

ON EPISTEMIC ABSTEMIOUSNESS: A REPLY TO AIKIN, HARBOUR, NEUFELD, AND TALISSE

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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. In “In Defense of Epistemic Abstemiousness” I presented arguments that their arguments do not succeed, and in “On Epistemic Abstemiousness: A Reply to Bundy” they argue that my arguments are not successful. I here clarify and defend my arguments.

KEYWORDS: disagreement, epistemic abstemiousness, epistemic martyrdom, epistemic conversion

In “Epistemic Abstainers, Epistemic Martyrs, and Epistemic Converts,” Scott F. Aikin, Michael Harbour, Jonathan Neufeld, and Robert B. Talisse (hereafter AHNT) argue against the principle of suspension.¹

(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*.²

In “In Defense of Epistemic Abstemiousness,” I reply to AHNT’s arguments. I argue that their arguments do not succeed.³ In “On Epistemic Abstemiousness: A Reply to Bundy,” they respond to my reply; they think that my counter-arguments are unsuccessful.⁴ This is my response. It is still my position that neither of the

¹ Scott Aikin, Michael Harbour, Jonathan Neufeld, and Robert B. Talisse, “Epistemic Abstainers, Epistemic Martyrs, and Epistemic Converts,” *Logos & Episteme* 1, 2 (2010): 211–9.

² This principle is labeled *PS+* in my response on 289. Alex Bundy, “In Defense of Epistemic Abstemiousness,” *Logos & Episteme* II, 2 (2011): 287–92.

³ Alex Bundy, “In Defense.”

⁴ Scott Aikin, Michael Harbour, Jonathan Neufeld, and Robert B. Talisse, “On Epistemic Abstemiousness: A Reply to Bundy,” *Logos & Episteme* II, 3 (2011): 425–8.

arguments they presented in their original paper succeed in showing that PS is false.

The epistemic martyrdom argument

In their first argument AHNT claim that PS is a false principle because following it could lead one to mislead those one disagrees with. In their example that is supposed to illustrate this problem with PS, Mary believes not-*p*, Alf believes *p*, each judges to the other to be an epistemic peer, and each is aware of the disagreement about *p*. It is thus a case where PS applies, and so Betty suspends judgment regarding *p*. Alf, in turn, becomes more confident in *p* because he judges that Betty's suspension provides some evidence that his belief that not-*p* is correct. AHNT argue that Alf should not become more confident in *p* in this case, and that PS is to blame for this mistake.

My response to this argument was that whether one's adjustment of one's beliefs leads others to be misled is irrelevant to whether that adjustment is epistemically rational.⁵ I took it that the notion of rationality in question in the disagreement literature is such that whether a belief is rational supervenes on the evidence that one has, and not on the evidence one has as well as the future consequences for the doxastic attitudes of oneself or others. In their response, AHNT make it clear that they think this is the wrong way to evaluate PS. They think that PS should be evaluated, at least in part, based on its consequences for others, and for one's future epistemic well-being.

I acknowledge that norms like PS can be evaluated in this way. Following Richard Foley, different forms of rationality may be distinguished based on their respective 'ends.'⁶ AHNT clearly favor a form of rationality according to which one's own future doxastic states, and the doxastic states of others, are ends. I took the form of rationality of which PS is supposed to be a norm of to concern,

⁵ I actually examined two ways of interpreting AHNT's martyrdom argument. The first took the argument to say PS is a bad principle because a person's (in the example, Betty's) following PS would lead to others being misled. The second took the argument to say that PS supports the claim that a peer's *shift* from belief that *p* to suspension of belief regarding *p* provides evidence for one's own belief that not-*p*. My objection to the former interpretation was based on the claim that how one's beliefs affect the beliefs of others is irrelevant to evaluating a norm of rationality like PS; my objection to the latter was not based on this claim. AHNT do not state which reading of their argument they intended, but their response is to the former argument, and so presumably that is one of the arguments they intended to put forward.

⁶ Richard Foley, *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 7–8.

roughly, the ends of now having true beliefs, and now not having false beliefs. It is not surprising, then, that AHNT found my counter-argument to be unconvincing.

I do not, however, think my response was completely off the mark. The other- and future-regarding notion of rationality AHNT favor is not the one in question in the debates regarding the appropriate way to respond to disagreement with a peer. If it were, then PS would not have the supporters it does. AHNT themselves point out that what motivates Feldman's support of PS is that disagreement with a peer indicates that one's own view is false.⁷ If the present accuracy of one's beliefs is not the only end associated with the notion of rationality in play in PS, then it is not immediately clear what the rationale for PS would be, since then evidence that one might be mistaken about a particular proposition would not be sufficient for showing that one's doxastic attitude towards that proposition is unreasonable. Thus, evaluating PS according to its consequences for one's future doxastic states and the doxastic states of others involves a change of subject. I agree with AHNT that a study of norms that take the one's future doxastic states and the doxastic states of others as ends is worthwhile. But I also think that the form of rationality that has to do with the goal of now having true beliefs and not having false beliefs is one worthy of study.

Finally, even if we grant that it is appropriate to evaluate PS in the way AHNT do, their argument does not succeed in showing that PS is false. The reason for this is that in their story, Alf is misled when he comes to believe that Betty changed her belief. And presumably this is because Betty did something to let him know she changed her belief – e.g. she told him she now suspends belief regarding p. It is thus Betty's actions that lead to Alf being misled, not her belief. Betty could easily change her belief, and claim that she did not change her belief. PS, thus, does not lead to Alf's being misled, and PS does not lead to the systematic misleading of others in the way AHNT say it does.

Of course, it could be that Betty's adhering to PS and some other norm would lead to Alf's being misled. If, for instance, Betty had an epistemic duty to always be honest and vocal about her doxastic states, then it could be that PS would, if followed by an epistemically responsible agent, systematically lead others to be misled. If there is such an epistemic duty, then AHNT may have an argument against PS as a norm of other-regarding rationality. But as I suggested above, if PS is taken to be a norm that has to do with securing true beliefs for one's future self and for others, then PS would be unmotivated in any case.

⁷Aikin et. al., "Epistemic Abstainers," 217. The cited passage from Feldman is on page 307 of Richard Feldman, "Evidentialism, Higher-Order Evidence, and Disagreement," *Episteme* 6 (2009): 294–312.

The conversion argument

In their second argument against PS, AHNT argue that PS is a mistaken principle because it would lead a person deploying it to be misled whenever in a disagreement with a 'stubborn' peer who does not change his belief in the face of disagreement with a peer. In the case of the disagreement between Betty and Alf, we are supposed to imagine Betty applying PS and suspending belief regarding *p*, while Alf retains his belief that *p*. Alf's retaining his belief that *p* is now supposed to be evidence for Betty for *p*. And when Betty considers whether it is appropriate to suspend belief regarding *p*, she will see that Alf – her peer – thinks that it is not; he thinks that one should believe *p*. So Betty should suspend about whether to suspend when it comes to *p*. And this is supposed to be further evidence for *p*. And after Betty reasons along these lines for awhile, with Alf stubbornly retaining his belief that *p* the whole time, Betty will eventually arrive at the point where the appropriate attitude to have towards *p* is believing *p*.

In response to my response to this argument, AHNT claim that I claim that Alf would be 'double-counting' the evidence in this case, and they think that this is a mistake. My response to the conversion argument, however, does not rely on any claims about why Alf is being stubborn, since as far as I can tell, the conversion argument does not rely on what Alf's reasons for being stubborn are. Betty is the one who is supposed to be reasoning herself into a bad epistemic situation via repeated application of PS. So if my counter-argument were that Alf is doing some double-counting, that would be a bad counter-argument; but that was not my argument.

AHNT also suggest that I should hold that Betty would be double-counting the evidence in this case. I think AHNT are taking me to say that both (a) Alf's belief that *p*, and (b) his retaining the belief that *p* in the face of disagreement, should count as only one piece of evidence for Betty. And I agree with AHNT that this would be a mistake; these are clearly two different pieces of evidence. But this was not my argument either. In fact, my argument depends on (a) and (b) being treated as distinct pieces of evidence with different import. I argued that following PS, Betty should suspend judgment regarding *p* when she discovers (a), that Alf believes *p*. But then I further suggest that when Alf does not suspend judgment regarding *p*, she acquires (b), which gives her reason to think that Alf is not applying PS, which in turn gives her reason to think that Alf should not be fully trusted when it comes to *p*. Betty thus could reasonably conclude that Alf is not a peer when it comes to *p* and so does not have to apply PS to the case. PS thus does not have the implausible consequence that whenever one disagrees with a stubborn peer, one should end up with the peer's belief.

In response to this argument, AHNT suggest that if Betty takes Alf's failure to conform to PS as evidence that Alf is not a peer, then she is treating PS as a rough criterion of peerhood. And they think this would be "against the spirit of the principle," since PS is about taking the opinions of peers seriously, while my suggestion is that Betty can use the purported truth of PS to dismiss Alf as not being her peer. And they are right that I do think that PS, if true, is a criterion of epistemic peerhood. It is a criterion of epistemic peerhood in the sense that as a norm of rationality, a person's failure to conform to it indicates an epistemic failure of the agent, and it is the epistemic successes and failures of an agent that enable one to judge whether someone is one's peer. I think that all norms of rationality are criteria of epistemic peerhood in this sense.

The apparent implausibility of Betty's demoting Alf from peerhood in the way I suggested can be explained away in two ways. First, as I specified peerhood, it was relative to a particular proposition. So when Betty judges Alf to not be a peer, it is only with respect to this one proposition, *p*. And this is consistent with her continuing to judge him to be overall as smart, well-informed, etc. as she; indeed, it even is consistent with her thinking that Alf is, overall, her epistemic superior. All Betty is doing is judging that Alf's opinion about the truth of *p* should be taken with a grain of salt; she is not coming to a judgment of Alf's overall epistemic character.

Second, my suggestion that Betty can take Alf's stubbornness as evidence that Alf is not her peer with respect to *p* does not entail that in every case of disagreement with a supposed peer about *p*, one may judge that the stubborn peer is her epistemic inferior regarding *p*. In fact, I admitted that in some cases a peer's stubbornness in such a situation will be evidence that the person is better positioned epistemically, and so is one's epistemic superior when it comes to evaluating whether *p*. So dismissal of a peer's opinions is not prescribed even when it comes to disagreement about particular propositions.

Perhaps the most serious objection AHNT have to my reply to the conversion argument is that it has the consequence that disagreement between peers who believe each other to be peers and are aware of the disagreement is impossible.⁸ Given that there are actual cases just like this, if this is true my argument is clearly mistaken. The impossibility is supposed to follow from the claim that "whenever two parties are locked in a disagreement over *p*, they will, if they are in fact peers, agree to suspend judgment with respect to *p*."⁹ I do not see how this is supposed to

⁸ They just say "disagreement between peers is impossible," without the qualifications I have added; It is clear they take the qualifications to be understood.

⁹ Aikin et. al., "On Epistemic Abstentiousness," 427.

follow from PS or my suggestion that PS can be used as one way of evaluating whether someone is a peer. It is true that both peers in such a case should, if PS is true, suspend judgment. Yet if neither suspends judgment they can nevertheless remain peers, since they would both be equally guilty of violating PS.

Finally, AHNT suggest that PS is a mistaken principle, because if there is a disagreement between peers about the truth of PS, then PS says one should suspend judgment about PS. PS thus undermines itself in instances where peers disagree about PS; and presumably this is actually the case – there are epistemic peers who recognize each other as peers who disagree about whether PS is true. And if PS can undermine itself in this way, the thinking goes, it must be a false principle. This is an argument against PS that was not presented in AHNT's original paper. It is a version of an argument presented by Adam Elga in his "How to Disagree About How to Disagree."¹⁰ Elga thinks the argument works. I think it might work as well. So AHNT may have a good reason for thinking that PS is false. The arguments presented in AHNT's original paper, however, do not show that PS is false.

¹⁰ Adam Elga, "How to Disagree About How to Disagree," in *Disagreement*, eds. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 178–82.