

ON EPISTEMIC ABSTEMIOUSNESS AND DIACHRONIC NORMS: A REPLY TO BUNDY

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ABSTRACT: In “On Epistemic Abstemiousness,” Alex Bundy has advanced his criticism of our view that the Principle of Suspension yields serious diachronic irrationality. Here, we defend the diachronic perspective on epistemic norms and clarify how we think the diachronic consequences follow.

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

Many thanks to Alex Bundy for his replies¹ to our work² and to the editors of *Logos and Episteme* for the opportunity to continue this discussion. In outline, the dialectic stands as follows. We’ve argued that there are reasons to reject what we’ve called *the Principle of Suspension* (PS), which runs roughly that *if S is aware that an epistemic peer disagrees with S regarding p, S should suspend judgment regarding p*. These reasons arise from our tale of Betty’s epistemic journey, wherein she follows PS by first suspending judgment regarding *p* with a disagreeing Alf. Alf’s position is improved by this, as he no longer has dissenters. In light of this, Betty now has new evidence for Alf’s view, and so must come to agree with him. She may object to Alf’s dogmatism on the basis of PS, but if Alf rejects PS, then she is, again, relegated to suspending judgment, not objecting. The trouble, as we saw it, was that PS seems acceptable enough as a *synchronic* epistemic rule, but yields intellectual chaos *diachronically*. Bundy’s objections have consistently been (I) that the diachronic social consequences of PS are not relevant considerations for its acceptance, (II) that PS is not the operative principle in yielding Betty’s conversion, and (III) that Betty

¹ Alex Bundy, “In Defense of Epistemic Abstemiousness,” *Logos & Episteme* II, 2 (2011): 287–92, “On Epistemic Abstemiousness: A Reply to Aikin, Harbour, Neufeld, and Talisse,” *Logos and Episteme* II, 4 (2011): 619–624.

² Scott Aikin, Michael Harbour, Jonathan Neufeld, and Robert B. Talisse, “Epistemic Abstainers, Epistemic Martyrs, and Epistemic Converts,” *Logos & Episteme* I, 2 (2010): 211–9, “On Epistemic Abstemiousness: A Reply to Bundy,” *Logos & Episteme* II, 3 (2011): 425–8.

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has an out: to hold that Alf is not a peer, because he does not accept or abide by PS. We still think we're on the right track with the argument, but there are some details to clarify.

I

Our main concern is that dialectical-epistemic norms that cannot reasonably be applied iteratedly over time (as a discussion or debate unfolds) have reasons against them. PS is such a norm. It, again, is a norm that expresses a proper concern for what evidence one has, and it takes the attitudes of competent peers as relevant. But when PS is put into motion, we believe it yields social irrationality. Our tale is one of epistemic free-riding and its consequent hazards, as the lesson is that dogmatism pays in contexts of abstemious interlocutors. The consequences that concern us, then, are third-personal and diachronic consequences. For sure, Bundy is right that “the other- and future-regarding notion of rationality ... is not the one in question in the debates regarding the appropriate way to respond to disagreement with a peer.” And he's right that the norms directed to “now having true beliefs and not having false ones is worthy of study.”³ But what is the fit between these two observations? Bundy's case is that our diachronic and social consequences aren't relevant to the debate, because the debate is about synchronic first personal issues.

Perhaps our reply on this will be too metaphilosophical to cut much ice, but here goes. Compartmentalizing a research program in this fashion is a bad idea, especially when the fact is that those diachronically surveyed *futures* will be *nows* soon enough. Moreover, it seems that if having and understanding the truth is the goal, and if we can show that following a rule like PS impedes that goal over time, that surely is relevant. Our case, we think, is analogous to the person who, in striving to be frugal, buys only the smallest tubes of toothpaste, and thereby spends, in each case of purchasing toothpaste, the least. But over time, this is not so frugal, as toothpaste in those little tubes costs more per ounce, and so it is a better policy in the long run to buy in the big tube. Looking at ourselves only as time-slices is a bad way to knock about in the grocery, and it's bad for epistemology. There, we said it. Now, the fact that most of the folks working on the disagreement problem are exclusively synchronic epistemologists is curious, but of no matter. This is then evidence that we've got a new consideration. Whether Bundy or any of the others see this point as worthy of consideration is on the same level as whether our friend

³ Bundy, “On Epistemic Abstemiousness,” 621.

holds a tiny tube of toothpaste under our noses and insists that all he wants to do is *save money now*. Alright, we concede, be that way.

II

In his first reply, Bundy argued that PS wasn't the principle that yields Alf's improved position or Betty's conversion. We'd interpreted Bundy's counter-argument that Alf's case is not one of applying PS but one of double-counting Alf's view as evidence. We'd argued that such double-counting can work as additional evidence. Our example was that of going back and trying a joke again, but it could also be of, say, counting the pennies in your change basket again, too. But Bundy holds that his case did not depend on challenging the double-counting as vicious. Fair enough, but now the question is *what principle other than PS* is the one that yields the conclusion. Here we're unsure how to respond, because Bundy hasn't proposed an alternative principle.

But there is something to Bundy's challenge, even if he hasn't given us the full-blown version of it. Here, we think, can be the main challenge: PS is an other-regarding epistemic norm that only has the requirement of *suspension* as an output, not endorsement. There needs to be another norm, a cousin to PS, to yield Alf's improved confidence and Betty's conversion, because those two cases are ones of *endorsement*. So something along the lines of the following cluster of conditionals is required:

- (1) If S has a peer that disagrees regarding p, S should suspend judgment;
- (2) if S has a peer that tends toward agreement that p, S has increased support for p; and
- (3) if S has no view regarding p but a peer holds that p, S has increased evidence that p.

We'd argued that these come as a family for the following reason: if a peer's beliefs count enough to function as defeaters, then absent contrary evidence, they should count as positive evidence. This is Alf and Betty's reasoning. Bundy does see the gap, as in his first essay, he identifies Alf as relying on a principle he terms 'suspension as evidence.'⁴ (Bundy conceded the principle for the sake of the argument). The point is that this cluster of conditionals isn't simply PS. That's right, but note the tight connection between them. Again, PS and Alf and Betty's conditionals are all manifestations of the view that the opinions of peers function as evidence that can either defeat or further support. So Bundy's objection is correct – our case did not proceed exclusively from PS, but from a cluster of closely-tied commitments that are reflective of a broad class of views we'd identified as

⁴ Bundy, "In Defense of Epistemic Abstemiousness," 290.

motivating what we'd called epistemic abstemiousness. The principles that yield our story, it is true, are not exclusively PS, but they are nevertheless tied together by a form of evidential parity – roughly that, if only evidence can determine our cognitive duties, then, if the beliefs of others can function as a defeater for one's justification, it must be evidence. PS and this parity principle provide norms Alf and Betty later follow. And so, yes, PS is not what yields Alf's distortion or Betty's conversion, *per se*, but the norms that do yield them are derived from it.

III

Bundy argues that Betty has reason to hold that Alf, because he does not follow PS, is not a peer. As Bundy puts it, “when Alf does not suspend judgment regarding p, [Betty] acquires [evidence that Alf retains his belief in the face of disagreement], which in turn gives her reason to think that Alf should not be fully trusted when it comes to p.”⁵ Betty then may “reasonably conclude that Alf is not a peer when it comes to p.”⁶

The trouble with this line of thought, as we see it, is that the disagreement question in epistemology arose precisely because of the *persistence of deep* disagreements. The objective behind PS is to avoid being dogmatic in the face of these challenges, and so it seems positively strange to downgrade peerhood for others solely on the basis of their disagreement with PS.

Bundy responds that the apparent *strangeness* of this result is mitigated by two features of his view. Taking the second first: He insists that stubbornness on behalf another will not always count as reason for denying that person peerhood because sometimes such stubbornness will count as “evidence that the person is better positioned epistemically, and so is one's epistemic superior when it comes to evaluating whether p.”⁷ However, one could only reach that conclusion if one already had evidence that this person, *in addition to* his or her refusal to apply PS, was epistemically superior with respect to p (otherwise there would be no way to distinguish this person from the one whose failure to apply to PS undermines his or her status as a peer). But in that case, one is not dealing with an epistemic peer in the first place, and so the question of whether to apply PS does not even arise.

His more fundamental objection, the one that sheds most light on the deep difference in what we take to be at stake in arguments about PS, emphasizes that peerhood is “relative to a particular proposition.” So one's determination that another is not a peer with respect to p is consistent with treating that person as

⁵ Bundy, “On Epistemic Abstemiousness,” 622.

⁶ Bundy, “On Epistemic Abstemiousness,” 622.

⁷ Bundy, “On Epistemic Abstemiousness,” 623.

otherwise smart, competent, well-informed, etc.⁸ But our objection was never that Bundy's account was troubling because it would permit Betty to treat Alf as if he were generally an imbecile. Rather our concern was that this move is inconsistent with the spirit of PS which is supposed to be a principle for taking peer disagreement seriously. In the face of such disagreement, one should not remain dogmatic, but instead reconsider one's own deeply held beliefs. On Bundy's version of things, however, PS is a mechanism for *dismissing* certain cases of disagreement, namely disagreement with an apparent peer over whether it is appropriate to suspend judgment with respect to p. In such cases, the proper conclusion according to Bundy is not to reevaluate one's own beliefs, but rather the other's peerhood. This strikes us as incongruent because we cannot think of any reason why PS should be special in this regard. That is: why should PS apply to all disagreement *except* disagreements over whether to apply PS? A consistent application of PS would prohibit the strategy Bundy advocates thus resulting in the descent into conversion and martyrdom we outlined in our original paper.

Bundy suggests that Adam Elga has answered just this objection with his argument for a "partially conciliatory view" which offers a principled method for taking disagreement about disagreement off the table of conciliation — that is, Elga argues that views on disagreement can be excluded as proper objects of PS. Elga notes, as we do, that this exclusion would be arbitrary without some independent motivation. He suggests that, "the real reason for constraining conciliatory views is not specific to disagreement. Rather, the real reason is a completely general constraint that applies to any fundamental policy, rule, or method. In order to be consistent, a fundamental policy, rule or method must be dogmatic with respect to its own correctness. This general constraint provides independent motivation for a view on disagreement to treat disagreement about disagreement in a special way."⁹ First, this simply pushes the argument back a step. We still need to see an account of *why* disagreement norms generally, and specifically the PS, count as fundamental in this sense. It's clear that *if it did*, its exclusion from conciliation would be a non-arbitrary.

Even if such an argument is forthcoming, however, the cost of treating views of disagreement as fundamental is extremely high. The troubling upshot of Bundy's, as well as Elga's, view is that people who disagree about when to apply PS cannot be epistemic peers, or at least, we're justified in holding they aren't. In our original reply, we argued that this effectively renders disagreement amongst epistemic peers

⁸ Bundy, "On Epistemic Abstemiousness," 623.

⁹ Adam Elga, "How to Disagree About How to Disagree," in *Disagreement*, eds. Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 185.

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impossible: debates amongst such peers can never terminate in disagreement because either both parties will agree to suspend or they are not in fact peers. Bundy objects by noting that disagreement is still possible amongst epistemic peers who mutually fail to apply PS (that is, peers who disagree, but do not think that peer disagreement warrants suspension).¹⁰ But surely *that* is an even stranger result. Recall that PS is supposed to urge us to take peer disagreement seriously, but now it turns out that the only people capable of acknowledging that they have epistemic peers with whom they disagree are those who *reject* PS, and thereby are *epistemic failures!* We have argued from the beginning that the appeal of PS, the appeal of the conciliatory view, is its promise to help in matters of fundamental, deep, disagreement between people who can reasonably regard each other in cognitively favorable lights. If PS rules this out in advance, it is not clear to us what the remaining appeal of the principle is. The only way out of this problem that we can see, is to take the diachronic dialectical-epistemic consequences of how we treat disagreement (that is, to treat just those consequences that made PS appealing in the first place) as relevant.

¹⁰ Bundy, "On Epistemic Abstemiousness," 624.