

ON EPISTEMIC ABSTEMIOUSNESS: A REPLY TO BUNDY

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ABSTRACT: In the previous issue of *Logos & Episteme*, Alex Bundy defends epistemic abstemiousness and criticizes our tales of epistemic abstention to martyrdom and conversion. Here we will briefly reply to Bundy's criticisms and then diagnose what we think the trouble is with the going versions of epistemic abstemiousness.

KEYWORDS: epistemic abstemiousness, epistemic martyrdom, epistemic conversion, Alex Bundy

Many thanks to Alex Bundy for his defense of epistemic abstemiousness in the previous issue of *Logos and Episteme*¹ and to the editors for the opportunity to reply to his essay. Bundy criticizes our tales of epistemic abstention to martyrdom and conversion along two lines. First, he argues that the consequences of conversion, as we tell the story, are not reasons that count against epistemic abstemiousness. Second, Bundy argues that in cases of dogmatic behavior from an interlocutor, we have evidence against that speaker's peerhood. Here we will briefly reply to Bundy's criticisms and then diagnose what we think the trouble is with the going versions of epistemic abstemiousness.

The main target for criticism in our original essay² was what we called the *principle of suspension* (PS), which Bundy nicely indexes for our purposes: *if S disagrees with a peer about p, and S is aware of the disagreement and of the peer as a peer, then S should suspend judgment about p*. As we said earlier, we have a good deal of sympathy for this principle and the broader program of epistemic abstemiousness. It is not only *prima facie* plausible, but seems the exact sort of responsible line to take in the face of deep disagreement between peers. However, our story shows that deploying the principle has untoward consequences. Consider the consequences of what we've called epistemic martyrdom. Betty and Alf are

¹ Alex Bundy, "In Defense of Epistemic Abstemiousness," *Logos and Episteme* II, 2 (2011): 287-292.

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

peers and disagree about *p*. Betty, upon discovering this disagreement, follows PS, and she thereby puts Alf in (it seems at least to him) a better epistemic position by suspending judgment. Alf now has no one directly disagreeing with him, and so has had a potential defeater simply vanish. This seems strange that one subject following PS should improve the dialectical situation for another opposing subject.

Bundy objects that “norms like PS are not evaluated according to how they contribute to the epistemic good of some other person or sets of people.”³ That is, PS is a rule for an *individual*, not for *groups*, and so Bundy’s argument is that if the epistemic virtues of individuals yield group irrationality, then so be it. This seems a curious bullet to bite to save abstemiousness, as these principles are ones that are deeply other-regarding – they are about disagreement and taking the views of opponents very seriously. Those who care for PS and its abstemious kin are motivated by a care for what and how their peers think, and so it is a troubling way to save those principles by saying that the cognitive consequences for those peers do not matter to PS’s evaluation.

Bundy’s second line of criticism is of our account of the path from epistemic martyrdom to epistemic conversion. Our tale was that once Betty has suspended regarding *p*, Alf’s assessment of the situation has improved his commitment to not-*p*. Betty now has new meta-evidence, because the dialectical situation regarding *p* has changed. Moreover, because Betty is committed to PS, it seems she must adopt a similarly abstemious commitment to its application in this circumstance – if Betty disagrees with Alf about the proper response to the dialectical logjam, then she (by PS) should suspend about whether she should suspend judgment regarding *p*. And when that is the case, she is returned again to Alf’s confident acceptance as meta-evidence. Bundy thinks this is ‘double-counting’ on Alf’s part (and by extension, Betty’s), but aren’t these different pieces of evidence? They occur at different times and they are responses to different dialectical circumstances – the first regarding *p*, the second regarding *p* and whether PS applies to this case. Take a similar sort of circumstance, perhaps the question of whether a joke is funny. First, you may tell the joke, and the audience does not laugh. That is evidence your joke is not funny. You could then remind the audience of certain principles of humor and explain the joke to them. They still don’t laugh. The fact that the audience persists in not laughing is not simply the same evidence as their initial reaction that the joke isn’t funny, but is more evidence. The same goes for Alf and Betty. Bundy would have it that a peer’s doxastic attitude is transparent to the reason that caused her to hold it, so that, once we see the reason, we no longer take the attitude as evidence. But this

³ Bundy, “In Defense,” 289.

is to deny the central point of PS: the doxastic attitudes of our peers matter to our deliberations.

At this point, though, Bundy thinks that Alf has shown himself (at least to Betty) to be Betty's epistemic inferior. He holds, "Alf is no longer a peer when it comes to *p*."⁴ As a consequence, Bundy takes it that the untoward series of events from Betty's suspension to martyrdom to conversion needn't unfold, because a Betty with some judgment wouldn't go down such a path. Crucial to Bundy's objection, though, is that Betty reason along the following lines:

[N]ow 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 of her belief regarding *p*, Betty does not have to continue to apply PS until she ends up believing not-*P*.⁵

So, according to Bundy, Betty may use the PS as a rough criterion for peerhood. This strategy would work were PS not self-reflexive (i.e., were PS to run that when *S* knowingly disagrees with a peer regarding *p*, *S* must suspend judgment with regard to *p*, except for when *p*=PS). The trouble is that there's no obvious reason why the PS can be made so as to except itself. If *prima facie* Alf and Betty are peers and their disagreement about *p* does not undermine that, then why does their disagreement about PS count as a case for undermining peerhood? It would surely be strange to say: *I thought we were roughly intellectual peers until I found out all the things we disagree about, especially epistemology*. Even if it were possible to exempt PS from peer disagreement, the consequences seem to be against the spirit of the principle.

Bundy doesn't dispute that some of the deepest and most important questions are likely to spark just the kind of disagreement that we point to in our paper – often sparking second order disagreements. In cases involving disagreement over the application of PS, though, the both first- and second-order disagreements are simply short-circuited by denying peerhood to Alf. So while it seems that there is deep disagreement among peers about matters that are important to us, we should take heart: we have far fewer peers than we originally thought.

Indeed, on Bundy's view, it turns out that epistemic disagreement amongst peers is *impossible*. This is because, in order to be genuine peers, two parties must be capable of appropriately applying PS. So 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*. This is an odd result. *Epistemic abstemioussness* is motivated by the fact that disagreement amongst apparent peers is a basic feature of our epistemic

⁴ Bundy, "In Defense," 291.

⁵ Bundy, "In Defense," 291-2.

condition; even after extensive deliberation, people often still disagree. But if Bundy is right, this problem is illusory. Deliberation amongst peers can never terminate in disagreement because *true peers* will always resolve disagreement by suspending judgment.

We should be clear that we are sympathetic with the PS and the broader program of epistemic abstemiousness. Our trouble is that the principles of abstention, as stated, are only *synchronic*, and they may be right from the perspective of time-slices of cognitive duties, but they have *diachronic* consequences, too. One may, *looking at one time*, be doing what's right, but *over time*, it could be wrong. For example, take the hedonist's rule of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. Surely without a diachronic view, following the rule would ultimately lead to its frustration. One must take on long-term goals, plan, make sacrifices, and so on. The same, we think, goes for epistemic principles that have practical bearing, because when one follows an other-regarding epistemic principle, especially in a dialogue, one thereby changes the situation the principle bears on.