course, we can talk about norms that lead to social epistemic goods; but these are not the kinds of norms in question in the literature on disagreement. Norms like PS are not evaluated according to how they contribute to the epistemic good of some other person or sets of people.

⁶ For example, the fact that they set up their case so that the two characters, Betty and Alf, have shared their evidence with one another indicates that they think it is important that Alf and Betty consider each other as peers.

⁷ My paraphrase.

The second possibility is that the case is supposed to tell against PS because *Alf's* behavior is somehow endorsed by PS. In discussing this case, AHNT claim that “if Betty must take *Alf's immovability* about *p* as evidence about the insufficiency of her own evidence, then *Alf* may likewise take *Betty's movability* as evidence in favor of the *strength* of his evidence.”⁸ *Alf* is led to take *Betty's* movability as evidence that he is right by the following line of reasoning, which AHNT endorse:

If a peer's disagreement is enough to defeat one's reasons, then my peer's movement from full-bore disagreement to suspension of judgment should also be an indicator of the (insufficient) quality my peer's reasons.⁹

In other words, PS entails the following *suspension as evidence* principle:

SAE If *S* is a peer regarding *p*, then *S's* suspension of judgment regarding *p* is evidence that *S's* reasons for *p* are insufficient.

I'm not sure if PS entails SAE but I am willing to grant that it does for the sake of argument. Given SAE, *Alf* can take *Betty's* suspension of judgment regarding *p* as evidence that her evidence is insufficient for her to reasonably believe *p*. This does not, however, provide any indication that *Alf's* reasons *are* sufficient; it does not provide *Alf* with new evidence for not-*p*. And in the given case, if *Alf* knows that *Betty* suspended because of her disagreement with him, it seems obvious that *Alf* should not take *Betty's* suspension as an indication that his own reasons *are* sufficient. For him to take her suspension as evidence that he is better positioned evidentially would be for him to double-count his own reasoning and evidence. And even if *Alf* does *not* know that *Betty's* suspension was as a result of applying PS, SAE does not say that *Betty's* suspending would give *Alf* an additional reason for thinking that his evidence *is* sufficient.

True, if *Betty* suspends judgment regarding *p*, then PS no longer applies to the case, and so PS will no longer say that *Alf* should suspend. But it does not follow from the fact that PS does not apply that the correct response for *Alf* is to become more confident that not-*p*. In fact, given the assumption that *Alf* and *Mary* have shared most of their relevant evidence, their evidence will be about the same, and

⁸ Aikin et al., “Epistemic Abstainers,” 216. Strictly speaking, it is not *Alf's immovability* that *Betty* takes as evidence, but merely the fact that *Alf* believes not-*p*. At the point in the case where PS applies – the point where *Betty* believes *p* and *Alf* believes not-*p* – nobody's beliefs have moved.

⁹ Aikin et al., “Epistemic Abstainers,” 216.

so if Alf really takes Betty to be a peer, he should take her suspension of belief as evidence that *he* should suspend as well.¹⁰

III. Second argument: Mary's descent

The next objection has to do with the effect that PS has on someone who follows it – i.e. Mary. For suppose that Mary has suspended belief regarding *p* based on the facts that she believed *p*, Alf believed not-*p*, and her and Alf's epistemic peerage. And suppose that Alf continues to believe not-*p*. Now we have another disagreement – a disagreement where Betty withholds belief regarding *p*, and Alf believes not-*p*. AHNT point out that PS does not now apply here, because PS only applies when one peer believes *p* and the other believes not-*p*.¹¹ But, they point out, there is a higher-level disagreement now – one about what the proper doxastic attitude towards *p* is given their evidence. Mary thinks it is withholding belief regarding *p*, and Alf thinks it is to believe not-*p*. If Betty applies PS to this new disagreement, then she will think that the correct doxastic attitude to *p* is a bit closer to believing not-*p* than believing *p*. And assuming a plausible principle that says your belief in *p* should be in accordance with your take on how the evidence bears on *p*, Mary should now be closer to believing not-*p*. But now we have yet another disagreement to which PS must be applied, which will lead to a further disagreement, and so on. The limiting point for Mary, obviously, is the belief that the correct attitude to take towards *p* will be *believing* not-*p*. Thus, AHNT claim, PS must be a bad principle, since it is obvious that it is irrational for Mary to come to believe not-*p* in such a way.

One way to reply to this objection is to claim that by not suspending judgment, Alf is no longer a peer when it comes to *p*. It seems like it is possible for Betty to reasonably come to this conclusion. After all, as the case is specified Alf and Betty started out as peers, with more or less the same evidence and same reasoning abilities. But now Betty has good evidence that Alf is not living up to his epistemic duties – namely, he is not conforming to PS! So after the first adjustment

¹⁰ Thanks to Phil Atkins, Tony Brueckner, Tim Butzer, and Timothy Linehan for help with this last argument.

¹¹ Principles like PS are sometimes stated in terms of degrees of belief rather than in terms of belief, disbelief, and suspension of belief. A degrees-of-belief version of PS *would* apply to this new disagreement, since Alf and Betty still have different credences regarding *p*, and so still have a disagreement about *p*. AHNT's argument here could just as easily be stated against a degrees-of-belief version of PS. And my reply would work just as well to this modified version of the argument.

of her belief regarding *p*, Betty does not have to continue to apply PS until she ends up believing not-*p*.¹²

AHNT might reply that *sometimes* when an acknowledged peer is stubborn, that is evidence that the peer has better reasons than you do. And this is surely true – sometimes a peer's being stubborn *is* reason for you to adjust your belief. But if Betty thinks Alf is being stubborn because he believes he has better evidence than her, then again we no longer have a case of peerhood, and PS does not apply. And if PS does not apply, it is not responsible for Betty's epistemic conversion to believing not-*p*.

Thus, PS is not responsible for Mary's epistemic martyrdom.

¹² Note that Betty's judgment does not seem to involve violation of the principle that David Christensen calls *independence*, because she is not downgrading her evaluation of Alf based on her reasoning that led her to believe *p*. David Christensen, "Disagreement as Evidence: The Epistemology of Controversy," *Philosophy Compass* 4 (2009): 758.