

The Illusion of Discretion

Abstract. *Discretion* is the thesis that if one has sufficient evidence for p , it is epistemically permissible for one either to believe p or be agnostic on whether p . This paper argues that Discretion is not as obvious as many assume—indeed, that it is false. §1 observes that Discretion is not supported by the fact that we lack positive epistemic duties to take doxastic stances on propositions. §2 considers a different kind of example often taken to support Discretion and argues that it provides no more support than was provided by the case against positive epistemic duties. §3 gives a direct argument against Discretion. The upshot of these sections is that if agnosticism is an attitude in its own right rather than a mere form of non-belief (as recent writers argue), we should reject Discretion. With that conclusion in mind, §4 gives an error theory to explain away the appeal of Discretion. §5 explores the implications of rejecting Discretion, showing among other things how it undermines a major case for the view that practical reasons can be motivating reasons for belief.

1 What Discretion Is and Why It Is Not a Datum

Traditional epistemologists have been interested in the epistemic norms governing three coarse-grained doxastic attitudes: belief, disbelief, and agnosticism. If we regard disbelief in p as belief in the negation of p ,¹ we can reduce the trichotomy to a dichotomy: belief and agnosticism. Focusing on this dichotomy, we can ask:

- (Q) Are there cases where it is epistemically permissible for one to adopt one or the other of these attitudes? Or is one always singled out as epistemically permitted?

While rarely defended directly, the following answer finds considerable sympathy:

Discretion: Even if one has sufficient epistemic reason to think that p , it can be epistemically permissible for one either to believe p or be agnostic on whether p .²

Some might insist that Discretion is an unassailable datum—an upshot of the apparent fact that there is no positive epistemic duty to take doxastic stances on proposition. The evidence supports an infinite number of uninteresting conclusions whenever it supports

¹This is widely assumed, though Schroeder (2008: 102–104) provides compelling reasons for thinking that there is something worth calling “disbelief” that isn’t thus reducible. But his reasons don’t affect these introductory points. We will later see that they support my position.

²I borrow this term from McHugh (forthcoming), though he uses the term to describe the *psychological* claim that sufficient evidence “psychologically allows” belief and agnosticism. He also accepts the corresponding normative claim. That is not surprising. It is natural to think if both claims were true, the latter would help to explain the former: it would be because we understand that the evidence permits belief and agnosticism that we are psychologically able to respond to sufficient evidence with either belief or agnosticism. I will assume this connection later in discussing implications for doxastic voluntarism.

any conclusion. Suppose I see three birds eating from the bird feeder and know that the bird feeder does not have room for more than five birds. My evidence supports thinking that there is more than one bird, more than two, at least three, fewer than six, fewer than seven, and so on *ad infinitum*. My evidence also supports an infinite number of disjunctive propositions one of whose disjuncts is the proposition that there are three birds on the feeder. I am not epistemically required to believe these propositions. So, one might conclude, I am epistemically permitted to be agnostic on them.

Isn't Discretion just obviously true for these reasons? No. Consider another example to see why. Suppose I walk past a sign that has printed on it the question: "Do most dogs speak English?" If I consider that question, agnosticism is not an epistemically permissible response. To be agnostic on the answer to this question would be irrationally underconfident. The answer is obviously 'No'. Of course, I am not required to disbelieve that most dogs speak English. But that is because I am not required to give this question any attention. I can ignore it. That does not suggest that agnosticism is permitted. It rather suggests that no doxastic attitude, including agnosticism, is required because ignoring the question is permitted. Lacking belief and disbelief—even intentionally—is not sufficient for agnosticism. That is exactly what this case suggests.

So, while the epistemic norms do not require any doxastic attitude, that fact does not establish Discretion. And the fact that our evidence supports an infinity of uninteresting propositions only supports that weaker conclusion, not Discretion.

Accordingly, we should not think that Discretion is an unassailable datum that follows from the apparent fact that there is no positive epistemic duty to take any doxastic stances.³ The only unassailable datum is the following thesis:

Permissible Oblivion: For uncountably many propositions p , it is epistemically permissible to neither believe nor disbelieve p even if one has sufficient evidence for p (or $\neg p$).

Work on the nature of agnosticism confirms the importance of distinguishing Permissible Oblivion and Discretion. Friedman (2013) and others persuasively argue that agnosticism is not merely a form of non-belief, including a form of principled non-belief. Rather, it is an attitude in its own right—a *committed neutrality*, to use Sturgeon (2010)'s phrase. It is true that it can be epistemically permissible either to believe that p or to avoid or lack belief in p or $\neg p$ for a reason. But if agnosticism is not just principled non-belief, we do not hereby get a good reason to think that it can be epistemically permissible either to believe or to be agnostic on p . Committed neutrality is not a correct response to truths that are obviously supported by our evidence, though omitting any attitude is.

So, henceforth I will assume that the considerations that make Permissible Oblivion a datum do not make Discretion a datum.

This will come as no surprise to some believers of Discretion. Although epistemologists of the past assumed Discretion to be obvious for the reasons just dismissed, more recent friends of Discretion have been sensitive to the distinctness of Discretion and Per-

³For a defense of this apparent fact, see Nelson (2010).

missible Oblivion. At any rate, they need to be sensitive to the difference because of the role that Discretion plays in their thinking.

Why is that? Well, the theorists who have discussed Discretion most recently are interested in defending the possibility of belief for pragmatic reasons and in defending a cautious but interesting form of doxastic voluntarism.⁴ They argue that because the epistemic norms can give us discretion to believe or to be agnostic, practical reasons can jump in and directly motivate us to become believers rather than agnostics. But these theorists know that it is not enough to establish an interesting version of doxastic voluntarism to show that we can have practical reasons to perform *belief-affecting actions*, like ignoring or trying to forget counterevidence. For that only shows that we can have indirect voluntary control over our doxastic attitudes, and we already knew that. Since the case for Permissible Oblivion only suggests that we can have practical reasons for belief-influencing actions (e.g., that the interestingness of a proposition can be a reason to consider the evidence for it and thereby come to believe it, or the uninterestingness of a question a reason to ignore it and thereby come to have no attitude on it), defenders of doxastic voluntarism cannot afford to rely on Permissible Oblivion.

We should bear this point in mind. For later in this paper, we will encounter an irony in the dialectic surrounding Discretion. While defenders of doxastic voluntarism do rely on more interesting cases for Discretion than the cases dismissed in this section, these cases fail to establish Discretion for a reason that resembles the reason why Permissible Oblivion fails to motivate doxastic voluntarism. All that the further examples in favor of Discretion suggest is that we have practical discretion to perform agnosticism-influencing actions, such as getting ourselves to ourselves to worry that we need stronger evidence or lack sufficient evidence. If agnosticism is an attitude in its own right, however, they do not show that we have properly epistemic discretion.

Of course, if one's main penchant in life is gaining Cartesian certainty, one might have a practical reason to refuse to treat the evidence as sufficient unless it is conclusive. But that is not a real epistemic reason, any more than the fact that going to the library will give one lots of information is a properly epistemic reason. It is just a practical reason for someone with certain intellectual interests to perform a doxastic-attitude-affecting action. Or so I will argue further throughout.

2 Undercutting the Support for Discretion

Let's consider another kind of argument for Discretion. Like the argument discussed in the last section, this argument also appeals to cases. But the cases are different. Rather than involving an appeal to uninteresting propositions for which we could in principle have conclusive epistemic reason (e.g., big tautologies), they involve an appeal

⁴See McHugh (forthcoming) for the former and Frankish (2007), Ginet (2001) and Nickel (2010) for the latter. I separate these camps because McHugh regards Discretion-based cases as peripheral in the voluntarism debate and thinks that doxastic voluntarism is generally false (cf. McHugh (2012, 2014)).

to propositions that are sufficiently but not conclusively supported by our evidence. Here is a typical case taken verbatim from Nickel (2010: 313):

(BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY) “My roommate, a serious and sensible person, announces to me that he has just been outside and seen a three-foot lizard in the driveway. I have never seen such a large lizard in the area before, and I have some reason to doubt whether any lizards of that size live naturally in the area.”

Now, there are two forms of support that one might take BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY to lend to Discretion. Firstly, one might claim that given the evidence, it would be epistemically permissible to believe that there was a big lizard in the driveway (because one’s friend is serious, reliable, sensible. . .), but also epistemically permissible to be agnostic. Assuming that one’s evidence in BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY is sufficient evidence for thinking that there was a big lizard in the driveway, that would yield discretion with respect to the following non-normative proposition:

- (1) There is a big lizard outside.

Secondly, one might also claim that with respect to this normative proposition:

- (2) I have sufficient evidence to think that there is a big lizard outside.

it would be epistemically permissible to believe that (2) but also epistemically permissible to be agnostic about whether (2) is true. Assuming that one’s epistemic reason for thinking that one has sufficient evidence for (1) is itself sufficient, that would give one discretion with respect to (2).

Problems for this Kind of Argument

Now, it is interesting that when Discretion gets discussed in the literature in connection with cases like BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY, proponents of Discretion claim that what gives one discretion with respect to (1) is the fact that one has discretion with respect to (2). Nickel observes that the usual way in which one comes to believe a (1)-type proposition is by taking one’s evidence for that proposition to be sufficient, and that usual the way in which one comes to be agnostic on a (1)-type proposition is by taking one’s evidence for that proposition to be insufficient. He writes of BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY:

Here again, I think, is a case in which I am in a position to take my roommate’s testimony *as providing adequate reason to believe* that there was a three-foot lizard in the driveway, or to suspend belief and *demand more evidence*.⁵

So, Nickel holds, the reason why one has discretion with respect to (1) is that one can either permissibly take one’s evidence for (1) to be sufficient and then believe (1) or permissibly take one’s evidence for (1) to be insufficient and then be agnostic on (1).

⁵Nickel (2010: 314); italics mine.

It is surprising that this is the way that Discretion gets defended with respect to (1)-type propositions. For there are good reasons to doubt that this argument shows that we have discretion with respect to (1)-type propositions. These reasons are revealed by the key observation on which the argument relies: viz., that it is by changing our views about (2) that we get another choice with respect to (1).

To see what I have in mind, suppose—following Nickel—that you become agnostic about (1) because you think that your evidence for (1) is insufficient. This is psychologically plausible: it is easiest to imagine you being agnostic because you regard mere testimony, even by a reliable friend, as not providing strong enough evidence for such a surprising conclusion. It is easiest to imagine, that is, that you are agnostic because you “demand more evidence”. When we see this, we should take the case for Discretion to be weakened, not strengthened. After all, according to Discretion, it is permissible for you to be agnostic even when your evidence is sufficient. The fact that it is most natural to regard you as becoming agnostic in BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY by *getting yourself to take the evidence to be insufficient* suggests that it is *not* natural to regard you as reasoning as Discretion predicts to be rational. Assuming Discretion, it should not be necessary for you to take your evidence to be insufficient in order for you to rationally become agnostic. You should not have to regard testimony as providing insufficiently strong evidence for believing (2). You should be able to regard it with full confidence as sufficient evidence but remain agnostic.

It is not clear that you can do that while remaining fully rational. It looks irrationally underconfident to think with full sincerity: “The evidence is not just very good but *clearly sufficient* to justify belief. Still, I am agnostic.” While underconfidence might be a less serious mistake than overconfidence, it is a mistake anyway.

Of course, you can regard the testimony as providing good reason for thinking that (1) is true while rationally being agnostic on (1). Indeed, you can regard the testimony as providing very good reason for thinking that (1) is true while being rationally agnostic on (1). But good reasons—even very good reasons—are not the same as sufficient reasons. So we must ask: is it so clear that you can with full confidence regard the testimony as good enough to justify belief while being rationally agnostic? I think it is not so clear. Indeed, I suspect that the only reason why it might be difficult to regard our agent as underconfident is that it is hard to see how someone could sincerely think with full confidence that the relevant testimony is sufficient to justify belief in (1). For it is unclear that this testimony is sufficient to justify belief in (1).

So, if anything, BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY undermines Discretion. Indeed, the intuitions about BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY can be used to support the following argument against Discretion:

- i. It is rational to be agnostic on (1) only if it is not rational to believe outright that the evidence for (1) is clearly sufficient.
- ii. If Discretion is true, (i) is false, because:
 - a. If Discretion is true, it should be possible to rationally believe outright that the

evidence for (1) is clearly sufficient while being agnostic on (1).

- b. And if it is possible rationally to believe fully that the evidence for (1) is sufficient while being agnostic on (1), then (i) is false.

iii. So, Discretion is false.

I have already explained why we should accept (i). What about ii(a)?

ii(a) is motivated by the thought that there is the following connection between principles of permissibility and principles of rationality:

The Rationality-Apparent Permissibility Principle: If ϕ -ing is permissible when C obtains, then if it is rational to believe that C obtains, it is rational to ϕ .

This principle does not equate permissibility and rationality. Like many people in ethics and an increasing number of people in epistemology, I am suspicious of that equation.⁶ But even if we do not equate the permissible and the rational, we can still agree that there is an indirect link between them: what is rational is what is *apparently* permissible.

Given that link, it is easy to see that the data about BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY undermine rather than support Discretion. After all, why should one have to doubt that the testimony is sufficient evidence for (1) in order to rationally be agnostic about (1)? Why shouldn't it be perfectly rational to be certain that the evidence is manifestly sufficient while nonetheless remaining agnostic? And yet it looks less than fully rational to do that. It looks underconfident to think, "The evidence is not only good, but clearly sufficient to permit belief. Still, I am agnostic." So, we have a good reason to doubt that BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY supports Discretion.

There is another reason to doubt that BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY supports Discretion. Think about what normally happens when one rationally takes the evidence to provide an insufficient or sufficient case for believing a proposition. One considers the evidence and gains some higher-order evidence: it strikes one as insufficiently clear that the evidence is strong enough, or it strikes one as clear that the evidence is strong enough. One then responds to this higher-order evidence by forming the relevant attitude: one doubts the evidence is strong enough or thinks it is strong enough. Notice that in these cases, one's stock of *total* evidence appears to increase. It now includes some higher-order evidence concerning the quality of the evidence for the relevant (1)-type proposition.

If this higher-order evidence is part of the total evidence, we should be doubtful for another reason that cases like BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY support Discretion. Discretion says that if one has sufficient evidence for believing P, it can be permissible either to believe or to be agnostic on P. The sufficiency of a given piece of evidence is to be assessed relative to the total evidence. If the total evidence is different in the case in which one can rationally believe and the case in which one can be rationally agnostic, we get no obvious support for Discretion from BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY. We already knew that it can be rational to believe P given total evidence E but rational to be agnostic given slightly

⁶See, e.g., Kolodny (2005) in ethics, and Littlejohn (2011) and Jackson (2011) in epistemology.

changed total evidence E^* . If the total evidence is not the same when it is rational for one to believe and when it is rational for one to be agnostic, we should be suspicious.

Now, there are different views about the impact that higher-order evidence can have on what is epistemically permitted at the first-order. Some theorists—level-splitters, to use Horowitz (forthcoming)’s term—think that it has no impact on what is epistemically permitted at the first-order. Level-splitters will, however, will typically agree that it has some effect on what is excusable, praiseworthy, or rational at the first-order: they will just sharply distinguish these statuses from the status of permissibility.⁷ Others—the level-bridgers—think that higher-order evidence can have an impact on what is epistemically permitted at the first-order.⁸ But both views make predictions that undermine the case for Discretion.

Level-bridgers will think that if one acquires the higher-order evidence that one’s first-order evidence for thinking that P appears insufficient, that higher-order evidence can undercut the support one had for P and make it the case that one’s evidence for P is insufficient. So, on a level-bridging view, it is clear that we get no case for Discretion if what makes agnosticism become permissible is the appearance that one’s evidence is insufficient. In that case, it will not be permissible for one to believe the first-order proposition. Sure, it was permissible moments before. But it was permissible because one’s total evidence was different.

Level-splitters, on the other hand, will think that if believing P was permitted by one’s evidence before one gained the appearance that the evidence is sufficient, believing P is still permitted by one’s evidence after one gains that appearance. But given that appearance, one couldn’t be blamed for taking one’s evidence to be insufficient, and hence couldn’t be blamed for being agnostic on that basis. Level-splitting views also do not aid the case for Discretion. While these views will agree that both believing P and being agnostic about whether P might both merit *some* positive appraisal, they will deny that these attitudes would merit the *same* positive appraisal. Believing P is permitted, while being agnostic is excusable, merely rational, merely reasonable, or whatever.

So, we have a second reason for doubting that BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY supports Discretion. It will often be by reflecting on the first-order evidence and gaining some second-order evidence that one figures out whether to believe or to be agnostic. On a level-bridging view, what happens in the case in which one proceeds to be agnostic is that one’s total evidence goes from sufficiently supporting (1) to not sufficiently supporting (1). That scenario obviously provides no support for Discretion. On a level-splitting view, what happens when one proceeds to be agnostic is that the evidence remains the same, but one’s decision to be agnostic is excusable given the status that the evidence appears to have (namely, it appears to be insufficient). It does not follow that agnosticism

⁷Some prominent level-splitters include Lasonen-Aarnio (2010, 2014), Weatherson (MS), and Williamson (2011). All three are sympathetic to the idea that there is a distinction between justification and some weaker status, though they have different words for that status—“reasonable” in Lasonen-Aarnio’s case, “praiseworthy” in Weatherson’s case (cf. Weatherson (2008)), and “excusable” in Williamson’s case (cf. Williamson (2007) and (2013)).

⁸See Christensen (2010), Elga (2007), Horowitz (forthcoming) and Kelly (2010).

is permitted. The motivations for level-splitting require us not to draw that conclusion. Without that conclusion, we get no support for Discretion. So, either way, we get no support for Discretion.

I have now assessed the case for thinking that one has discretion with respect to (1)-type propositions. But remember: BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY was supposed to provide two avenues of support for Discretion. It was supposed to make it plausible not only that we have discretion with respect to (1), but also with respect to (2).

I have not explicitly assessed the case for discretion with respect to (2)-type propositions. Still, it is easy to see why we should doubt the case for discretion with respect to (2)-type propositions. We have such discretion only if it can be true that

- (a) We have sufficient reason for thinking that (2) is true.

while it is true that

- (b) We are permitted to be agnostic on (2).

But again, if it is clear that (a) is the case, then it would be irrationally underconfident to remain agnostic on (2). If we had discretion with respect to (2), we wouldn't expect that. On the other hand, if it is not clear to one that (a) is so, one could rationally be agnostic about (2). On what basis, would one be rationally agnostic? Presumably on the basis of the fact that it is not sufficiently clear that (a) is so. But now both of our earlier points apply. The fact that (a) is not sufficiently clear will be a piece of higher-order evidence. Our earlier points about higher-order evidence will now apply again. We can run the dilemma we ran before to show that we get no support for Discretion. For another thing, the fact that it is most natural to take one to be rationally agnostic about (2) on the basis of the fact that (a) not sufficiently undermines Discretion rather than supporting Discretion. For if Discretion is true, it should be possible for one to be rationally agnostic even when it is clear to one that the evidence for (2) is sufficient. That is not clearly possible.

So I conclude that cases like BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY provide insufficient support for Discretion.

3 A Direct Case against Discretion

We have found that the major arguments for Discretion are faulty, and hence that Discretion is not as obvious as many assume. But at best, that conclusion only gives us reason to be agnostic on whether Discretion is true. Is there a good direct argument against Discretion?

I think so. In particular, I think that once we appreciate that agnosticism is a doxastic stance in its own right (rather than the lack or even the intentional lack of any doxastic stance), it becomes natural to reject Discretion. For on a natural picture of what this doxastic stance involves, it is rationally commits one to thinking that believing P is

improper just as much as believing the negation of P rationally commits one to thinking that believing P is improper. And it is plausible that if two states conflict in this way, there cannot be sufficient epistemic reason to pick either.

What is this natural picture of agnosticism I have in mind? It is one that can be motivated by thinking about the paradigm example of agnosticism: agnosticism about the existence of God. Imagine that Rene claimed to be an agnostic about the existence of God. We ask Rene: “So, you think there is not sufficient evidence for thinking that God exists, right?” Rene replies: “No. I think it is perfectly clear that there is sufficient evidence to believe that God exists.” Rene goes on to clarify that he is not an agnostic for practical reasons. We are baffled. It is natural for us to conclude that Rene does not understand what it is to be agnostic, or does not understand what we meant by “sufficient evidence”. It seems incoherent for a true agnostic about the existence of God to think that there is clearly sufficient evidence to justify believing that God exists. Surely no capital-‘A’ agnostic thinks that.

But why would it be incoherent for one to claim to be agnostic about whether P while agreeing that there is clearly sufficient evidence for P? A natural answer appeals to the nature of agnosticism: something about the attitude of agnosticism makes that combination of states incoherent and helps to explain why assertions like “There is clearly sufficient evidence for P but I am agnostic about whether P” are infelicitous. What is that feature of agnosticism?

Here is one hypothesis—though I do not intend this to be an analysis of agnosticism, and do not even claim to be giving sufficient conditions. When one is agnostic about the existence of God, one is at least temporarily *against proceeding as if* God exists and also *against proceeding as if* God does not exist, where both of those facts hold in virtue of the agnostic state of mind one is in.⁹ It is plausible that the agnostic will usually be against proceeding as if God exists and against proceeding as if God does not exist because she takes both to involve the error of overconfidence. She believes at least tacitly that the epistemic reasons are insufficient for belief and for disbelief.¹⁰

The agnostic may not be permanently against proceeding as if God exists or permanently against proceeding as if God does not exist. Many agnostics are not like that. Many do not believe that it is *unknowable* whether God exists: they merely believe that

⁹When Schroeder (2008: 102–104) denies that disbelief in p is belief in the negation of p , he relies on the ideology of being against proceeding as if P: disbelief in p , he suggests, is being against proceeding as if p . I am unclear about whether to call that state “disbelief”. But note that being agnostic involves even more: it involves being against proceeding as if P and being against proceeding as if $\neg p$.

¹⁰One might wonder whether requiring this belief requires an overintellectualization. I don’t think so. It is plausible that agnosticism is a state that only reflective creatures can have; non-human animals might have credences, but they are not capable of true agnosticism. So it cannot be an overintellectualization in virtue of requiring agnostics to have the capacity to think about their own beliefs. One might think that it is an overintellectualization because it requires agnostics to have the concept of a reason or the concept of sufficiency. But I think that any agnostic should at least have some related concept or proto-concept. For a nice illustration of how to answer this sort of overintellectualization worry, see Raz (2011: 32–33).

Again, I only claim that this is part of what agnosticism involves. I do not claim that it is an analysis (as Bergmann (2005) does). Friedman (2013) argues well that it does not provide sufficient conditions.

we are not *currently* in a position to know whether God exists. Some agnostics would even insist that true agnosticism necessarily involves leaving it open that we could later discover strong enough epistemic reason to believe or disbelieve.¹¹ Now, we can set aside whether these agnostics are right about that. For in any case, the agnostic will at least be against proceeding as if God exists now and proceeding as if God does not exist now. In having this attitude, one is not necessarily in the state of mind one might occupy with respect to a semantically or epistemically indeterminate proposition.¹²

With these qualifications in mind, it is plausible to generalize from the case of capital-'A'-agnosticism and claim that agnosticism always involves being against proceeding as if p and being against proceeding as if $\neg p$, at least temporarily. We can use this hypothesis to explain why it seems incoherent to believe outright that there is sufficient evidence for p while being agnostic about whether p . The incoherence is straightforward given this view about what agnosticism constitutively involves. Believing p constitutively involves being for proceeding as if p . So, if one takes there to be sufficient evidence for believing p , one *ipso facto* takes there to be sufficient epistemic reason to proceed as if p . If agnosticism constitutively involves being against proceeding as if p , there would certainly seem to be incoherence here: why be *against* ϕ -ing if you think that there is clearly sufficient reason to ϕ ? Of course, in general, one could choose not to ϕ simply because one is not interested in the game of being either for or against ϕ -ing. But that is not to be against ϕ -ing. This is the more fundamental reason why there is a difference between intentionally lacking any doxastic attitude out of apathy and being an agnostic.

Is it really incoherent to be against proceeding as if P when one thinks that there is clearly sufficient reason to proceed as if p ? After all, consider someone who says: "Look, I see that there is sufficient reason for me to proceed as if p . But I am not going to proceed as if p . I would like to have a conclusive reason to proceed as if p ." One might think that this is not incoherent, even if one thinks that it is silly policy. But our view is compatible with the coherence of this speech. This person is merely *not for* proceeding as if p and has a policy to not be for proceeding as if p unless she has conclusive reason to proceed as if p . This person is not *against* proceeding as if p . Our claim was that it

¹¹An entertainingly extreme example is Jorge Luis Borges, who apparently said: "Being an agnostic means that all things are possible, even god, even the Holy Trinity"; see Shenker (1971).

¹²Schroeder (2008: 102–104) mentions indeterminate propositions as central candidates of propositions that make it fitting to be being against proceeding as if P . While I agree that they are among the candidates, I think it is misleading to mention them and not mention cases where a less stable agnosticism is fitting. For we do not need to claim that there is yet another attitude in this case. Schroeder does, however, claim that someone who withholds judgment is not necessarily of this attitude. I think this illustrates the unhelpfulness of the phrase "withhold judgment", which could be understood as either picking out a non-attitude or as picking out the attitude of agnosticism proper. Indeed, Schroeder elsewhere treats withholding as a form of intentional non-belief; in his (2012: 276–77), for example, he writes: "To withhold is to not make up your mind, to have formed no belief. Consequently, any disadvantage of forming beliefs—of making up your mind—is potentially a reason to withhold." But as I have stressed, I intend to be referring to the attitude that Friedman, Sturgeon, and others have helped to illuminate. Discretion is only an interesting thesis when applied to this attitude. For it is clear—but not very important—that we can intentionally lack a doxastic attitude to P even when we have clear sufficient evidence for P .

is incoherent to agree that there is sufficient reason to proceed as if p but to be *against* proceeding as if p .

This gives us a nice diagnosis of what is wrong with an argument for Discretion. One might have thought that a subject who thinks in the following way is not incoherent: “Look, I see that I have sufficient evidence to believe p . But I am going to wait until I have conclusive reason to believe p before I believe p .” There is indeed nothing incoherent here, even if one thinks it is silly to demand conclusive reasons. This does not involve the vice of underconfidence and might even manifest a virtue of epistemic supererogation. But that is because this agent *need not be agnostic about whether p* . Rather, this agent merely holds off from taking any stance at all. If this agent really were agnostic, she would be underconfident to a rational fault or the like.

That is a different case. Compare the self-proclaimed capital-‘A’ agnostic who says: “Look, I see that there is sufficient evidence to believe that God exists. But I am an agnostic, and will remain one until there is conclusive evidence to believe that God exists.” It is hard to make literal sense of this person. Perhaps this person really means that with respect to weighty propositions like the proposition that God exists, it is not reasonable to believe until one has conclusive evidence, and only means that the evidence we have *would* be sufficient evidence if the proposition were a less weighty one. That is understandable. But if she literally thought that our evidence was perfectly sufficient with respect to such a weighty proposition but remains agnostic, her position would manifest underconfidence to a rational fault.

Perhaps one will reply to these points by saying: “I agree that Discretion fails to hold for agnosticism. But this just shows that you have misunderstood the spirit of Discretion. It is not a thesis about agnosticism in your sense, but rather about the intentional resistance, avoidance, or withholding of belief.” But I think this reply gets things backwards. This is for a reason foreshadowed in §1 that I will reinforce in the following two sections: namely, that the other thesis to which the objector alludes cannot do the work that people wanted Discretion to do. Indeed, the error theory I will use to diagnose the attraction of Discretion is that it is easily confused with the objector’s idea, which cannot do the work Discretion has been asked to do.

4 An Error Theory

I turn to this error theory. After unpacking it, I proceed to explain in the next section why the thesis with which Discretion is easily confused cannot do the work Discretion is supposed to do.

To warm up to this error theory, consider a distinction that has received considerable independent defense.¹³ The distinction is between

¹³This distinction is at the heart of Sosa (forthcoming)’s critique of a major form of responsibilist virtue epistemology (though Sosa regards his new view as a reliabilist responsibilism). It is drawn in Sosa’s earlier work; see, e.g., Sosa (2007: 89–91). In addition to being defended by major externalists like Sosa, the distinction is exploited by major internalists. See especially Dougherty (2011) and (forthcoming). As

epistemic norms on doxastic attitudes

and

practical norms on attitude-affecting acts, which may be underpinned by intellectual interests

To see the distinction in play, imagine that Jenny has the intention to gain knowledge about physics. This plausibly gives her a reason to think about physics and form beliefs about physics. After all, only by doing so can she fulfill her intention. But although this reason has an intellectual focus, it does not follow that she fails to respond to the epistemic reasons that bear on the correctness of her doxastic attitudes if she fails to fulfill her intention to gain knowledge about physics (e.g., because she gets distracted and reads mystery novels). The failure is fundamentally a practical one, though the practical interests are those of someone with an intellectual penchant. This is an example of what I am calling a practical norm on belief-affecting actions that is underpinned by intellectual interests.

There are more famous examples. Many ethicists who are pluralists about intrinsic value will include some intellectual items on their list: G. E. Moore, for example, put knowledge on his list. When the conjunction of Moore's value theory and his act consequentialism predict that there is reason to reflect on subject matters where knowledge could be gained (since that would promote intrinsic value *simpliciter*), the predicted reason is not an epistemic reason. It is a practical reason for certain belief-affecting actions underpinned by an intellectual interest (a purportedly objective one, this time).

With this distinction in hand, it is easy to see that there is a defensible thesis that can easily be confused with Discretion:

State-Affecting Prerogative (SAP): Even if your evidence for p is sufficient, it can be within your rights to ignore the question whether p , to intentionally withhold acceptance of p , or even to perform mental actions that will make you agnostic about p (say, by re-considering the sufficiency of the evidence) if doing so promotes your interests, including your intellectual penchants.¹⁴ You violate no epistemic norm just by performing these acts, though some of them may cause you to enter states that do violate epistemic norms.

SAP allows for what is uncontroversial: namely, that you can withhold acceptance even when your evidence is sufficient and do so without making an epistemic mistake. And

Dougherty notes, the distinction goes back to Conee and Feldman's first paper on evidentialism; cf. Conee and Feldman (2004: 89–90). The distinction is also motivated by Kelly (2003)'s attack on viewing epistemic rationality as a species of instrumental rationality. Indeed, Kelly (2014) observes in a footnote that his distinction undermines an argument for permissivism and only defends permissivism in an interpersonal form (not the form represented by Discretion).

¹⁴“Acceptance” in this thesis is not another word for belief; cf. Bratman (1992), Cohen (1992), and Stalnaker (1984). While I think we have direct voluntary control over whether we withhold acceptance in a proposition, I think it is unclear whether we have direct voluntary control over whether we withhold belief. Of course, we do have indirect voluntary control over that, and that is what the second clause in Prereogative is accommodating.

SAP allows that you can intentionally withhold acceptance for intellectual reasons without making any properly epistemic mistake—say, because you want certainty before you accept P. But it does not allow what Discretion allows. Unless the evidence for a proposition cannot be sufficient without making that proposition certain, you would make an epistemic mistake if you were genuinely agnostic on P. The mistake might be one for which you cannot be faulted if you rationally thought that the evidence was insufficient, but it would still be a mistake.¹⁵

I have already argued that we should not confuse Discretion and SAP. But why think that attributing a confusion of Discretion and SAP is a good error theory to explain away that mistaken attraction to Discretion?

There are many reasons. The most central and obvious reason is that until epistemologists like Friedman started defending the view that agnosticism is an attitude in its own right, it was common to understand the alternative to belief and disbelief as something properly picked out by action words like “withholding”. Unless one distinguishes between the state of agnosticism and mental actions like withholding judgment (and notice that “judgment” can pick out acceptance rather than belief), one will be in no position to appreciate the distinction between Discretion and SAP. Since the distinction between the absence-creating action of withholding judgment and the positive state of being agnostic has only been well appreciated in the most recent literature, the conflation of Discretion and Prereogative is unsurprising.

A second reason is that there are related common confluences that make the conflation of Discretion and SAP unsurprising. For example, there is a tendency in the literature on epistemic value to conflate

- (a) being epistemically good
- (b) being good *simpliciter* and also epistemic.¹⁶

The epistemologist who has been clear on this distinction is Ernest Sosa,¹⁷ but he draws a further distinction that supports the distinctness of Discretion and SAP—viz., between the study of epistemic normativity and the study of “intellectual ethics”. The conflation of (a) and (b) would encourage the conflation of Discretion and SAP, since the distinction between the latter requires a distinction between an attitude’s being epistemically permitted and an attitude-causing act’s being permitted *simpliciter* on the basis of intellectual interests. That distinction is hard to draw if one already conflates (a) and (b). Indeed, I suspect that the conflation of (a) and (b) is behind a natural rationale for Discretion, according to which underconfidence is not an error but rather a virtue of modesty or humility. Certainly, modesty and humility are virtues and they are virtues

¹⁵I should stress that I am myself agnostic on whether it is necessary for evidence to make P certain to be sufficient evidence, since I think there are strong reasons both for and against that view. The defender of Discretion, however, seems committed to denying this.

¹⁶Ridge (2013) documents the conflation of (a) and (b) well.

¹⁷See Sosa (2007, 2011, Forthcoming).

that are manifested by intellectual conduct. But a virtue that can be manifested by intellectual conduct is not necessarily a properly epistemic virtue. Once we distinguish between (a) and (b), it is more natural to regard whatever intellectual conduct that might cause one to be underconfident being good but not epistemically good. Indeed, ethicists writing on modesty independently hold this view.¹⁸

A third reason is that the difference between reasons for attitude-affecting acts and reasons for attitudes is only widely appreciated in isolated corners of epistemology—viz., in the literature on strict evidentialism and doxastic voluntarism. Elsewhere it is common to hear it taken for granted that in addition to epistemic justifications, there can be pragmatic justifications for beliefs. Many books about epistemic justification begin with claims that presuppose that there are pragmatic justifications for doxastic attitudes and not merely for attitude-affecting acts.¹⁹ Since the distinction between Discretion and SAP cannot be appreciated without this more basic distinction and furthermore the thesis of Discretion is never explicitly defended in these corners of epistemology, the conflation of Discretion and SAP would be unsurprising.

So much for some of the reasons why our error theory is empirically believable. It is also a substantively attractive. It yields a unified diagnosis of where the arguments for Discretion go wrong. The arguments discussed in §1 and §2 fail for the same reason: both rest on a failure to distinguish between the claim that certain intellectual interests can give us a practical reason for a mental act whose result is easily conflated with agnosticism and the thesis that the epistemic reasons can justify agnosticism even when they are sufficient to justify belief. It is just that the mental acts and the intellectual interests are different in the two cases. The mental act relevant to debunking the argument from §1 is that of ignoring a question or drawing one's attention away from it. There are various mental acts relevant to §2—withholding acceptance, focusing on the counterevidence, reconsidering the sufficiency of the evidence, and so on. Some of these acts may lead one eventually to become agnostic because they lead one to doubt that the evidence is sufficient. Others are compatible with one's being a believer. But in each case, what one is permitted to do is to perform some mental action, and the permission is not a properly epistemic one but rather a practical one (though it can be backed by an intellectual penchant).

Does this error theory beg the question against a form of interest-relativism in epistemology on which one's intellectual interests can affect whether one knows?²⁰ No. These will be views on which one's intellectual interests can literally affect the sufficiency of one's evidence—say, by increasing the bar that evidence must meet to be sufficient.

¹⁸See especially Driver (1989) and (2000). It is also worth noting that ethicists who disagree with her that modesty requires epistemic vice do so on the basis of an alternative account of modesty on which it does not require underestimation of self-worth (e.g., Brennan (2007)), and indeed some locate modesty upstream of any doxastic attitude (e.g., Bommarito (2013)). So while these other ethicists don't think the moral and epistemic virtues conflict, they *also* don't think that underconfidence is a virtue of any kind.

¹⁹A few examples include BonJour (1985: 6–7), Conee and Feldman (2004: 2), Fumerton (2006: 33–34), and Pollock and Cruz (1999: 11–12).

²⁰See Roeber (2013) for such a view.

These views do not motivate Discretion. They are not views on which one's intellectual interests can make it epistemically permissible to be agnostic even when the evidence is sufficient.

5 Why the Falsity of Discretion Matters

Why does it matter if Discretion is false? Why can't we reject Discretion while doing everything we wanted to do with the likes of SAP?

An answer to the second question is that SAP cannot do some central work that Discretion has been asked to do. Writers such as Ginet (2001), Frankish (2007), McHugh (forthcoming), and Nickel (2010) have all relied on Discretion in mounting arguments for the view that practical reasons can motivate us to form doxastic attitudes. The thought is that if the epistemic norms fail to determine whether we ought to be agnostic or be believers, then we will have psychological discretion to be agnostics or believers, and practical reasons will be able to move us directly to be agnostics or to be believers. These writers are well aware of the distinction between being directly motivated to have an attitude by some consideration, on the one hand, and coming to have the attitude only by being directly motivated to perform attitude-affecting acts. They know that it is no case against strict evidentialism to point out that we can rely on practical reasons in pursuing indirect routes to doxastic attitudes. For this reason, these writers should not be content with the conclusion that we can rely on practical reasons to pursue indirect routes to agnosticism. Nor, of course, should they be content with the conclusion that by getting ourselves to regard the evidence as sufficient, we can thereby become believers.

But SAP alone does not advance us beyond these familiar conclusions. Is it necessarily any easier to pursue these indirect routes, given SAP? I don't think so. If I find myself agnostic in the case of *BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY*, it will take finagling to become a believer. And if I find myself a believer in a case where I am fully confident that my evidence is sufficient, it will take finagling to become agnostic. We need Discretion to obviate such finagling. Since Discretion is false, we get no new argument for thinking that practical reasons can motivate belief directly and no argument for the qualified voluntarism Ginet, Frankish and Nickel favor.²¹

The falsity of Discretion matters for another major reason that has been salient throughout: namely, it might tell us something about the nature of agnosticism. Although Friedman (2013) argues convincingly that agnosticism cannot be understood as a form of non-belief, she leaves open how we should understand the attitude. Some options are more radical than others. On the radical end, we might take agnosticism to a *sui generis* attitude, one to be placed on the list of fundamental cognitive attitudes. On a less radical end, we might take agnosticism to be a special case of one of our old

²¹I refrain from mentioning McHugh as a defender of doxastic voluntarism because he opposes it elsewhere (cf. McHugh (2012, 2014)) and he regards his arguments in his (forthcoming) as motivating only a trivial exception. Alvarez (MS) convincingly brings out the tension between these commitments.

attitudes—say, a higher-order belief.²² One option is a higher-order belief about the propriety of believing or about the quality of the evidence. If Discretion is false, there is a flat-footed view one might take: being agnostic about whether p just consists in taking the evidence for p to be insufficient. This view would explain the normative profile of agnosticism: agnosticism is correct iff the evidence is not sufficient just because the belief that the evidence is not sufficient is correct iff the evidence is not sufficient. Before turning to the more radical option of positing a *sui generis* attitude, I think we should put more effort into considering this type of view, which the falsity of Discretion recommends.²³

Besides telling us something about the nature of agnosticism, the falsity of Discretion also tells us something about the nature of *sufficiency* in epistemology. Or, more accurately, it shows us how to preserve a thought about it that was already attractive. Schroeder (2012) argues that when we recognize that there is a third doxastic option besides belief and disbelief, we can uphold the same account of sufficiency in the epistemic case as we had in the practical case, and thereby undermine the common thought that there is a major structural disanalogy between epistemic and practical reason. In the practical case, we want to say that:

One has sufficient reason to ϕ iff one has at least as much reason to ϕ as to do any of the alternatives to ϕ -ing.

Schroeder suggests that it is wrong to think that there is a disanalogy between practical rationality and epistemic rationality simply because one cannot rationally believe p whenever if one has at least as much reason to believe p as to believe $\neg p$. That alone yields no disanalogy with practical rationality, since there is another alternative to believing P than believing $\neg p$: namely, agnosticism. With that alternative in view, one might suggest that one has sufficient reason to believe p iff one has at least as much reason to believe p as to disbelieve p and to be agnostic about whether p . But if Discretion is false, a disanalogy between practical and epistemic sufficiency remains. One will need more reason to believe p than to be agnostic about p , since one can never have as much reason to believe as to be agnostic. Any apparent case of that form is really a case

²²As Bergmann (2005) suggests.

²³Our discussion has a related upshot bearing on Friedman’s work. Friedman (MS) suggests that there is a connection between agnosticism and inquiry. She draws attention to what she calls *inquiring attitudes*, which are question-directed phenomena like wondering whether p , deliberating about whether p , and contemplating whether p . She recommends the biconditional that one is suspended about whether p iff one is inquiring into whether p and suggests that being suspended about whether p is the core inquiring attitude—the inquiring attitude one hosts if one hosts any inquiring attitude. This story needs finessing, I think, because the things Friedman calls inquiring attitudes are activities, not attitudes. There is an activity that tends to cause agnosticism, and that activity is aptly named “withholding” or “suspending”. But we should separate process and product here, which Friedman (MS) does not (though Friedman (2013) does). If we do, however, the connection between inquiry and agnosticism breaks down. One reason is anticipated by Friedman (2013): one can be agnostic about p without inquiring into whether p . But there is another reason: one can inquire further into whether p even if one is not agnostic about p , if one has an intellectual interest in something more demanding than humdrum knowledge (say, certainty or conclusive reasons).

in which either belief or agnosticism is right. Practical and epistemic sufficiency can't be given the same treatment, because while it is clear that we can have discretion to plump for various alternatives in the practical case, the same does not go for the epistemic case.

There is a last important implication that I will mention: the falsity of Discretion would lend further support to the project of divorcing the rational and the justified in epistemology, and suggests that it should be a recognizable distinction even assuming a traditional evidentialist epistemology on which evidence is given by non-factive mental states. For if Discretion is false, there will be very clear candidates for excusable epistemic wrongdoing that could occur even in the demon world. Underconfident agents are naturally diagnosed in this way. Plausibly, underconfidence is often excusable because it is not hard to have rational but false beliefs about whether the evidence is sufficient. Sure, a non-factive mentalist might also be a level-bridger and insist that the evidence for P is automatically sufficient whenever it is rational to believe that it is sufficient. But that strong claim is not an essential feature of mentalist evidentialism. One might have hoped to avoid resting the fate of traditional evidentialism on the strong claim that rational beliefs about the sufficiency of the evidence are infallible.

These points tell us something interesting about the dialectic between traditional evidentialists and externalists. If Discretion is false, we can give the internalist evidentialist a very clear example of what excusable epistemic wrongdoing would look like that is consistent with her non-factive mentalism. We can agree that this example is not one of mere blamelessness, following Pryor (2001: 117). But we can note that doesn't matter, since major writers on the distinction between justification and excuse deny that excusability is mere blamelessness: rather, excusability it consists in responsiveness to apparent reasons, which may not be real reasons.²⁴ That distinction consistent with non-factive mentalism by itself, given the falsity of Discretion. It only collapses if we also opt for a further piece of internalist equipment that some internalists might well want to avoid—namely, a level-bridging view of higher-order evidence.

Now, traditional evidentialists cannot comfortably object to the externalist's appeal to the distinction between justification and excusability unless they can themselves avoid relying on this distinction. But they need a reason to think that no cases of underconfidence are cases of excusable wrongdoing. If Discretion is false, that further reason has to be a strong level-bridging view of higher-order evidence. So, if Discretion is false, traditional evidentialists seem dialectically committed to that view. That is striking. One might have hoped to separate the level-bridging view from non-factive mentalism. Perhaps there are arguments for non-factive mentalism that don't carry this commitment. But the main argument has been the new evil demon argument, and a friend of that argument must resist the justification/excuse distinction in epistemology.

²⁴See Gardner (2007) and Littlejohn (2011: 44-45)'s discussion of him and this point.

6 Conclusion

Let's recap. I began by attacking two arguments for Discretion. According to the first, Discretion is a consequence of the fact that we are never required to believe what the evidence supports. This is a bad argument for Discretion because it turns crucially on conflating agnosticism with mere absence of belief. The fact that one violates no epistemic norm in lacking belief with respect to a proposition that is sufficiently evidentially supported does not show that agnosticism is permitted, since the absence of belief is compatible with the absence of agnosticism. In cases where one considers a proposition that is obviously sufficiently evident (e.g., the proposition that most dogs do not speak English) and responds to it with agnosticism, we find that to be an absurdly underconfident response.

According to the second argument, Discretion is supported by cases where the evidence is sufficient but not conclusive (e.g., BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY). I observed first that to the extent that it is intuitive in these variants of these cases that one is rationally agnostic about the relevant factual proposition, it will be plausible that one is not really confident that the evidence is sufficient. If one is fully confident that the evidence is sufficient (which is hard to believe in cases like BIG LIZARD TESTIMONY), it will again seem like one is not fully rational in responding with agnosticism. I suggested that these data are best explained by the negation of Discretion. I also observed that it is plausible that before one takes a stand on the relevant factual proposition, one will first gain some higher-order evidence concerning the sufficiency of one's evidence: if one believes, it will seem clear that the evidence is good enough, and if one is agnostic, it will seem unclear that the evidence is good enough. This creates trouble for the defender of Discretion, I argued. And it does so *whatever* we think about the impact of higher-order evidence on first-order evidence.

Having found more evidence against Discretion than for it in considering these arguments, I proceeded to give a direct argument against Discretion. I first suggested that we need a story about the nature of agnosticism that explains why it is irrationally underconfident to believe outright that the evidence is clearly sufficient while responding with agnosticism. While I did not give an analysis of agnosticism, I suggested that the best explanation of this datum about irrationality is that agnosticism about p constitutively requires being at least temporarily against proceeding as if p and against proceeding as if $\neg p$. I showed that this is an extremely natural thing to think about capital-'A'-agnosticism, and that we should generalize from that case. I then showed that if we do this, we get a direct argument against Discretion. For on this type of account, agnosticism and belief oppose each other in a way that makes it impossible for one to have sufficient reason for either at one time.

Of course, this left us without much of an explanation for why we found Discretion attractive. So I gave an error theory: we confuse a properly epistemic permission to be in the state of agnosticism with a practical permission to perform certain belief-affecting acts, where that practical permission may itself be supported by intellectual penchants

(say, a penchant for certainty). I showed that this error theory is empirically plausible and gives a unified explanation of why people were led astray by the two arguments discussed earlier in the paper. While one might respond to my error theory by saying that SAP is all we needed anyway, I proceeded in the next section to show that this claim is wrong: SAP alone cannot do the work that Discretion has been asked to do, and so it matters if Discretion is false.

At the very least, I hope to have shown that Discretion is far from obviously true, as many have assumed. While other arguments for Discretion might be forthcoming, I would hope that they are equipped to grapple with the difficulties I have raised and avoid the conflation that lie behind the standard cases for Discretion. Of course, it would be modest to forbear from declaring Discretion false. But I think we also have sufficient reason to disbelieve it. So, if we take any doxastic attitude towards it at all, it ought to be disbelief. It certainly shouldn't be agnosticism.

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