

# Beginning in Wonder: Suspensive Attitudes and Epistemic Dilemmas<sup>\*†</sup>

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Errol Lord

University of Pennsylvania

Kurt Sylvan

University of Southampton

## 1 Introduction

Normative theorists have never been fans of deontic dilemmas—situations in which one reacts in a forbidden way no matter how one reacts. The moral domain is where we’ve seen the most handwringing over dilemmas. Most see them as anathema. A certain sort of sensibility takes them to be an inevitable result of the essential tragedy of the world. All agree that, as a practical matter, one should avoid them.

Despite the serious attention dilemmas have received by moral theorists, they have received less attention from epistemologists. One reason why, we suspect, is that it has been orthodox to think that all epistemic normativity flows from a single fundamental epistemic value (usually *truth* or *knowledge*). This monist view about fundamental epistemic value gives rise to optimism about a further monist view about contributory support—viz., the idea that there is only one source of contributory support. The best arguments for moral dilemmas seem to depend on pluralistic sources of contributory support. One’s duties to one’s children might have their say *and* one’s duties to justice might have their say; the rub—or tragedy—is that they sometimes say different things.

As the existence of this volume shows, epistemic dilemmas are no longer ignored. This is largely because recent epistemology has brought to light various phenomena that make epistemic normativity look more pluralistic. One debate that has forcefully brought this to the fore is about *higher-order evidence*. To get a feel for things, consider Hypoxia (inspired by Elga (MS), Schoenfeld (2015)):

**Hypoxia:** Anjali is a pilot in flight. She has to calculate whether she has enough fuel to make it to her destination. She does some easy calculations and concludes that she

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<sup>\*</sup>Thanks to Nick Hughes, Daniel Whiting...

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does have enough fuel. Air traffic control then contacts her and informs her that she is currently flying under conditions that make it 75% likely that she has hypoxia, which is a condition that severely hampers one's arithmetic abilities. As it happens, the calculations she performed are correct.

One source of contributory support is clear in this case. This is the force of the first-order evidence. The first-order evidence clearly supports believing that she does have enough fuel. By stipulation, this is a matter of easy arithmetic.

Nevertheless, there is a second source of contributory support. This is the *higher-order evidence*. This evidence comes from the testimony of the air traffic controllers. The fact that they said that there is a 75% chance that she is hypoxic bears on which doxastic attitude Anjali should hold, but not because it provides evidence for or against the claim that she has enough fuel. Despite not providing such evidence, it looks like it makes it rational for Anjali to not believe that she has enough fuel.

There are many different theoretical reactions to such examples. One is dilemmic. It maintains that *both* sources of contributory support issue honest-to-goodness requirements. The first-order evidence demands believing that there is enough fuel. The higher-order evidence demands something other than belief—most plausibly, suspension of judgment.

The plausibility of the dilemmic reaction turns on whether one can give a theory that harmonizes the first-order and higher-order evidence. Recent theorists have been increasingly pessimistic about the prospects for harmony. Indeed, [Lasonen-Aarnio \(2014, 2020\)](#) argues that, no matter what, we should expect disharmony. This is because higher-order evidence comes cheap. Take a theory that says that, in order to have a justified belief that  $p$ , one's belief that  $p$  has to have feature  $F$ . Now imagine a case where one's belief that  $p$  has  $F$  at  $t$ . At  $t_1$ , a highly reliable but not infallible epistemic oracle comes along and falsely tells one that one's belief that  $p$  does not have  $F$ . The higher-order evidence provided by this testimony seems to bear on which doxastic reactions are permitted. But, by stipulation, one's belief has the special feature  $F$ . The factors that contribute to having feature  $F$  provide one source of contributory support; the higher-order evidence is another source of contributory support. And it looks like these are bound to conflict in at least some cases. This is a result that dilemmic epistemologists should want.<sup>1</sup>

Cases of misleading higher-order evidence can be used to generate a second sort of potential epistemic dilemma. Hypoxia highlights the situation nicely. By stipulation, the first-order evidence supports believing there is enough fuel. As we just saw, the higher-order evidence seems to directly bear on whether Anjali should believe there is enough fuel; when it

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<sup>1</sup>Although, of course, this doesn't show that there are dilemmas. It just makes it easier to stomach them if the two sources are bound to conflict. One can avoid dilemmas with conflict by maintaining that one source takes precedence. This is what [Weatherson \(2019\)](#) advocates—on his view, the first-order evidence always takes precedence. One sort of conciliationist about the higher-order evidence provided by peer disagreement advocates the flip position—that the higher-order evidence always wins (see [Lord & Sylvan \(FC\)](#) for more discussion).

comes to *that* question, the higher-order evidence suggests that Anjali shouldn't believe there is enough fuel. The higher-order evidence also speaks to other questions. For example, it speaks to the question of what Anjali should believe about what the evidence supports. It seems to forbid Anjali from believing that the evidence sufficiently supports believing that there is enough fuel; let's say that it requires that Anjali suspend judgment about whether the evidence sufficiently supports that belief. Thus, the first-order evidence that bears on whether there is enough fuel recommends believing that there is, while the evidence that bears on whether the evidence sufficiently supports believing there is enough fuel recommends suspending judgment about whether the evidence is sufficient.

The upshot is that it looks like the evidence demands that Anjali believe that there is enough fuel but suspend judgment about whether the evidence sufficiently supports this belief. This looks incoherent in a rationally problematic way. Indeed, it is plausible that there are rational requirements that forbid this sort of incoherence. Weak Evidence-Belief is one such requirement:

**Weak Evidence-Belief:** One is rationally required not to [believe  $p$  if one suspends judgment about whether the evidence sufficiently supports  $p$ ].

We can make the incoherence even starker if instead of learning that there is a 75% chance that she is hypoxic, Anjali is told by the epistemic oracle that the evidence doesn't support believing that there is enough fuel. In that case, it looks like the first-order evidence recommends believing that there is enough fuel and the higher-order evidence recommends believing that the evidence does not support believing that there is enough fuel. This combination seems irrationally incoherent. Indeed, it seems like there is a rational requirement that directly forbids this incoherence:

**Strong Evidence-Belief:** One is rationally required not to [believe  $p$  if one believes that the evidence does not sufficiently support  $p$ ].

Here again we get two sources of contributory support. We have the evidence—first- and higher-order—and we have requirements that forbid incoherence. Cases of misleading higher-order evidence show that these can fail to harmonize. One reaction to this failure is dilemmic. The coherence requirements are honest-to-goodness requirements *and* the evidential requirements are honest-to-goodness requirements. The tragedy is that they can conflict in these sorts of cases.

This way of thinking about the dilemma makes it a special case of a more general sort of conflict that has been discussed independently of the literature on higher-order evidence: the conflict between coherence requirements and the requirements of reasons. Reflection on that literature brings out some further potential examples of dilemmas that we will discuss at the end of the paper. One further example is the tension between evidential requirements and requirements of consistency in a narrower sense, such as the requirement that one's total set of beliefs be deductively consistent.

The main goal of this paper is to dispel these dilemmas. The initial insight is that we can't reliably judge the plausibility of the dilemmic views without a detailed understanding of the *options* that are available to epistemic subjects. After all, whether you have any requirements—much less multiple incompatible ones—depends on what your options are. So we won't know how plausible it is to think there are epistemic dilemmas until we fully understand the relevant epistemic options. The literature on options in epistemology remains scandalously underdeveloped. The default view recognizes three coarse-grained options: belief, disbelief, and a neutral option variously called 'agnosticism', 'suspension' or 'withholding'. Only recently has there been serious work on the neutral option, with Friedman (2013, 2017, 2019, FCB) taking the lead.

To put some of our cards on the table: we think a better understanding of epistemology's neutral middle resolves conflicts between first-order and higher-order evidence. This is a hypothesis that we have already explored in earlier work, in which we argued that direct reasons for suspension of judgment can be derived from a more sophisticated view about the nature and rational profile of suspension of judgment.<sup>2</sup> We will extend this hypothesis here by arguing that epistemology's neutral options are richer than we had previously suggested. One clue to the extended hypothesis is given by reflecting on the potentially important differences suggested by existing labels for the neutral option; for example, e.g., 'agnosticism' and 'suspended judgment' are subtly but importantly different, and the words used in other historically important languages in epistemology are also suggestive (e.g., the Pyrrhonist's term *epoché* translates as stopped, paused, or held back). We suspect that the existing labels communicate subtly different concepts. But our main aim is to introduce some more joint-carving concepts which allow us to appreciate a variety of coarse-grained middle ways between hardline belief and hardline disbelief.

Our particular strategy rests on a distinction between a narrower kind of neutral attitude on the question of whether *p* that entails *closing the question*, and a wider kind of neutral attitude that doesn't entail closing the question, and which rather embodies perfect open-mindedness. We think a proper understanding of the second, more open-minded attitude solves Lasonen-Aarnio's extended puzzle. The oracle can mess with you a good deal, but she can't get you into an epistemic dilemma. Her powers are limited, since there is a kind of openness of mind that is always epistemically permitted (even in cases where practical reasons demand *acceptance*). We also provide a hypothesis about why this wider neutral option is special. It is, we suggest, the most general question-directed option for the doxastic deliberator to take.

With these ideas in view, here is the plan for the paper. In Section 2, we will look more carefully at the assumptions that are needed first to generate dilemmas from applying enkratic requirements and consistency requirements to HOE cases, and then to generate the wider argument developed by Lasonen-Aarnio (2014, 2020). In line with earlier work, we will hypothesize that these assumptions can be undermined by positing direct reasons for suspension of judgment which flow from the constitutive norms of suspension of judgment, which are not

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<sup>2</sup>See Lord & Sylvan (FC).

simple evidentialist norms or simple coherence norms. But we will also explain why an earlier version of our hypothesis will need to be expanded to address Lasonen-Aarnio's puzzle. In Section 3, we develop a new account of the thinker's options which vindicates this expanded hypothesis. We then explain in Section 4 how that vindication works. We conclude in Section 5 with some hopeful suggestions about how the strategy in this paper generalizes to defuse other purported dilemmas. We stress in advance that we think the wider issue of how to demarcate the epistemic must be settled for the strategy to provide reassurance that there are no lurking dilemmas of another kind. We are, however, happy to conclude that as far as epistemology in its classic sense is concerned, there are none.

## 2 The Case for Dilemmas: Some Underlying Assumptions and an Optimistic Hypothesis

### 2.1 From Simple Higher-Order Evidence to Dilemmas

Our first task is to more fully explicate the reasoning that leads to a dilemmic reaction on the basis of what we'll call *simple higher-order evidence cases* (their simplicity will become apparent in the next subsection). We'll continue to use Hypoxia:

**Hypoxia:** Anjali is a pilot in flight. She has to calculate whether she has enough fuel to make it to her destination. She does the calculations and concludes that she does have enough fuel. Air traffic control then contacts her and informs her that she is currently flying under conditions that make it 75% likely that she has hypoxia, which is a condition that severely hampers one's arithmetic abilities. As it happens, the calculations she performed are correct.

What we're looking for, of course, are two incompatible requirements. The first-order evidence has its say, and it recommends Anjali believe that there is enough fuel. It makes this recommendation because it entails that there is enough fuel. Indeed, the fact of entailment renders the evidence *decisive*. Given the following tempting requirement, the decisiveness of the evidence seems to generate an obligation to believe  $p$ :

**Conclusive Evidence:** If the evidence in favor of  $p$  is decisive, and  $S$  possesses this evidence, then  $S$  ought to believe that  $p$ .

The higher-order evidence also has its say. While it is, at this point, unclear just how the mechanics of higher-order evidence works, it is plausible that there are systematic connections between the rationality of beliefs about our rational position and the rationality of our first-order beliefs. In particular, Level Bridging seems plausible:

**Level Bridging:** If there is a strong undefeated reason to believe that one lacks sufficient reason to have doxastic attitude  $D$ , then one is rationally required not to have  $D$ .

Anjali's higher-order evidence provides strong undefeated reason to believe that she lacks sufficient reason to believe that she has enough fuel. Thus, it follows from Level Bridging that she ought not to believe that she has enough fuel. Thus, if both Conclusive Evidence and Level Bridging are true, then Anjali is in a dilemma. She can believe that she has enough fuel or she can fail to believe she has enough fuel. If she does the former, she complies with Conclusive Evidence but transgresses Level Bridging; if she does the latter, she complies with Level Bridging but transgresses Conclusive Evidence.

In previous work (Lord & Sylvan (FC)), we've argued against principles like Conclusive Evidence. What generates epistemic obligations are the epistemic *reasons*. In other words, Conclusive Reason is true:

**Conclusive Reason:** If the reasons in favor of some doxastic option  $D$  are decisive, and  $S$  possesses those reasons, then  $S$  ought to have  $D$ .

Don't get us wrong: evidence does provide epistemic reasons. But in order to turn Conclusive Evidence into Conclusive Reason you need to add something like Logico-Evidentialism about Epistemic Reasons:<sup>3</sup>

**Logico-Evidentialism about Epistemic Reasons:** If one's evidence entails or overall strongly confirms  $p$ , then there is always decisive epistemic reason to believe that  $p$ .

As we'll see, the problem with Logico-Evidentialism about Epistemic Reasons is that it ignores the impact that reasons for *suspension* can have on one's rational situation. It is common to think that suspension is one of the epistemic options. Yet many have failed to follow through on how this impacts the rational power of the first-order evidence.

In Lord & Sylvan (FC) we argued that once we turn our attention to reasons for suspension, we can harmonize Anjali's situation. The basic idea is that the higher-order evidence directly provides decisive reason to suspend judgment. And when one has decisive reason to suspend judgment, one cannot have sufficient reason to believe. Thus, it is simply not the case that the first-order evidence gives rise to a requirement to believe. Conclusive Evidence is false.

## 2.2 The Epistemic Oracle Strikes

Anjali's situation is straightforwardly addressed. One might suspect that the strategy will way-lay any dilemmic concerns: once we have suspension in our toolkit, we can harmonize all

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<sup>3</sup>This formulation is slightly different from the one given in Lord & Sylvan (FC).

sources of ostensible conflicting support. In the end, we will argue that this is the case. But matters are more complicated than we let on in Lord & Sylvan (FC). They are complicated primarily because of how easy it is to generate higher-order evidence.

This is brought out nicely by Lasonen-Aarnio (2014, 2020). She argues that no matter which property one thinks confers justification on a doxastic attitude, it is always possible to come across some misleading higher-order evidence that demands that one believe that one's first-order attitudes lack that property. When applied to our theory, Lasonen-Aarnio's claim is that it is always possible to come to possess misleading higher-order evidence that one lacks sufficient reason to suspend on  $p$ .

We can dramatize the problem by positing a highly reliable yet fallible epistemic oracle. Suppose Anjali gets the higher-order evidence about the hypoxia at time  $t$ . She revises her view as we recommend and suspends judgment. On our view, this is rational because she possesses decisive reason to suspend. Now the epistemic oracle gets on the mic and tells her (the falsehood) that she lacks sufficient reason to suspend judgment. This new bit of higher-order evidence seems to bear on what she epistemically ought to do just like the information about hypoxia. And, at least at first, it is not clear why the oracle's testimony can't defeat her reasons to suspend just like the hypoxia information defeated her reasons to believe.

If the oracle's testimony can defeat her reasons to suspend, then it looks like we can get dilemmas going again. After all, Conclusive Reason demands that Anjali suspend judgment—there are decisive reasons to suspend (the oracle's testimony is false). But Level Bridging seems to require her not to suspend. The oracle's testimony provides strong undefeated reason to believe that she lacks sufficient reason to suspend. Thus, it looks like she both ought to suspend and ought not suspend.

The epistemic oracle is a powerful tool for dilemmic epistemologists. It looks like the ultimate supplier of defeat. This is why Lasonen-Aarnio makes the pessimistic induction that no theory of epistemic justification (or rationality) can avoid disharmony with higher-order evidence.

It is worth noting one further upshot of the oracle's power. The oracle's power resides, it seems, in her ability to provide sufficient reason for various higher-order beliefs about one's rational position. When it comes to Anjali, it is the belief that she lacks sufficient reason to suspend. Hence, the oracle can also generate dilemmas between Conclusive Reason and the sort of coherence requirements discussed in §1. It looks like the only way Anjali can comply with the requirements of reason is by believing that she lacks sufficient reason to suspend whilst suspending. If that's right, then complying with the requirements of reason guarantees that she violates Strong Suspend-Belief:

**Strong Suspend-Belief:** One is rationally required not to [suspend about  $p$  if one believes that one lacks sufficient reason to suspend about  $p$ ].

Thus, it looks like the oracle can put Anjali in two dilemmas.

The oracle certainly complicates matters. We grant that the story sketched in the previous section cannot immediately neutralize the oracle's powers. However, we think that our basic

strategy does succeed. That is, we think that reflection on the rational profile of the neutral alternative to belief and disbelief shows that the oracle cannot generate dilemmas. The key is to appreciate the variety of ways in which one can adopt a neutral attitude on a question. The oracle's testimony can defeat the reasons for some kinds of neutral attitudes, but not all.

### 3 The Varieties of Epistemic Neutrality and the Avoidance of Dilemmas

As we've previewed, our optimism rests on the idea that there is a genuine third option in epistemology besides belief and disbelief. In fact, there are several importantly different forms of this neutral third option. We suspect that all kinds of dilemmas can be avoided by recognizing the full variety of forms of epistemic neutrality, and in effect provide an inductive argument in this paper for this hypothesis by considering the most compelling putative examples of epistemic dilemmas and showing that our hypothesis resolves them.

The idea that suspension is a genuine third option has become prominent through the work of Jane Friedman, and our thinking is partly inspired by hers (though at key points we will disagree with her most recent work).<sup>4</sup> Friedman (2013) started by arguing that suspension cannot be identified with any kind of non-belief, including intentional non-belief, and suggested in response to her arguments that it is an attitude in its own right. She went on in Friedman (2017, 2019) to develop a positive account of suspension of judgment as a kind of inquiring attitude. We agree with Friedman that the relevant alternatives to belief and disbelief are genuine attitudes in their own right (and not mere non-belief), and we also agree that there is a close connection between some of these attitudes and inquiry (understood in a certain way). But we think that there are importantly different neutral attitudes to questions that must be distinguished. Each will prove important in our anti-dilemmic approach, we will see in the next section.

Before we proceed, we will address a concern by putting some further cards on the table. One might worry that we will be proliferating attitudes in an *ad hoc* way, and that it would be preferable to have a simpler view. But we think attitudes come pretty cheap, partly because we assume a broadly functionalist approach. We accept a plenitudinous ontology of attitudes, with any consistent functional role in principle corresponding to an attitude; some are distinguished and deserving of names merely because their functional roles have greater theoretical significance. As a result, we think there is good reason for officially recognizing the different neutral doxastic attitudes we are about to describe, because of the relevance of each functional role for solving problems in epistemology. Moreover, as we will see, our view is simpler than it may seem at first: we will single out one of these neutral attitudes as the most general form of epistemic neutrality, and offer a hypothesis about how the others are related to it.

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<sup>4</sup>See Friedman (2013, 2017, 2019) especially.



### 3.1 Distinctions: Closed Neutrality, Open Neutrality, and the Act of Withholding

With these remarks out of the way, let's begin to consider some distinctive forms of epistemic neutrality, where epistemic neutrality in every case is understood (following Friedman) as a question-directed attitude—i.e., one is always neutral about <whether  $p$ ?>. One important distinction is a distinction between a form of doxastic neutrality that *closes* the question of whether  $p$ , and a form of doxastic neutrality that embodies a kind of open-mindedness about the question of whether  $p$ . This distinction is usefully understood by contrasting one sort of religious agnostic with Pyrrhonian skeptics.

One central kind of religious agnostic closes their mind to the question of whether God exists, at least for the time being: they commit to an undecided attitude and treat their epistemic situation as meriting this attitude rather than others. This close-mindedness will be rational provided that the religious agnostic lacks sufficient evidence to believe that God exists or to disbelieve that God exists and perhaps doesn't believe that they could easily, or ever, acquire such evidence. This agnostic doesn't rule out that God exists, or that they might eventually be persuaded to change their mind. But their view is settled for now. As a result, this agnostic will often not be inquiring further into God's existence unless some new reasons become apparent.

At least as portrayed by Sextus Empiricus,<sup>5</sup> The Pyrrhonian skeptic self-describes as 'still inquiring'—not merely into God's existence, of course, but into every question. Pyrrhonian skeptics can hence be understood as radically open-minded. Such universal open-mindedness is not rationally required, of course. But a more limited form of open-mindedness is often highly sensible. On questions of metaphysics and epistemology, for example, open-mindedness is a characteristic of some of the best philosophers. Open-mindedness of this kind is compatible with having not yet formed commitments of any kind, including agnosticism of the preceding sort. For this reason, we can treat such open-mindedness as a commitment-neutral attitude.

A comparison and contrast with belief (and disbelief) helps to draw out the contours of close-minded neutrality versus open-minded neutrality. Belief involves *commitment* when it comes to  $p$ . In other words, when you believe that  $p$ , we can say that your intellectual outlook contains the view that  $p$ . With belief, the commitment you have about  $p$  involves a stand on the truth of  $p$ . This is one way to have a commitment about <whether  $p$ ?>. Closed-minded neutrality also involves a commitment about <whether  $p$ ?>. This commitment is a sort of *shutting down* of the question. To have this commitment involves being disposed to set the question aside, at least for now.

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<sup>5</sup>We will contrast the Pyrrhonist with another global skeptical figure—namely, the Mādhyamaka Buddhist. But there is significant historical evidence that Pyrrho himself was influenced by ideas in early Buddhism that would later develop into Mādhyamaka Buddhism, and was much closer to this option than to Pyrrhonism as described by Sextus. See ? for a cautious take on the evidence, and Beckwith (2017) for the view that Pyrrho in effect became a Buddhist after visiting India with Alexander the Great.

In contrast, open-minded neutrality does not involve a commitment in the same way as belief and close-minded neutrality.<sup>6</sup> Open-minded neutrality, at its most extreme, merely involves *considering* <whether  $p$ ?>. Thus, when you take a neutral attitude that is perfectly open-minded, you have not taken any particular stand on the question; rather, you have, as it were, offered it up as a candidate for a commitment.

It is worth emphasizing that we are describing this kind of open-mindedness as *commitment-neutral* vis-à-vis the question of <whether  $p$ ?> rather than *commitment-excluding*. ‘Commitment-neutrality’ means compatibility with a lack of commitment, not incompatibility with commitment. We draw this distinction because we want to allow that one’s commitments may themselves be described as more or less open-minded. Consider (Bowie, 1976, Track 3)’s line, ‘Just because I believe don’t mean I don’t think as well.’ One thing that Bowie might mean is that there is a kind of belief that is compatible with continued inquiry. Regardless of what Bowie meant, we think this is a plausible idea that could prove illuminating for understanding belief which is entirely free from dogmatism. The Pyrrhonists, indeed, are sometimes interpreted not as being free of all beliefs, but rather free from *dogmatic* beliefs.<sup>7</sup> One way of developing this idea would be to treat it as being possible to believe while at the same time suspending in one way, by allowing a kind of inquiry to continue.

Together with this point, it is worth distinguishing between two senses in which one might be ‘still inquiring’ (to use the Pyrrhonist’s phrase). One way to be ‘still inquiring’ is to be in a state of mind that disposes one to try to settle the question of whether  $p$ , where this presupposes that one hasn’t yet settled whether  $p$ , and hence still ‘holds  $p$  in question.’ This form of inquiry excludes the other commitments—belief, disbelief, and closed-minded neutrality. But it does not seem to us that all inquiring attitudes work this way, at least if the class of inquiring attitudes is just understood as the class of question-directed attitudes that runs the gamut from merely *considering* whether  $p$  to *seeking to determine* whether  $p$ . One can have the conviction that  $p$  while still considering the issue of whether  $p$ , and indeed while still wondering whether  $p$ . And this consideration of whether  $p$  amounts to more than merely tokening the question of whether  $p$  in thought, in the way that one might if one merely heard someone utter a question and understood what that person was saying. While we agree that inquiry doesn’t begin that soon upon encountering a question, we also think it begins earlier than suggested by Friedman (FCb): it is not necessary to have the question of whether  $p$  on one’s research agenda (in anything like the normal sense) in order to be considering it in a way that counts as inquiry (albeit not research).

In any case, even if one doesn’t find this compelling as a claim about inquiry, we don’t need to put all the emphasis on the word ‘inquiry.’ There is, we think, a clear difference between someone who merely tokens a question in thought (e.g., after hearing and understand-

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<sup>6</sup>As we’ll see, there is a variety of open-minded neutrality that involves a commitment. But what we will call *strong* open-minded neutrality does not. This will be crucial to our resolution of dilemmas.

<sup>7</sup>See Frede (1987) though we will not be assuming (as Frede seems to assume) that dogmatic beliefs are distinguished by their content, but rather by their having a property of being dogmatic; any belief could be dogmatically held, as we are understanding the idea.

ing it), and someone who exhibits the kind of consideration toward that question that we ordinarily would call inquisitive. Our way of drawing this distinction is to suggest that the inquisitive person is alive to the reasons that bear on the question of whether  $p$ , where this consists in a disposition to be responsive to the reasons that bear on the question of whether  $p$ . To have the attitude that disposes one to consider a question in this way isn't psychologically taxing: simply having the disposition to be responsive to reasons doesn't take up mental space in the way that doing research into a question does. As we will later suggest, this person exhibits the *most general inquisitive attitude*, and one can exhibit this attitude without going through the mental motions of reasoning and deliberation that constitute research.

A final distinction is in order before we give our taxonomy in brief. We started off by contrasting close-minded and open-minded attitudes, and then saw that there are two kinds of open-minded attitudes. There is also a further distinction within close-minded attitudes. The religious agnostic of the kind discussed earlier closes their mind to the question of whether God exists for the time being, but leaves open whether they might be persuaded otherwise on a future occasion. In this way, although their stand is justified by the insufficiency of their current evidence, it might be overturned if more evidence were to be acquired. In this way, there is still a limited way in which they are open-minded about the question of whether God exists. This attitude should be contrasted with the attitude of the Mādhyamaka Buddhist toward metaphysical questions, at least if such questions are understood as questions about essences. The Mādhyamaka Buddhist rejects these questions in an effort to avoid using the concepts in which such questions are couched. For an illustration, consider the way in which the Buddha is described in the Pali Canon taking any questions about the existence of the saint after attaining nirvana as 'not fitting the case.' Such questions resemble the question of whether a fire has gone north, south, east, or west upon extinguishing:

'Gautama, where is the priest reborn who has attained this deliverance for his mind?'

'Vaccha, to say that he is reborn would not fit the case.'

'Then, Gautama, he is not reborn.'

'Vaccha, to say that he is not reborn would not fit the case.'

'Then, Gautama, he is both reborn and not reborn.'

'Vaccha, to say that he is both reborn and not reborn would not fit the case.'

'Then, Gautama, he is neither reborn nor not reborn.'

'Vaccha, to say that he is neither reborn nor not reborn would not fit the case.'

'Gautama, I am at a loss what to think in this matter, and I have become greatly confused...'

'Vaccha, if someone were to ask you, 'In which direction has that fire gone—east, or west, or north, or south?' what would you say, O Vaccha?'

‘The question would not fit the case, Gautama ...’

‘In exactly the same way, Vaccha, all form by which one could predicate the existence of the saint, all that form has been abandoned ...’<sup>8</sup>

The recommendation here is not to be open-minded about whether the saint is reborn, but to reject the question. Mādhyamaka Buddhism more generally takes this attitude toward metaphysical questions. In so doing, it is advocating for a stronger version of close-mindedness than the religious agnostic described above. Rather than just *setting the question aside*, as the agnostic does, the Mādhyamaka Buddhist is *burying the question*.

This kind of question-rejecting attitude can take a less comprehensive form. In our earlier work, we described the anti-interrogative attitude of someone who wants to insulate themselves from a question which is both unanswerable given their evidence and uninteresting. When one is closed-minded in this sense, one is disposed to *ignore* considerations that are germane for answering the question. This provides the more general contrast for the Pyrrhonist’s radical open-mindedness, but it is also to be distinguished from the religious agnostic we described earlier who merely brackets the question without deciding to insulate herself from it.

With these cases in mind, we can more officially distinguish several forms of neutral attitude toward a question:

**Strongly Close-Minded Neutrality:** One exhibits strongly close-minded neutrality about whether  $p$  iff one has a settled agnosticism about whether  $p$ , where that is a state of mind that disposes one to treat one’s evidence for  $p$  as insufficient to justify belief or disbelief in  $p$  and disposes one not to evaluate the relevance of new information to whether  $p$ .

**Weakly Close-Minded Neutrality:** One exhibits weakly close-minded neutrality about whether  $p$  at  $t$  iff one has an unsettled agnosticism about whether  $p$ , where that is a state of mind that disposes one to not treat one’s evidence for  $p$  and for  $\neg p$  at  $t$  as sufficient to justify belief or disbelief.

**Weakly Open-Minded Neutrality:** One exhibits weakly open-minded neutrality about whether  $p$  iff one is in an inquisitive state of mind vis-a-vis  $p$  which disposes one to try to settle the question of whether  $p$  by adopting belief, disbelief, or close-minded neutrality.

**Strongly Open-Minded Neutrality:** One exhibits strongly open-minded neutrality about whether  $p$  iff one is in an inquisitive state of mind vis-a-vis  $p$  which, on its own, just disposes one to wonder whether  $p$ , where that involves adopting a disposition to be responsive to the reasons that bear on the question of whether  $p$  (though one may not yet incline toward any particular response to these reasons).

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<sup>8</sup>The translation is from Radhakrishnan and Moore (1967).

The first variety of suspension corresponds to one interpretation of the Mādhyamaka Buddhist,<sup>9</sup> and is on one extreme of the closed-open spectrum. The second variety of suspension corresponds to the attitude of the most familiar sort of religious agnostic. The third and fourth varieties of suspension correspond to different ways of thinking about the Pyrrhonist's state of mind. Neither of these attitudes treats one's evidence as insufficient—such a stand would be overly committal. The second is more open-minded than the first, given that inquiry into whether  $p$  only makes sense if one allows that there is some reason to think sufficient evidence could be found beyond one's current evidence. One may, however, not be committed even to that, and hence have an attitude of mere wondering about the case for any attitude toward  $p$ . Which of these attitudes corresponds to the universally adopted attitude of the historical Pyrrhonist is unclear, but both are interesting options.

All of these forms of suspension are *question-directed attitudes*. But they bear different relations to inquiry, or at least to the property of inquisitiveness with respect to a question (which is a dispositional property that may not be manifested, and which may be temporarily masked by other concerns). The final two attitudes—the open-minded attitudes—are forms of inquisitiveness with respect to a question, and Strongly Open-Minded Neutrality, we propose, is in fact the *most general* inquisitive attitude (more on this momentarily). The closed-minded states are not forms of inquisitiveness. Strongly Closed-Minded Neutrality is, indeed, counter-inquisitive. It is not necessarily dogmatic, however: if one holds this attitude toward a question because one takes the question to be empty, undecidable or incoherent, one is not being a dogmatist. But there is a kind of dogmatic agnosticism that is manifested by Strongly Closed-Minded Neutrality.

We take all of these forms of suspension of judgment to be options that are available to one in thinking about the question of whether  $p$ . They are all in one clear way first-order: they concern the first-order question of whether  $p$ , not a higher-order question. Nonetheless, some of them bear important normative relations to certain higher-order questions. For example, if one had sufficient evidence that believing  $p$  would be fitting, then it would be irrational to suspend in the strongly closed-minded way. It does not follow, however, that we must analyze this attitude in higher-order terms. After all, belief itself bears similar normative relations to higher-order questions: if one had sufficient evidence that believing  $p$  would be fitting, then it would be rational to believe  $p$ . Note that belief also induces certain higher-order treating dispositions: if you believe that  $p$ , there is a clear sense in which you treat the overall case for believing  $p$  as good. The fact that suspension induces similar dispositions doesn't imply that it should be analyzed in first-order terms. We mention the treating dispositions only to clarify the functional role, not to suggest that these attitudes are higher-order.

Although all these forms of suspension are options in the same sense in which belief and disbelief are options, they bear different coherence relations to belief and disbelief. It is

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<sup>9</sup>But to characterize this tradition completely, one would have to add that there is a distinctive reason for having this attitude toward certain questions—namely, emptiness (*sūnyatā*). See Garfield (1990) for a comparison with Pyrrhonism.

incoherent to suspend in a closed-minded way and also believe or disbelieve. But it is not incoherent to believe or disbelieve  $p$  while retaining a kind of open-mindedness about whether  $p$ , and indeed while continuing to inquire into whether  $p$ . Of course, it might seem misleading to suggest that a person in this more complex state of mind really suspends on whether  $p$  overall. But it is clearly possible to hold a belief while also subjecting that belief to scrutiny, and indeed while being open to being proven entirely wrong. If so, it is possible to rationally compartmentalize one's mind in such a way that one can be properly described as believing  $p$  at one level, while wondering whether  $p$  at another level. Such compartmentalization is not a form of incoherence (or at least not a kind that should be called irrational). In this way, it is different from the kind of fragmentation that appears when a person has an implicit belief that  $p$  and an explicit belief that  $\neg p$ ; this person is to some degree irrational.

Hence it is important to distinguish between options and alternatives, where alternatives are *rationally exclusive*—i.e., one cannot rationally hold more than one alternative state of mind. This distinction is generally a sensible one. In asking what to feel or to intend, one also confronts various options. These options may fail to be rationally exclusive without thereby having different intentional objects. In asking how to feel about Jones, one confronts a list of emotions: love, fear, anger, envy, respect, contempt, awe, and so on. Some are rationally exclusive, like love and contempt. Others are not, like love, respect, and awe. Just as it does not follow from the fact that one rationally loves  $X$  and respects  $Y$  that  $X$  and  $Y$  are non-identical, so it does not follow from the fact that one rationally believes  $p$  and yet still wonders and considers whether  $q$  that  $p$  and  $q$  are non-identical. Hence Bowie's line from 'Word on a Wing'.

Some propositions may be both sufficiently interesting and sufficiently difficult to evaluate that it would be entirely fitting upon reflection to believe them while still wondering more about them. Insofar as we have any philosophical beliefs, these beliefs will be good examples. If we choose good questions, we may wonder about them for the rest of our lives. But that doesn't preclude us from having philosophical beliefs. If we do have such beliefs, we are not thereby irrational for continuing to wonder. We are instead responding in an entirely fitting way.

All of these attitudes should be further distinguished from *attitude-affecting actions* which might also be described by the phrase 'withholding belief', such as actions which are intended to prevent one from forming a belief, or from manifesting certain dispositions associated with belief or other attitudes. We assume that reasons for such actions are in the first instance non-epistemic, even though the values which generate these reasons might be epistemic in a broader sense (i.e., concerned with the value *simpliciter* of cognitive states like true belief and knowledge).

Since it will be crucial to what is to come, it is important for us to argue that strongly open-minded neutrality is the most general inquisitive attitude, and hence one of the epistemic options. The main reason why is simple: inquiry—or the inquisitive—needs to be founded in a non-committal orientation towards  $\langle$ whether  $p$ ? $\rangle$ . Otherwise, inquiry will be founded in some state that already precludes some of the options. This would be overly prejudicial.

The point can be seen by reflecting on Friedman's view of inquiry. According to her view, states that constitute (something like) what we call weakly open-minded neutrality are foundational to inquiry. The problem with this is that weakly open-minded neutrality is in tension with closed-minded forms of neutrality. So if those states are foundational to inquiry, the founding state of inquiry is in rational tension with a state that looks to be one of the options for the *conclusion* of inquiry.<sup>10</sup> To put it a different way, if Friedman's view is right, then the neutral state that is at the foundation of inquiry will be a state that rationally precludes a different neutral state that, intuitively, can be the conclusion of inquiry. That is puzzling, and it forces inquiry to be too optimistic about finding an answer to <whether  $p$ ?>.

The form of this argument can be applied to all of the other options that involve commitments—i.e., all of the other options except strongly-open minded neutrality. Strongly open-minded neutrality is immune to this sort of argument precisely because it doesn't involve any commitment towards <whether  $p$ ?>. It is, to be clear, an attitude directed at <whether  $p$ >; but it doesn't involve a commitment about the question. It is directed at the question only insofar as it makes one alive to the reasons for making a commitment about the question. So it is a way of being inquisitive about <whether  $p$ ?> that is one step behind particular commitments about the question. For this reason, it seems to us to be the right sort of attitude to be the foundation of inquiry. If this is right, then it is one of the epistemic options.

### 3.2 Reasons for Suspension and the Scope of Discretion

Reasons for the neutral states are not pieces of evidence for  $p$  or for  $\neg p$ . They may be facts about one's evidence such as the fact that one's evidence is insufficient to justify believing  $p$  or believing  $\neg p$ . Hence higher-order evidence may directly provide reasons for neutral attitudes.

But it is important to bear in mind the different normative profiles of these forms of neutrality. Weak closed-mindedness will be rational when (a) it makes sense to not treat one's evidence as sufficient for justifying belief or disbelief and (b) it makes sense to not be disposed to inquire further into whether  $p$ . Conditions (a) and (b) may hold, however, even if it is not sensible to treat one's evidence as *insufficient* for justifying belief or disbelief. If it is sensible to treat one's evidence as insufficient, then strong closed-mindedness will be rational. If it is not rational to treat one's evidence as insufficient, though, weak closed-mindedness is not automatically the most sensible option. For it might be at least as sensible, or more sensible, to keep one's mind open, by staying inquisitive about whether  $p$ .

As one of us has documented elsewhere (Sylvan (2015)), a limited sort of permissivism has often been popular when options beyond belief and disbelief are considered. In particular, many have thought that unless one's evidence is decisive, it is always permissible to suspend. We think this doctrine requires significant qualification. Neutrality can itself be a commitment. This commitment may not be rational if one's evidence is sufficient to justify belief, even if it is not decisive.

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<sup>10</sup>This point has been brought out decisively by Archer (2018, 2019). We will be affirming the intuitions that drive his critique of Friedman in discussing the place of strongly open-minded neutrality.

But we think it is more plausible that the strongly open-minded neutral attitude could always be epistemically permissible. How could mere wondering about whether  $p$  be epistemically forbidden? To be sure, inquiry of the kind that is professionally carried out is resource-intensive, and one's intellectual energies might be better spent elsewhere. But here one ought to distinguish between pragmatic reasons that flow from the value or disvalue *simpliciter* of certain mental states, and properly epistemic reasons. Resource-based objections most plausibly fall into the first class. Moreover, we are distinguishing between a more resource-intensive open-mindedness (weak open-mindedness) that rationally commits one to have not answered the question, and a kind of wondering that may take place both without belief and with belief in a non-dogmatic subject. This strong sort of open-mindedness, when occurrent, is not particularly resource-intensive. Moreover, the attitude which is manifested by such wondering needn't be occurrent, and we see no cost to merely having an underlying attitude of continued wonderment or considerateness.

At any rate, these are among ideas that we will be further developing in the next section.

## 4 Against Dilemmas from Higher-Order Evidence and Coherence Requirements

### 4.1 How Direct Reasons for Suspension Dissolve the Simple FOE/HOE Dilemmas

Now we are in a position to start explaining how our considered view harmonizes the various sources of contributory support. We will start with a more precise explanation of what is going on with Anjali in the original hypoxia case.

Recall Conclusive Reason:

**Conclusive Reason:** If the reasons in favor of some doxastic option  $D$  are decisive, and  $S$  possesses those reasons, then  $S$  ought to have  $D$ .

The first-order evidence provides Anjali with strong reason to believe that she has enough fuel. Before learning about the chance of hypoxia, it is rational and probably even required for her to believe that she has enough fuel. However, things change when she finds out about the chance of hypoxia. This provides a very strong reason to suspend about whether she has enough fuel. This reason plausibly defeats her reasons to believe. The only rational option is suspension.

This story explains why Logico-Evidentialism about Epistemic Reasons is false. Recall that doctrine.

**Logico-Evidentialism about Epistemic Reasons:** If the evidence  $E$  entails or strongly confirms  $p$ , then there is always decisive reason to believe that  $p$ .



Logico-Evidentialism is false because reasons to suspend can defeat reasons to believe without changing the entailment or confirmational facts. This is the lesson we should learn from cases like Anjali's. Without something like Logico-Evidentialism, however, we can't get the dilemmic view going.

We take this to be a very natural story about Anjali. After all, most have thought that in cases like this, it is not rational to believe. But our story comes with a twist. Since we do not think that there is just one kind of suspension, it is crucial to ask which way Anjali should suspend. Which variety is warranted depends on further details about her situation. Given the totality of facts about her situation, it is plausible that weakly open-minded suspension is the way for her to go. The higher-order evidence makes it the case that she should not treat her evidence as sufficient.

That's Anjali. In principle, higher-order evidence can make any variety of suspension rational. It does this most directly by counting against treating the first-order reasons as sufficient or counting in favor of treating the first-order reasons as insufficient. When it does the former, some version of weak suspension is favored; when it does the latter, some version of strong suspension is favored. What makes the final difference to whether an open- or closed-minded variety of suspension is warranted has to do with the case for continued inquiry.<sup>11</sup>

This story allows us to avoid rationally required incoherence, as well. Anjali can comply with both the requirements of reason and requirements like Weak Evidence-Belief. Reason requires her to suspend, which coheres with suspending judgment about whether the evidence sufficiently supports belief.

## 4.2 How the Distinction between Forms of Suspension Defeats the Oracle

We stand by the view that simple apparent dilemmas between first-order and higher-order evidence disappear once we realize that our options include weakly close-minded and open-minded suspension, and that these attitudes may be justified even if the first-order evidence is conclusive. The first-order evidence for  $p$  may be conclusive even if the epistemic reasons for believing  $p$  are not conclusive. But, as we saw above, life is not always so simple. For in addition to higher-order evidence bearing on one's evidence for or against  $p$ , there is higher-order evidence bearing on the rationality of suspending. The oracle can do more than tell us that our reasons for belief are insufficient: she can also tell us that our reasons for suspension are insufficient.

In order to fully avoid dilemmas, then, we must argue that there are limits to the defeating potential of the oracle's testimony. There must be some reaction that it is permissible to hold even in the face of testimony from the oracle to the contrary. We shall argue that this reaction

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<sup>11</sup>Sometimes the case for open- vs. closed- and the case for strong or weak will hinge on the same considerations. For example, one's higher-order evidence about whether one will ever find out how many blades of grass are currently in Central Park provides reasons directly for strongly closed-minded suspension. This is because it both provides reason to treat my first-order evidence as insufficient and suggests I'll never get sufficient evidence and thus further inquiry is pointless.

is strongly open-minded neutrality.

Before we get to our story, it is worth stressing first that the idea that testimony has limited defeating capacities is already plausible in some cases. For example, it is unclear whether testimony—even of an alleged expert—can defeat epistemic reasons derived from certain non-testimonial sources. One might, for example, take a radical view about epistemic reasons derived from certain forms of self-knowledge, and argue that no expert testimony from a third-person could ever defeat certain kinds of first-personal reasons: if one is in extreme pain, testimony even from the world's greatest neurophysiologist arguably couldn't defeat one's reason to believe that one is in pain.

Although we think that this suggestion is ultimately on the right track, we don't think it is enough merely to gesture at the limits of testimonial defeat. We need a specific reason for thinking that there is a similar limit here. And at least initially, it is not easy to see what the reason could be. After all, in this case, the testimony *is* sufficient to exclude belief and disbelief. We must claim that it has a different kind of force, or perhaps no force, against some form of epistemic neutrality. What could justify that asymmetry?

The answer to this question is going to have to turn on the thought that there is something special about some form(s) of epistemic neutrality—or something special about the *reasons* for some form(s) of epistemic neutrality—that justify this asymmetry.

The first thing to note is that there is a special kind of difference between belief, disbelief, and the close-minded forms of suspension, on the one hand, and the open-minded forms of suspension, on the other. The former mental states involve a particular kind of relation to a question we could call a *stand* on the question. In virtue of being stands, close-minded belief, close-minded disbelief, and the close-minded forms of suspension commit one to a certain response to one's evidence: either treating it as sufficient, treating it as insufficient, or forbearing from treating it as sufficient or insufficient (perhaps because it is undecidable).

The open-minded attitudes do not carry these commitments. Weakly open-minded suspension does commit one to *answering* the question with a stand. But this is not a commitment to any *answer* (including the answers 'Not sure!' or 'God only knows!'). It doesn't follow, however, that it isn't directed at the question of whether *p*. It is just directed at that question in a less committal way. Not all ways of being question-directed are stands.

Although weakly open-minded suspension is importantly different from the close-minded attitudes, it may not be sufficiently special to solve the problem of the oracle. For, as we just noted, weakly open-minded suspension is not commitment-free: having this attitude with respect to a question rationally commits one to *trying to answer it*. As a result, the oracle can defeat reasons to be weakly open-minded. In particular, if one has sufficient reason to believe that the question is undecidable, then committing to trying to answer the question would be irrational.

Strongly open-minded suspension (henceforth 'SOMN') is importantly different in virtue of being commitment-free. We will argue that a proper understanding of the way in which SOMN is commitment-free makes it relevantly indefeasible. We should stress up front that we aren't going to argue that there can't be all-things-considered reasons, *including non-epistemic*

*reasons*, for opting out of wondering, or for masking one's inquisitive dispositions.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, there evidently can be decisive resource-based objections to occurrent wondering that require one to opt out of it, or to suppress one's inquisitiveness temporarily. But these are practical reasons to decide not to wonder (something one can do at will because wondering is commitment-free). Here we are discussing the 'right-kind' reasons that are internal to the activity of thinking about a question, where wondering is the most general way of thinking about a question, and the various ways of closing one's mind are at the opposite extreme. Partly because the volume is about epistemic/epistemic dilemmas rather than epistemic/practical dilemmas, we feel it unobjectionable to restrict our focus in this way.<sup>13</sup>

To bring out the argument for the epistemic indefeasibility of SOMN, let's reflect on the phenomenology of occurrent SOMN, and how different it is from the phenomenology of forming commitment-involving attitudes. When it comes to commitment-involving attitudes, one normally cannot form them unless one takes oneself to have issue-related reasons for forming them, where such reasons might be first-order evidence, higher-order evidence, or considerations concerning the complexity or nature of the issue being considered (e.g., Is it mired in vagueness? Is it too hard to resolve?). This point is a generalization of familiar observations in the literature on believing at will partly noted by Hieronymi (2006) (though she doesn't explicitly discuss agnosticism or close-minded neutrality). Matters are starkly different with SOMN. Wondering and considering are normally things that we do *spontaneously*, and indeed quite randomly. Hence, we can immediately make sense of utterances like the following:

'While eating breakfast, I randomly wondered: was Schelling really an *idealist*?'

Compare the foregoing utterance, which seems fine out of context, with a puzzling utterance like:

??? 'While eating breakfast, I randomly formed the belief that Schelling isn't an idealist [/ randomly thought 'Nah, Schelling isn't an idealist!']'

To make such utterances tolerable, one must follow up by saying more about why one believed that Schelling wasn't an idealist: What else was one thinking? Did it just seem obvious? Being told that the belief just popped into one's head would be bizarre. The comparison suggests that while there is something seriously odd about adopting commitments in ways that seem

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<sup>12</sup>We deliberately say 'opting out' because it is not clear one can rightly say that one 'suspends' wondering. Only commitment-involving attitudes are the kinds of things one can suspend. Compare imagination: there is no sense in which one can 'suspend' imagination. One just decides not to imagine. Wondering is partly different, of course: it is an option in theoretical deliberation about whether *p*, and imagination is not. But it helps to look at other attitudes to clarify the distinction between suspending and opting out.

<sup>13</sup>We will, however, devote future work to the question of how epistemic and practical reasons to wonder (if there are any) might interact, and how the issues here interact with our other work on the distinction between right-kind and wrong-kind reasons (see Lord & Sylvan (2019)).

random by one's own lights, there is nothing odd about wondering for reasons that seem random by one's own lights. Wondering can just pop up: there is nothing strange about it being prompted by such random things as the stars, the ocean, or the taste of Cheerios.

It is perhaps for this kind of reason that the history of philosophy is filled with countless figures who felt no obligation to justify philosophizing and felt free to raise philosophical questions spontaneously. Philosophy is hardly special in this regard: while the fabled apple that knocked Newton in the head couldn't have given him a reason to believe his theory of gravity, it could very well have made him wonder about certain questions which, when pondered sufficiently, produced good reasons for Newtonian physics. There are, of course, plenty who would follow Wittgenstein in insisting that *doubting* requires specific reasons and doesn't come for free. We don't reject this claim: indeed, we think you need specific kinds of normative reasons for any form of close-mindedness, and even for weak open-mindedness. But SOMN seems markedly different.

We are now in a position to give the first stage of a more explicit argument for the epistemic indefeasibility of SOMN.<sup>14</sup> The argument begins with two contrasting facts that require explanation: ☒

**Wondering Fact:** You can wonder about whether  $p$  for random reasons, or no reasons, and realize you're doing it without thereby displaying any kind of incoherence.

**Believing Fact:** You cannot believe that  $p$  for random reasons, or no reasons, and realize you're doing it without thereby displaying any kind of incoherence.

Now there is a familiar—and we think defensible (see Lord & Sylvan (2019))—constitutivist story about Believing Fact: the reason why the Believing Fact obtains is that belief is by its very nature subject to norms that prohibit believing in ways that seem arbitrary by one's own lights. Common constitutivist stories jump quickly to examining the *most fundamental* norm which explains the Believing Fact. Hence the appeal to the idea that belief is constitutively subject to a Truth Norm (see, e.g., Shah (2006) and Wedgwood (2002)): if belief aims at truth, believing in ways that you think are arbitrary should be irrational, since such ways have no apparent connection to truth. In this paper, we want to be neutral about what this most fundamental norm might be. To avoid this controversy, we want instead to focus on *derived* constitutive norms like the norms of epistemic rationality, such as the norm that requires believing that  $p$  for good, or at least apparently good, reasons. For even if one isn't sure about whether the Truth Norm follows from the Believing Fact, one might very well accept certain derived norms, and then leave open what more fundamental norms might explain those derived norms.

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<sup>14</sup>As readers familiar with the wider literature might recognize, following through this argument will end up rejecting some claims about the coherence norms on inquiry that Friedman accepts. But, as the reader can also tell, we agree with critics like Archer (2018, 2019) that these norms should be rejected. We do, however, think that there are important insights on both sides of this dispute: they just concern different forms of epistemic neutrality.

While we cannot defend constitutivism about doxastic normativity here, it is a respectable approach that we defend elsewhere (see especially Lord & Sylvan (2019)). What we want to do here is grant it for the sake of argument, and then argue that the same reasons which support thinking that believing is constitutively subject to certain norms support thinking that wondering is not constitutively subject to such norms. Given this argument, we can then argue that as far as epistemic rationality is concerned, there is no burden of proof on wondering. Indeed, as far as ‘wondering’s own ethics’ is concerned, there can be nothing wrong with wondering spontaneously; apparent objections to wondering about coherent questions will, in the end, just be reasons for *masking one’s inquisitiveness*, not for killing off the dispositions that ground it. There are, of course, other kinds of reasons for avoiding the business of wondering. There remain interesting questions about dilemmic conflicts between these kinds of reasons and epistemic reasons. But within the sphere of epistemic reasons, there are no such conflicts.

Here then is an argument whose key premises should seem plausible if one finds the constitutivist approach to epistemic normativity plausible:

1. The best explanation of the Believing Fact entails that belief is constitutively subject to a non-arbitrariness norm.
2. If (1) is true, then the best explanation of the Wondering Fact entails that wondering is not constitutively subject to a non-arbitrariness norm.
3. Hence (granting the Wondering Fact), wondering is not constitutively subject to a non-arbitrariness norm.
4. If (3), then reasons of the right kind never prohibit wondering as such; the only reasons against wondering will be ‘wrong-kind’ reasons external to the wider activity of thinking, which really count in favor of *willing* to not wonder.
5. Hence, reasons of the right kind never prohibit wondering as such.
6. If (5) is true, then epistemic rationality never prohibits wondering as such.
7. So epistemic rationality never prohibits wondering as such.

Several key premises fall directly out of the kind of constitutivist approach we think is plausible. We have already explained why for (1). But (3) and (5) also fall out of this approach. As we argue elsewhere—as have others, like Schroeder (2010) and Sharadin (2016)—reasons of the right kind for *A-ing* are always reasons relative to the constitutive standards of correctness for *A-ing*. Hence (3).

Properly understood, we think (5) is supported by the same considerations that support (3). Epistemic rationality on the constitutivist approach is the rationality that is constitutive of a certain class of attitudes and mental activities. A traditional picture sees this class as containing doxastic attitudes and a closely related set of mental activities (*judging, coming to conclusions, engaging in theoretical reasoning ...*). We have a more colorful picture of this class than

many traditional epistemologists, partly because we acknowledge a variety of middle options, and partly because we connect some of those options to activities that have been neglected (e.g., theoretical reasoning and thinking more broadly). But the most exotic option is SOMN.

Now, there is a looming concern here that we should address, which will help us to clarify some important respects in which our picture is different from the picture in Friedman's work.<sup>15</sup> One might agree with us that wondering comes for free relative to the epistemic norms, but then worry that the rationale for including wondering supports counting other attitudes and activities as epistemic, which are governed by different constitutive norms. In particular, one might worry that some activities that seem like wondering are subject to conflicting constitutive norms. If so, then even if wondering escapes dilemmas, we would be clearing space for other dilemmas.

The concern is evident in Friedman (FCb,F)). Suppose we expand the epistemic domain beyond its traditional boundaries to include activities like the activity of inquiry, and suppose we think of this activity (as Friedman does) as one often carried out through outward actions like looking in the cupboard. As Friedman convincingly argues, there appear to be conflicts between traditional epistemic norms and the inquiry-related norms (she calls them 'zetetic' norms). These conflicts center around the fact that Friedman takes inquiry to be a teleological activity subject to principles of instrumental rationality. These principles conflict with traditional epistemic principles in certain cases, for reasons akin to why direct epistemic consequentialism has absurd implications according to Berker (2013).

Our response is to deny that the kind of inquiry that is properly epistemic is a teleological activity subject to principles of instrumental rationality. One should generally distinguish between practical activities which manifest one's valuing simpliciter of intellectual goods—e.g., running a University, writing articles, drafting funding bids for research—and the properly epistemic. It is obvious that epistemology is not in the business of studying all the norms to running Universities or writing articles are essentially subject. At most, it is only interested in a subset of those norms; it may be interested in *none* of those norms if actions like voting in a University Senate are not relevant epistemic options. We muddy the waters when we consider *investigations*. These are constituted by smaller activities, some of which are properly epistemic, and some of which are not. Running an investigation may both involve thinking and involve actions like contacting the FBI. It is manifest that epistemology has nothing to say about contacting the FBI. Epistemology does have to say something about thinking. That is why epistemology is relevant to investigating. But it doesn't follow that investigating as a whole, including all the smaller activities that are part of it, is among the properly epistemic options.

We allow that the word 'inquiry' can be used in various ways: it can be used broadly to include investigation of the kind done by the police as a special case, or narrowly, so that only activities that wholly consist in *thinking* count as forms of inquiry. We are not interested here

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<sup>15</sup>We should also note that in our own earlier work on this topic (Lord & Sylvan (FC)), we had not yet developed our framework to this point.

in the broadest notion of inquiry: it cannot be illuminated by epistemology alone if it includes investigations of the kind carried out by private eyes. We are interested in inquiry understood as *thinking and reasoning about whether something is the case*, and in the options that arise in these activities. Our proposal is that wondering is the most general—and often chronologically the first—form that thinking takes. Hence, it is sufficient to avoid epistemic dilemmas to show that wondering is always an option relative to the epistemic norms. We allow that there might be borderline activities wider than thinking, which may take both thinking and running a professional investigation as special cases. There may even be borderline activities that cannot be factored into practical and epistemic components, so that a novel form of pragmatic encroachment will create a faceoff of the practical and the narrowly epistemic. But if epistemology is understood as the study of thinking, we think there will be a sufficiently clear border between the epistemic and the practical to exclude the kinds of conflicts brought out in Friedman's most recent work.<sup>16</sup>

One concern that remains to be addressed is whether there might be *straightforwardly epistemic* objections to SOMN-ing.<sup>17</sup> For example, one might worry about whether some propositions are so obvious that even wondering about them would be a sign of irrationality. Here one might especially worry about the *cogito* or other hinge propositions.

But once the nature of SOMN is borne in mind, the worry seems unfounded. While SOMN is an option and it can be pursued without belief, it is not rationally incompatible with belief. The most that is clear is that one ought rationally to believe the *cogito* upon considering it. It doesn't follow that one must stop considering it, or that one cannot wonder more about it. The same would hold for other hinge propositions, as far as we can see. Given that one does end up believing, there is nothing destabilizing about continuing to wonder about even such obvious propositions. And indeed, there might be cases in which it would be dogmatic not to wonder about hinge propositions. Suppose, for example, one was reading Unger's 'I Do Not Exist' or thinking about Buddhist arguments against the self. Although one might be enough of a Moorean to think one should never stop believing evident propositions, and hence see nothing wrong with continuing to sustain one's belief even when one cannot identify the fault in such arguments, it does not seem right to refuse to consider the arguments and their conclusions.

Perhaps one might worry that because SOMN makes one alive to all the reasons that might bear on the question, there will be something too risky about giving a blanket permission for it. One might worry that this would be akin to having a blanket policy of keeping one's door unlocked in a mostly safe neighborhood, which would remain unwise if there is

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<sup>16</sup>More precisely, this will be true provided that one is an epistemic non-consequentialist or an indirect epistemic consequentialist who disallows tradeoffs of the kind Berker (2013) discusses. But there are good reasons to be an epistemic non-consequentialist; see Sylvan (2020).

<sup>17</sup>In our earlier work on this topic (Lord & Sylvan (FC)), we were less clear about how to respond to this objection than we are now, partly because we hadn't properly understood the most general form of open-minded neutrality. Now that this option is on the table, we lack one of the intuitions that led us to think that one's epistemic position might require one not to wonder about some propositions.

some small risk of intrusion. But the analogy is imperfect in a way that defuses the lingering concern. Having a blanket permission on being alive to the reasons is not like having a blanket policy to leave one's door unlocked in a safe neighborhood. It is rather like a blanket permission to be willing to unlock one's door conditional on there being sufficient reason to do so. If there are propositions that are so obvious that one is required to believe them upon considering them, then there simply won't ever be an occasion in which there is sufficient reason to unfix one's belief. Hence it does not seem that hinge propositions provide sufficient reason to reject a blanket permission for SOMN. And if propositions with this epistemic status aren't good counterexamples, we aren't sure what traditional epistemological counterexamples there could be.

Having given our argument, let's now take stock by reviewing Lasonen-Aarnio's problem again and seeing how our overall view applies. Consider Anjali and the oracle. The oracle tells Anjali that epistemic neutrality is not rational. On its own this not helpful, given the varieties of epistemic neutrality. So now imagine that the oracle tells Anjali that close-minded neutrality is not rational. The rationality of this form of neutrality can be easily defeated by the oracle's pronouncement, and so it is. Anjali can respond to this pronouncement by withholding that attitude. But this does not rule out other varieties of suspension. The oracle might then tell Anjali that weakly open-minded suspension is not rational. This will be more uncomfortable for Anjali since this is the way in which she is actually suspending. But, again, defeating the rationality of this attitude is easy to do for the oracle, and so she does. Anjali can respond to this pronouncement by not holding that attitude.

Now we just have one more left—strongly open-minded neutrality. The oracle, of course, can *say* to Anjali that this is not rational. But can she make it so? Can she make it the case that it is irrational for Anjali to *consider* whether she has enough fuel? Recall that this sort of considering does not come with any *commitment* towards the question. It does not come along with any dispositions to seek an answer or not seek an answer; it does not come with a commitment to reject the question or bury it. It just makes one alive to the reasons. It constitutes the most basic inquisitive state of mind. To make this irrational, the oracle's testimony would have to make it irrational to have the disposition to be responsive to the reasons bearing on the question. This is implausible, and evidently so in the case of Anjali. No matter what the oracle says, it seems that Anjali may be minimally inquisitive when it comes to whether she has enough fuel in the sense of having the disposition to be responsive to the reasons bearing on the question. To give this up would be tantamount to deciding to allow herself to die.

Even in low-stakes cases, it does not seem plausible that the oracle can give sufficient properly epistemic reasons against the dispositions constitutive of open-mindedness about *p*. There might be strong reasons to mask these dispositions, and to prevent their manifestation. But such reasons are reasons to prevent one's disposition from giving rise to one of its manifestations, by making sure that some triggering conditions never arise. We cannot see how there could be reasons of the right kind—hence properly epistemic reasons—against the *attitude* associated with these dispositions. Perhaps if curiosity-quelling pigheadedness were bliss, there could be decisive practical reason to handicap oneself and kill off the dispositions



associated with this attitude. But consideration does not speak against strongly open-minded neutrality itself, just against various actions that will bring it about that one cannot have this attitude.

We will end by describing more precisely how one should respond to the oracle, since it will implicitly address certain questions that might seem to remain hanging. Here it is helpful to flesh out the story a bit more, to understand how might be reacting and what you should be doing.

In any version of the oracle case that is relevant to our view and in which one has made no clear mistake prior to encountering the oracle, one will have been inquiring into some first-order question, (e.g., <whether  $p$ ?>). Let's imagine that one hasn't gotten very far: one has just started to consider the question of whether  $p$ , and then the oracle comes along. To slow things down, one thing we could imagine now is that the oracle gives her advice one option at a time. She knows you're inquiring into whether  $p$ , and says: 'Well, you shouldn't believe  $p$ .' You say OK, withhold belief, and continue to mull the issue. Then she says: 'Disbelief is off the table too.' You say OK, withhold disbelief, and continue to mull the issue. Then she says: 'But actually, neutrality is off the table too.' If you say OK, withhold all the committal forms of suspension, but continue to consider the question with much-enhanced perplexity, we say that you're proceeding fine vis-à-vis the question <whether  $p$ ?>. You're proceeding as if SOMN is permitted, and then showing by example that you're right, by obviously doing nothing wrong. Hence, if the oracle were to say, 'But even consider the issue is off the table,' you would be well within your rights to say: 'Wait, what are you talking about? How could it not be *epistemically* OK for me to think a little bit more? Until I figure out what's wrong with the issue (e.g., maybe it's a pseudo-problem), I'm not making up my mind about it.' Even if you don't do that, and you instead become puzzled and worry about what to do next, you'll still be doing something compatible with continuing to have the dispositional properties that ground SOMN: you will just be blocking their manifestation temporarily as you puzzle about a different question (namely, the question of whether the oracle is getting it wrong here).

Now, in the interim, there will be a kind of instability. But the instability shouldn't be blamed on the fact that you're keeping the issue of whether  $p$  on the table. The instability should be blamed on the fact that you're doing that without knowing for sure that it's OK to do that, and hence without endorsing what you're doing. To restore stability, you will need to reach that point: you will need to either figure out whether there is something wrong about the apparently fine question you've been asking (e.g., does it have false presuppositions?), or you will need to conclude that the oracle is only reliable, not infallible, and that she is making a mistake in this case. All the while, you can continue to have the dispositions that ground being considerate about whether  $p$ . For stability, you might need to redirect your attention to querying the oracle's level of reliability, and in that sense you will be stopping occurrent inquiry. But the mere attitude of being considerate about whether  $p$  that SOMN involves doesn't need to go away during this period.

It is easy to get confused here, because there *will* be something going epistemically wrong if you respond to the oracle by shrugging her off without explanation and continuing to con-

sider your question. But we are not advising that you shrug the oracle off in this way. Once the oracle has gone this far, the oracle has in effect made a higher-order question salient. Proceeding to consider whether *p* *without also doing something else* would be a mistake at this point. But that is not because proceeding to consider whether *p* itself would be a mistake. It is rather because you now *also* need to attend to the higher-order question: if you fail to do so, you will reveal a lack of open-mindedness about *that* question, and the fact that this question has been made salient by the oracle's advice now puts you on the hook for exhibiting dogmatism or pigheadedness with respect to it. So what you should be doing is *also* be considering the higher-order question. But it doesn't follow that you cannot continue to have the dispositions that underpin considerateness of the first-order question. You may continue to have those dispositions, and you may also, indeed, eventually discover that it is OK for you to continue to have those dispositions.

It is worth comparing what is going on here with what is going on with the Moorean response to skepticism according to Pryor (2004).<sup>18</sup> Consider you and the skeptic. You believe that *p*, where *p* is some commonsense proposition about the external world, and the skeptic comes along and offers a skeptical argument to show that you lack sufficient reason to believe *p* (say, an argument based on the intuition that you have the same evidence for *p* as a brain-in-a-vat). Moore and Pryor both say that you don't thereby lose your justification to believe *p*, and both also say that you can continue to have the *justified* belief that *p*. Clearly, however, there is something fishy about just shrugging off the skeptic and continuing to believe that *p* *as if there weren't anything going wrong*. But the fishiness of shrugging off the skeptic doesn't show that you are no longer permitted to believe that *p*. You are still permitted to believe that *p*. You are just also rationally required to give some response to the higher-order question that the skeptic has raised, insofar as you have started to consider that question (and it seems to us that you would be dogmatic in a bad way if you shrugged that question off). At this stage, we think you may note that you have a hand and then use that fact to reject the claim that you have the same evidence as a brain-in-a-vat; the remaining fishiness is merely dialectical. At that point, epistemic stability will be restored. But even before stability is restored, it is a mistake to think that you aren't permitted to continue to hold your commonsense beliefs. Non-Mooreans won't, of course, like the idea that you can answer the skeptic by begging the question. But as long as there is some answer to skepticism—Moorean or otherwise—it will indeed be OK to hold your commonsense beliefs.

There is one important kind of parallel between the skeptic and the oracle, we want to suggest. And our response is akin to the kind of response to skepticism offered by phenomenal conservatives, McDowellians, and some reliabilist externalists. But this response is tempered by the insights of Pryor (2004). When the oracle says that even neutrality is off the table, she has challenged your attitude. The mere raising of this challenge—even by someone highly reliable about epistemology—isn't sufficient to render that attitude impermissible. That isn't

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<sup>18</sup>As will become clear, we endorse Pryor's take on Moore's argument. We are also more optimistic about the possibility of giving an ambitious response to skepticism than Pryor (2000) is, however.

because you should never conciliate, but rather because mere wondering isn't a commitment, and as a result cannot be defeated in the ways that commitments can be defeated. Hence, like familiar anti-skeptics, we insist that you remain permitted to wonder whether  $p$  (though we emphasize that we don't then suggest being steadfast when it comes to *commitments*). We agree, however, that there is something fishy about just leaving it there. It's just that what's fishy is exactly like what's fishy in the case of a Moorean who just shrugs off the skeptic and goes on believing, as if no mistake had been made. A mistake *is* being made if the higher-order question is simply ignored at this stage. But that says nothing about the status of the first-order wondering, just as the wide-scope problem with the shrugging Moorean that is noted by Pryor (2004) says nothing about the status of that Moorean's commonsense beliefs about the external world.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

Let's wind down with some broader reflections about the scope of our strategy. We have shown that some apparently stubborn dilemmas can be defused recognizing the varieties of epistemic neutrality, and especially the widest form of epistemic neutrality (i.e., SOMN). But what about other alleged dilemmas?

We are optimistic that our strategy generalizes to prevent other collisions between seeming epistemic permissions to  $A$  and seeming epistemic restrictions against  $A$ -ing. The generalized strategy begins with the suggestion that in such cases, one of the apparent deontic facts will be genuine (e.g., the restriction), so that one is epistemically required to switch to some other option, where SOMN is always safe. This suggestion must then be combined with a diagnosis of the intuition about the other alleged deontic fact (e.g., the permission), in different normative terms. In the case of first-order/higher-order dilemmas, our strategy was to distinguish between *overall evidential support for  $p$*  and *sufficient epistemic reasons for believing  $p$* . The positive intuition got addressed by allowing that there is overall evidential support for  $p$  while denying that one is always epistemically permitted to heed this support by believing  $p$ . One is instead required to suspend.

This strategy works for other seeming epistemic dilemmas. Consider preface-like inconsistency between some first-order beliefs and the meta-belief that one of these is mistaken. Imagine that each first-order belief was rationally formed, and that it is psychologically realistic for one to accept the meta-belief. The fact of inconsistency could be thought to generate a requirement banning the combination of the first-order beliefs and the meta-belief. Hence an apparent dilemma. Here the first correct thing to say is that if the overall set of beliefs is sufficiently large, there cannot be a *deliberative requirement* against inconsistency at the time.<sup>19</sup> At most the inconsistency is objectively bad, but the deliberative 'ought' does not forbid it at the time. Nevertheless, it is not enough to leave it here. One should try to improve the situation:

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<sup>19</sup>This point is hardly original to us; it is also noted, for example, by ?

it would be blameworthy to do nothing. But what is one supposed to do? Clearly, one cannot just arbitrarily drop some belief or pigheadedly dismiss the possibility of error.

What one should do instead is wonder, either about the first-order beliefs or about the higher-order belief. So long as one is wondering all the while, without holding any particular belief dogmatically, one is doing the best one can. If none of the first-order beliefs seems mistaken on further inspection, one may conclude that one hasn't made a mistake. Any intuition that there might be a remaining problem should not be addressed by saying that one is violating a deliberative epistemic requirement; it should be addressed in another normative register.

Our diagnosis of this case helps to clarify the more general twofold strategy:

1. Firstly, one should argue that one of the apparent permissions or requirements is not a genuine *deliberative* permission or requirement, and instead make a positive or negative claim in a different normative register (e.g., the merely evaluative register).
2. Secondly, one should address the concern that doing nothing in the situation would be dogmatic, pigheaded, or naïve by agreeing that some more inquisitive stance is needed.

With other alleged dilemmas, the first part of the strategy is familiar. As [Hughes \(2019\)](#) notes, some have wanted to address conflicts between alethic requirements and rational requirements by insisting that the former requirements are only evaluative, and that the deliberative 'ought' sides with rationality rather than truth. We don't reject this idea, but we want to agree with Hughes that there is something not entirely satisfying about it. In particular, it seems overweening to dismiss the tension and insist that one is doing all that is required by responding to one's current evidence. Even if alethic norms cannot provide direct answers to the deliberative question 'What should I believe?', these norms carry some bite above and beyond what one's current evidence demands. There is something too breezy about trusting one's current perspective without any acknowledgment of the possibility of error. But it is an overreaction to replace that breezy attitude with skeptical angst. What is needed is not fear but a wonderment that opens one to the possibility that things are not what they seem.

It is worth emphasizing that the response here is not that more reflection is demanded, so that the surefire way to avoid epistemic wrongdoing is to keep up occurrent thought. While we are unsure that reflection is ever epistemically prohibited, the amount of ink spilled in recent years by figures like [Kornblith \(2012\)](#) makes it clear that it would be naïve to assume otherwise, and that reflection shouldn't be praised without reservation. At a minimum, we claim just that the anti-reflective sentiment running through externalist epistemology should not be extended to the *attitude of wonder*, which is distinct from the occurrent activity of wondering. For as we have stressed, having this attitude is compatible with also believing and acting accordingly, and hence doesn't threaten to bring us to a halt.

One remaining question we will explore in further work is whether there might be epistemic/practical conflicts that arise when we turn to the occurrent activity of thinking, or conflicts within the single sphere of what Friedman calls zetetic normativity. Here, as we pre-

viewed earlier, we think it will be crucial to distinguish what is at bottom the practical activity of *investigating* with the properly theoretical activity of *thinking*. The appearance of conflict within a single sphere might be resolved by properly distinguishing these two things; it is possible that the apparent conflict across spheres is resolved by this distinction as well. Making this move may, however, require rejecting Friedman's conception of the zetetic (not to mention some views left open in Lord & Sylvan (FC)). Alternatively, we might say that we are focusing on something else ('theoretical normativity') which is broader than traditional, attitude-focused epistemology, but still more insulated from the practical than Friedman's zetetic domain.

One hypothesis that we will consider is whether any residual appearance of conflict within the domain of theoretical normativity can be resolved in a similar way: namely, by better understanding the distinction between reasons that are *constitutively involved in the process of thinking*, and reasons that are *upstream of this process*. It is much easier to confuse these reasons than it is to confuse epistemic reasons for belief and practical reasons for getting oneself to believe. This is because we can think and stop thinking spontaneously in a way that has no parallel with belief. But, as we argued, the fact that we can think or stop thinking spontaneously does not mean that we can easily have motivating reasons for thinking or for withholding wonder that are practical. It only means that we can easily have motivating reasons for beginning or ending the process of thought that are practical (where that process, unlike the state of belief, is under our direct voluntary control). Here one might compare artistic normativity. Once one is creating art, one is bound by the reasons of artistic normativity. The fact that one can and should be cleaning one's room rather than painting doesn't imply that the reasons of artistic normativity suddenly go lax about crude work. Similarly, one might suggest, for theoretical reasons: bad thinking is not less objectionable qua thinking even if one should have been cleaning rather than thinking.

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