

## Deferring to Doubt

The sceptic with his whole nature adopts the doubting attitude; but which of us is the wiser, Omniscience only knows.

– *William James*

Abstract: When we doubt a belief, we examine how things look from a perspective in which that belief is set aside. Sometimes we care about what that perspective recommends and, as a result, we abandon the belief we've been doubting. Other times we don't: we recognize that a perspective in which a certain belief is set aside recommends abandoning it, but we go on believing it anyway. Why is this? In this paper, I'll consider and then reject some proposals concerning when to defer to the perspective of doubt. I'll argue that ultimately the question of whether to defer to doubt on any given occasion can't be answered through rational deliberation aimed at truth or accuracy. If I'm right, this means that a certain challenge facing defeatist views about higher order evidence cannot be met: namely, providing a motivation for abandoning belief in cases of higher order evidence, but not becoming a global skeptic.

### 1. Introduction

Sometimes we doubt a belief because we receive evidence that it was formed in a dubious manner. Sometimes we doubt because we encounter disagreement. Sometimes we doubt in response to skeptical arguments. Sometimes we doubt because the possibility of error becomes salient. Sometimes we doubt for no apparent reason at all.

It's natural to think that we should abandon belief in some of these cases, but not others. If I learn that I formed my belief when my cognitive faculties were not operating optimally, that may be a good reason to abandon it. But merely being reminded of the fact that I *could* be wrong isn't a good reason to revise my opinion. The aim of this paper is to argue against this natural thought, in a sense to be made more precise later. Very roughly, I'll argue that from the perspective of a deliberator aiming at truth or accuracy, there will be no way to motivate the judgment that we should reduce confidence in response to some forms of doubt but not others. I take these considerations to motivate a radical form of permissivism about higher order defeat and skepticism (one can abandon belief in response to higher order evidence, or not; one can be a skeptic, or not) though, as we'll see, others may draw different conclusions.

## 2. Doubt

I'll be arguing that accuracy/truth-aimed deliberation doesn't motivate abandoning belief in some cases of doubt but not others. The first step is to clarify exactly what I mean by "doubt." That's the aim of this section. Let's start with a simple example:

STOVE: You're walking to work one morning, listening to a podcast. You hear a fictional story about a house that burned down because someone left the stove on. You start worrying that maybe you forgot to turn your stove off. You pause for a moment and think: "I remember cleaning the stove right before I left. If the stove were on I would have noticed and turned it off. So the stove must be off." You maintain your belief and move on with your day.

This is a story in which you subject a belief (that your stove is off) to doubt.<sup>1</sup> What we're interested in, when we subject a belief to doubt, is whether we can reason our way to the belief from what I'll call "a perspective of doubt" (PD) – a perspective that is in some sense less committal than our usual one.

Let's unpack this a bit.<sup>2</sup> First, what is a perspective? For the purposes of this paper, we can think of a perspective as a set of truth or accuracy-aimed doxastic commitments: these commitments can include beliefs, attitudes of agnosticism, credences, and rules that permit certain cognitive transitions and forbid others. For example, the perspective I currently occupy includes a belief in the existence of California and a 0.5 credence that a fair coin lands head. It permits the transition from a visual perception as of P to a belief that P, and forbids transitions that commit the gamblers fallacy. What do I mean by "truth-aimed"? We can leave the notion relatively vague, but, at a minimum, it implies that a perspective will forbid cognitive transitions that it regards as having low expected accuracy/are conducive to forming false beliefs, and it will permit transitions that it regards as having high expected accuracy/are conducive to forming true beliefs, or that it regards as resulting in no loss of truth or accuracy. When a perspective permits a series of transitions that form a path to a particular attitude, I'll say that the perspective "permits" the

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper beliefs can be understood as attitudes of sufficiently high confidence (on some views this may require credence 1), though I don't think anything essential will rest on any particular understanding of belief.

<sup>2</sup> The material in this section and the following is a brief summary and reformulation of some ideas I develop in [omitted, (forthcoming)].

attitude in question. When the perspective forbids all but one attitude towards P, I'll say that the perspective "recommends" that attitude towards P.

Doubting, in my sense, involves considering whether a less committal perspective than my usual one will permit my belief. But precisely which commitments are set aside when I subject my belief that P to doubt? When I subjected my belief that the stove was off to doubt I wasn't willing to rely, of course, on the belief that the stove was off. There are a number of closely related beliefs that I wasn't willing to rely on as well. I wasn't willing to rely on my belief that I moved the stove knob in a certain direction, that the stove is off or  $2+2 = 5$ , or that there are no open flames in my kitchen. There are, however, plenty of commitments that I did not set aside in doubting my belief:<sup>3</sup> that I own a stove, that I cleaned the stove, and that I came into existence more than five minutes ago. I could have doubted my belief in a more global way. If I had, the resulting perspective of doubt would probably *not* have permitted belief that the stove is off – in other words, if I'd set more aside, I would not have been able to "recover" the belief from the perspective of doubt. So on the way I'm thinking about the process of doubting, there is no universal characterization of what we set aside when we doubt a particular belief. There are indefinitely many ways to doubt corresponding to indefinitely many perspectives of doubt, and whether we can recover the belief we've subjected to doubt depends on which perspective of doubt we're considering.<sup>4</sup>

Note that it's not only beliefs that we subject to doubt. Inferences, transitions, or reliance on certain capacities can be doubted as well. If I'm doubting inductive inferences I'm wondering whether I can defend the use of induction without relying on induction. If I'm doubting my perceptual capacities, I'm wondering whether I can defend my reliance on perception in a way that doesn't rely on beliefs I've formed perceptually. So far, I'm not making any claims about whether this activity of doubting is rational. I'm just observing that we do it sometimes.

One final comment before proceeding: my usage of the phrases "doubting" and "subjecting to doubt" are partially stipulative and so may diverge somewhat from ordinary usage. Out on the

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<sup>3</sup> By "doubting a belief" I mean the same thing as "subjecting a belief to doubt."

<sup>4</sup> Note that this way of thinking about doubt differs from the way AGM belief-revision theorists (Alchourrón et al. 1985) think of "belief contraction." AGM-theorists are interested in the *minimal* way of removing a commitment from one's belief set. My interest is not in the minimal way of removing a commitment. On my way of thinking, there are cases in which one doubts one's belief that P, that involve setting aside Q, and cases in which one doubts P without setting aside Q. There may be some constraints on what needs to be removed to *count* as doubting P, but those constraints don't narrow down the possible P-removing perspectives to one. This is not inconsistent with anything AGM theorists say. They may well be right about what's involved in *minimal* revisions. That's simply not what I'm talking about here.

street we might say something like “I thought there’d be a picnic today, but now I doubt it will happen – look at those clouds.” This is not an instance of doubting in my sense. This is a case of ordinary belief revision through a respectable process like conditionalizing. In this case, I received some evidence (it’s cloudy) that led me to abandon or significantly reduce confidence in my belief about the picnic. This is not what goes on in the kinds of doubt I have in mind. To see this, suppose that, for whatever reason, I couldn’t recover the belief that I turned off the stove from the perspective of doubt (perhaps I set aside too much) and, as a result, I abandon the belief. Doing so would not have been the result of conditionalizing on “I heard a fictional story about a house burning down.” I don’t take my having heard such a story to be any evidence whatsoever about the status of my stove. So the crucial thing about doubt in my sense is that modifying one’s beliefs in response to doubt is not an instance of standard conditionalization (more on that soon).

In sum: subjecting a belief to doubt, in my sense, amounts to engaging in an inquiry. I’m asking what is, in a way, a logical question: Does a certain perspective – one that’s less committal than my usual perspective – permit transitions that form a path to the belief in question. If, upon subjecting a belief to doubt and realizing that it can’t be recovered from doubt, we respond by abandoning the belief, I’ll say that we’ve “deferred to doubt” because we’ve adopted the attitude that the perspective of doubt in such a case recommends.

### **3. Higher Order Evidence**

In STOVE I managed to recover my belief from the perspective of doubt. But what if I can’t? There are cases in which it is tempting to think that we ought to abandon belief upon realizing that it can’t be recovered from a perspective of doubt. I’m going to argue that typical “higher order evidence” cases are of this sort. First, I’ll present such a case. Then I’ll explain why I think the judgment that we should reduce confidence in the case is best explained by appeal to the fact that the belief can’t be recovered from a perspective of doubt.

SLEEPY (adapted slightly from Horowitz (2014)): You are a police detective investigating a jewel theft. There are two suspects under consideration and before examining any evidence, you assign 0.5 credence to each one being the thief. Late one night, after hours of cracking codes and scrutinizing photographs and letters, you conclude that the thief was Lucy. In fact, it is Lucy and you evaluated the evidence correctly. You call your partner,

Alex. “I’ve gone through all the evidence,” you say, “and it all points to one person! I’ve found the thief!” But Alex is unimpressed. She replies: “I can tell you’ve been up all night working on this. Your late-night reasoning has been awful in the past. You’re always very confident that you’ve found the culprit, but under these circumstances, you do no better than chance. So I’m not convinced.” You rationally trust Alex and believe that you’ve done no better than chance on such occasions.

The case is a bit artificial. Still, try to imagine yourself in this situation. How confident should you be after hearing Alex’s testimony? It’s natural to think that maintaining your belief under these circumstances is unreasonable – that a 0.5 credence or thereabouts would be the appropriate attitude upon learning about your track record. We’ll call this “the defeatist verdict.” But how to motivate it? In particular, how can we explain what’s wrong with the following response to the case:

*Lucky me:* “When I’m tired my reasoning will sometimes lead me to the wrong conclusion. But not always. So the question is: how likely is it that I got the right answer *on this particular occasion?* Well, I got things right on this particular occasion if and only if Lucy is the thief. So is she? Let’s look at the evidence. The fingerprint evidence says...and the letter she wrote says...and if I calculate the distance between the other suspect’s house and the crime scene... so it must be her! Which means I got things right on this occasion despite being sleepy. Lucky me!”<sup>5</sup>

In the higher order evidence literature, the “lucky me” response is standardly blocked by appeal to what are called “independence principles.”<sup>6</sup> Independence principles say, very roughly, something along the following lines: when evaluating how likely you are to be right about whether P, do so in a way that is *independent* of, or sets aside, the reasoning in question. The problem with the “lucky me” response, the thought goes, is that it essentially relies on the very reasoning that’s being questioned, and, according to advocates of independence principles, this is inappropriate.

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<sup>5</sup> This can be dramatized by imagining a version of the case in which E entails P, since no matter what else you add to E, it will still entail P. So if you can reason with E, no matter what else is added, you’ll think you got lucky. But nothing about what follows requires entailment.

<sup>6</sup> Elga (2007), White (2009, 2010), Christensen (2010, 2011), Lasonen Aarnio (2014), Vavova (2014, 2018), Horowitz and Sliwa (2015).

These sorts of independence principles, when stated explicitly, can sound odd. Why on earth, when thinking about whether P, could it be rational to set aside reasoning or evidence that is relevant to P? I'll come back to this question in the moment, but for now I just want to convince you that if you like the defeatist verdict, you're going to have to appeal to *something* like an independence principle.

Two arguments for this:

First, you can't get the defeatist verdict by conditionalization. I won't rehearse the arguments for the incompatibility of defeatism with conditionalization in detail, since it's been argued for elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> but here's the gist: Think about your position earlier that day, before looking at the evidence. Call the evidence concerning the theft "E." Earlier in the day you had some conditional credence in Lucy's guilt given E (based perhaps in your dispositions), and it was quite high – say .95. Earlier that day, your credence in Lucy's guilt conditional on E *and at such and such time this evening you'll be sleepy*, was also 0.95. In the morning, you don't take facts about your mental condition later that evening to be remotely relevant to the question of who committed the crime. Conditionalization will never introduce dependence between propositions that one starts out regarding as independent, so conditionalization won't lead to the verdict that you should reduce confidence upon gaining evidence about your sleepiness in the evening. There are some complications here involving time-indexing and self-locating propositions that are discussed in Schoenfield (2018), but that's the basic thought. You don't get the verdict that you should reduce confidence in higher order evidence cases by conditionalizing. So *something* strange is going on.

The second argument is sociological. The fiercest defenders of defeatism appeal to independence principles. These are highly sophisticated thinkers who, we can safely assume, have surveyed many available options. That is some evidence that something like an independence principle is the best we can do to motivate this verdict, at least with the philosophical tools currently at our disposal.

What I want to suggest is that the defeatist idea will seem a lot more natural if we think of what is going on as instance of doubt, just like in STOVE. The effect of higher order evidence, I claim, is to make it impossible to recover our belief from a specific perspective of doubt. In STOVE, I have the resources to reason my way to the belief from the perspective of doubt in question. Not so in SLEEPY. For in such a case, if I subject the reasoning I just did to doubt, then I won't be able

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<sup>7</sup> Schoenfield (2018). For related points see also Christensen (2010) and Weisberg (2015).

to use it to reason my way to the belief. I won't be able to appeal to my own reliability about such matters either, because I know I'm sleepy. So there's no way to recover the belief from this perspective of doubt. This, then, is my explanation of what's going on in cases like SLEEPY: the presence of higher order evidence makes it impossible to recover our belief from a certain perspective of doubt. This realization motivates us to give it up.

I am not (yet) aiming to defend any particular verdict about SLEEPY. I'm just suggesting that insofar as we're inclined to reduce confidence in such cases, this inclination is naturally thought of as a response to the realization that the belief we formed can't be recovered from doubt. This thought is in the same spirit as independence principles. When the independence principles are telling us to reason in a way that "sets aside" or "brackets" certain reasoning, they are encouraging us to reason from a certain perspective of doubt and adopt the belief state such a perspective recommends.

It will be important for what follows to be very clear about what people who defend independence principles are thinking: They acknowledge that without setting aside/bracketing/deferring to the perspective of doubt, the "lucky me" response would make sense. The "non-doubtful" perspective – the one that doesn't do any "bracketing," and just proceeds by conditionalizing – does indeed recommend maintaining belief. But, they claim, a 0.5 credence is what you get when you set aside/bracket/reason from the perspective of doubt, and this fact figures in the explanation of why your credence should be 0.5 in such cases.

#### **4. The Challenge for Defeatism**

So far the story looks something like this: sometimes we subject beliefs to doubt. When we recover them from doubt, like in STOVE, we happily maintain belief. When we can't recover them from doubt, like in SLEEPY, we give them up. But that can't be the full story. For consider

SKEPTICISM: When I subject my belief that the sun will rise tomorrow to doubt in a way that sets aside my commitment to induction, I can't recover my belief.

This is just the old problem of induction. Most of us, upon realizing that our belief that the sun will rise tomorrow can't be recovered from a perspective in which some of our commitments are set aside, are inclined to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow anyway. Similarly, one might think,

if I set aside all of my beliefs about the external world, I won't be able to recover my belief that I have hands. But I still believe that I do.

So we don't think that for *any* belief and *any* perspective of doubt, if the belief can't be recovered from the perspective of doubt, we should abandon it. This then is the challenge: consider the cases in which belief cannot be recovered from doubt. Some, like SLEEPY, are cases in which this realization motivates (many of) us to abandon belief. Others, like SKEPTICISM, are cases in which we shrug our shoulders and move on with our lives. Can we give a well-motivated account of why in some cases we defer to doubt and in others we don't?<sup>8</sup>

Before considering some proposals, let me be clear about who does and doesn't face this challenge. "Steadfasters" think you should not reduce confidence in SLEEPY<sup>9</sup> and so are immune from the challenge. They have available to them a nice clean view according to which we should always revise our beliefs by conditionalizing – nothing fancy involving independence principles or doubting needs to happen. Skeptics are also immune. They think that you should reduce confidence in SKEPTICISM, or rather, they think it was unreasonable to have formed these non-skeptical beliefs to begin with. So they're also off the hook. Lastly, people who have solutions to skepticism of the "convince-the-skeptic" variety might think that, in fact, in any case in which it's plausible that we should believe P, P can be recovered from all perspectives of doubt – no matter how skeptical. Perhaps, for example, skeptical perspectives turn out to be self-undermining.<sup>10</sup> It's the thought that there are cases in which we cannot recover belief from a perspective of doubt, combined with the thought that we should defer to doubt in some of these cases but not others that gives rise to the challenge. Any view which don't countenance such a contrast doesn't need to explain it.

A number of people have proposed ways of meeting the challenge. I'll be arguing that these proposals are unsuccessful (at least in full generality), and then for the conclusion that there's a sense in which any proposal of this sort is bound to fail. At least a certain version of the challenge cannot be met.

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<sup>8</sup> Discussion of challenges to defeatism along these lines can be found in Elga (ms.), White (2010), Christensen (2011), and Vavova (2014, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> For views along these lines see White (2010), Lasonen Aarnio (2014) and Titelbaum (2015).

<sup>10</sup> Rinard (2018).

## 5. The First Proposal: Precise versus Imprecise Doubt

The first proposal I'll consider comes from [omitted, (forthcoming)]. A similar idea in the context of peer disagreement can be found in Elga (2007).

Here's the thought: in SLEEPY, it's plausible that the perspective of doubt contains a 0.5 credence in the proposition that Lucy committed the crime. After all, in the perspective of doubt, you can't rely on the reasoning you just did (it's been subject to doubt) and your prior was stipulated to be 0.5. Contrast this with SKEPTICISM. Suppose you were to give up your commitment to induction. How confident would you be that the sun will rise tomorrow? You might think that removing your commitment to induction wouldn't result in a 0.5 credence in the proposition that the sun will rise tomorrow. Perhaps, in such a highly impoverished perspective, you'd simply *have no idea* how likely it is that the sun will rise tomorrow. In such a case, the resulting attitude might be best represented by an imprecise credence like  $[0,1]$ . So, unlike in SLEEPY, where the perspective of doubt is precise, in SKEPTICISM, one might think, the perspective of doubt is extremely imprecise.

Why would the difference between precise and imprecise perspectives of doubt be relevant to the question of whether to defer to doubt? One difference is that while perspectives of doubt containing sharp credences recommend those credences from an accuracy point of view (they regard those credences as most expectedly accurate<sup>11</sup>), imprecise perspectives don't recommend their imprecise credences.<sup>12</sup> More specifically, [omitted, (forthcoming)] argues that an attitude of, say,  $[0,1]$  towards the proposition that the sun will rise tomorrow, is not a state that recommends against moving to a more opinionated state. So one might argue that in fact we *can* recover our belief that the sun will rise tomorrow from the perspective of doubt in which induction is set aside, so long as the perspective of doubt is (sufficiently) imprecise. For while the perspective doesn't recommend believing that the sun will rise tomorrow, it doesn't forbid it either. This means that if we choose to, we can simply transition to a more confident attitude towards the proposition from the perspective of doubt, in a way that the perspective of doubt permits.

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<sup>11</sup> I'm relying here on the thought that our accuracy measures are "strictly proper." Note that the dialectic of this paper doesn't get off the ground if we use the main competitor to a strictly proper rule – the absolute value score. For on the absolute value score, a 0.5 credence permits a credence of 1 or 0. So it wouldn't be true that the perspective of doubt in SLEEPY recommends 0.5.

<sup>12</sup> Seidenfeld et al. (2012), Mayo-Wilson and Wheeler (2016), Schoenfield (2017), Berger and Das (forthcoming).

The problem with the proposal is that I'm not convinced that it's going to do all the anti-skeptical work we might want it to. Some skeptical arguments are motivated by principles like the Principal of Indifference: that in the absence of reasons for treating different hypotheses differently we should distribute our credence evenly over the relevant possibilities. So if I'm considering how things look from a perspective in which I don't rely on induction, and I wonder whether the sun will rise tomorrow, one might argue that, rather than being spread all over the interval, my credence will be 0.5 that it will rise and 0.5 that it won't rise. I'm not claiming that all skeptical arguments are motivated by this sort of reasoning, aiming to defend the Principle of Indifference, or this particular application of it. My point is just that I don't think the precise/imprecise distinction gives us a *general* solution to the problem at hand because it seems like how precise or imprecise your credence is in a skeptical perspective of doubt will depend a lot on the details of your skepticism. I don't see an argument for the claim that skeptical worries *always* go along with extremely imprecise probabilities. It's also worth noting that even if the skeptical arguments motivate an attitude that is imprecise, if it's say  $[0.2, 0.8]$  rather than  $[0,1]$ , the perspective will still recommend being no more than 0.8 confident that the sun will rise – less than how confident we tend to be in that proposition.

In sum, while I think the proposal is well-motivated in the sense that I think there are good reasons to treat precise and imprecise perspectives of doubt differently, I'm not convinced that the proposal will vindicate non-skeptical positions to the extent we might have hoped. If it turns out that every compelling skeptical argument is motivated by considerations that induce extremely imprecise credences, this solution may be the one, but until we have some general argument to suggest this is the case, I think it's worth investigating alternatives.

## **6. The Second Proposal: Reasonful versus Reasonless Perspectives of Doubt**

David Christensen (2011) and Katia Vavova (2014, 2018) offer a different sort of proposal. Their thought is that, in SLEEPY, the perspective of doubt is one that contains *good reasons* to think you got things wrong: your evidence suggests that your reasoning was performed in a cognitively compromised state. In contrast, they claim, while the perspective that results from bracketing your commitment to induction *lacks* good reason to think you got things right, it doesn't *have* a good reason to think you got things wrong. Setting aside induction, the thought goes, you don't have much in the way of reasons to believe anything about such matters as whether the sun will rise.

The general thought is that if the perspective of doubt has good reasons for thinking a mistake was made, you should defer to it, but if it merely lacks good reasons to think you got things right, you should not. Vavova (2018) formulates this proposal by distinguishing two principles, the first of which she endorses, the second of which she rejects:

*Good Independent Reason Principle (GIRP)*. “To the extent that you have good independent [undefeated] reason to think that you are mistaken with respect to p, you must revise your confidence in p accordingly” (145)

*No Independent Reason Principle (NIRP)*. “To the extent that you [lack] good independent [undefeated] reason to think that you are [correct] with respect to p, you must revise your confidence in p accordingly” (148).

I’ll call the Christensen/Vavova proposal “GIRP-not-NIRP.”

This proposal may sound similar to the previous one, but it’s importantly different. For it’s compatible with GIRP-not-NIRP that the perspective in which you’ve set aside your commitment to induction recommends a 0.5 credence that the sun will rise tomorrow. Still, they say, 0.5 or not, you shouldn’t defer to this perspective because that 0.5 credence is based on a lack of reasons, rather than the presence of reasons. What’s important to Christensen and Vavova is not what sort of doxastic attitude the perspective of doubt recommends, but what sorts of reasons support that attitude.

I have two worries about GIRP-not-NIRP: First, I worry that it won’t do all the anti-skeptical work it’s purported to do. The second worry is about the motivation for the view: I’ll argue that the considerations it takes to be relevant won’t look relevant from point of a view of a deliberator who is trying to determine whether to defer doubt and who is interested in truth or accuracy. I will generalize the second worry later in the paper when I argue that no proposal along these lines can motivate treating the cases differently from an accuracy-aimed-deliberator’s perspective.

### 6.1. Anti-Skeptical Work

Let's start with the first worry. Vavova (2014) uses GIRP-not-NIRP to respond to evolutionary debunking arguments against moral realists. The argument that Vavova is responding to goes roughly like this: the best explanation for why we humans have the basic evaluative tendencies that we do is that they were naturally selected for. These tendencies were selected for because they were conducive to survival, not because they correspond with what the moral realist thinks of as a mind-independent normative reality. We have no good reason to expect that the mind-independent normative truths would correspond with the evaluative tendencies that were conducive to survival, so the moral realist isn't justified in maintaining her moral beliefs.

There is a common response to the evolutionary debunking argument (e.g. Enoch (2010)) which is similar to the "lucky me" response in SLEEPY. It says: The mind-independent normative truths are (necessarily!) those that promote life and well-being. The evaluative tendencies that are conducive to survival and reproduction are those that promote life and well-being. So it's no big surprise that the mind-independent normative truths correspond with our basic evaluative tendencies.

Street responds by claiming that her opponent is inappropriately relying on her own moral beliefs (life and well-being are good) in defending their legitimacy. In other words, Street is arguing that we need to be able to defend the reliability of our moral beliefs in a way that doesn't rely on them: we need to be able to recover them *from the perspective of doubt*. This is where Vavova comes in. Vavova argues that Street is asking for too much, and she appeals to GIRP-not-NIRP to explain why.

Here's the thought: It's true, says Vavova, that setting aside all of our moral beliefs, we have no good reason to think our moral faculties are reliable. For this reason, NIRP would indeed require us to abandon them. But GIRP only requires us to abandon our beliefs if the perspective of doubt provides us with good reason for thinking we made a mistake. So does the perspective in which we've set aside all of our moral beliefs provide us with a good reason to think we've made a mistake? Vavova says no. She asks us consider the set of true moral beliefs and the set of adaptive moral beliefs. She then argues as follows: If we're to have good reason for thinking the contents of these sets differ, then we must have some idea about the nature of those contents – "what they are or what they are like" (15). But if we've set aside our entire evaluative perspective, as Street would

have us do, then, says Vavova, we have no idea what the true moral beliefs are or what they are like, and so we have no good reasons to think they differ from the adaptive moral beliefs.

I'm not convinced that Vavova's solution will work. In general, it seems like we can have reason to think a process is likely to yield the wrong results about a subject matter without relying on any substantive commitments concerning that subject. Here's an example: imagine we're going to explore a new planet. We know that there exists an alien society on this planet but we know absolutely nothing about it. Plausibly, we can make no (reasonable) assumptions about the subject of the aliens' etiquette norms. Now suppose that Janine the astronaut anthropologist travels to this planet and observes the aliens' behavior. Since Janine doesn't know the language, she must use all of her anthropological skills to draw inferences about what the norms are on the basis of her observations. After a great deal of study, she forms several beliefs on the subject of alien etiquette norms. The norms, it turns out, are absolutely hilarious. Janine writes an article that goes viral on the hilarious etiquette norms of this society.

Upon return to Earth, Janine sees her therapist who says: "I was not remotely surprised when I read your article. One thing I've learned about you is that you will go to great lengths to make people laugh. Indeed, I suspect that whatever it is you saw the aliens do, you would have interpreted their behavior in such a way that a hilarious article would ensue."

Now, there's a question about to what extent Janine should believe her therapist. In some versions of the case she might have good reasons to think that her rigorous anthropological training would override her tendencies to play the joker. But suppose that Janine believes her therapist, and she has good reasons to do so. It's tempting to think that she should reduce her confidence in her beliefs. At very least, the sorts of intuitions that drive us to say that we should reduce our confidence in SLEEPY and similar cases to which the Christensen/Vavova proposal is meant to motivate reduction of confidence, seem to motivate the claim that Janine should reduce her confidence.

But if Janine should reduce her confidence, then the explanation for this fact can't be that the perspective in which Janine sets aside her beliefs about alien etiquette norms contains a rich array of beliefs about alien etiquette which form the basis of her having *good positive reason* for thinking the true norms and the funny norms don't coincide. The case was constructed to be as analogous as possible to the moral case. Setting aside the beliefs she formed during her expedition, by stipulation, *she has nothing at all to go on* concerning alien etiquette norms.

If Janine should reduce her confidence about alien etiquette norms upon finding out about their etiology, despite the fact that, from the perspective of doubt, she can't rely on any beliefs about alien etiquette, why shouldn't we reduce confidence in the moral norms upon finding out about their etiology, despite the fact that, from the perspective of doubt, we can't rely on any beliefs about morality? Insofar as we want to vindicate the intuition about Janine, it's difficult to see how Vavova can motivate the idea that we need to rely on substantive moral commitments in order to have reason to think that we made a mistake about morality. So I'm not convinced that GIRP-not-NIRP can do the moral anti-skeptical work Vavova hoped it would.<sup>13</sup>

## 6.2. Motivating the Proposal

I now want to think about the motivation for deciding whether to defer to doubt on the basis of GIRP-not-NIRP. Suppose you recognize that in some perspective of doubt a 0.5 credence in P is recommended, while the non-doubtful perspective recommends a high degree of confidence. Question: once you recognize this fact, will it matter whether that 0.5 credence is the result of *having* good reason to think you got things wrong or *lacking* good reason to think you got things right? I'll argue that if what you're interested in is the truth of your beliefs or the accuracy of your credences, you will regard such considerations as irrelevant.

Before presenting the argument, I want to describe its structure:

The argument is focused on cases in which the non-doubtful perspective – the one that doesn't do any bracketing – permits (and perhaps recommends) believing P on the basis of some reasoning with evidence E. More specifically, we'll be focusing on cases in which the agent's prior probability in P given her *total* evidence is high, and so is a case in which conditionalization (on the *total* evidence) would yield a high degree of confidence in P (see section 3).

However, the perspective of doubt in question is one whose commitments don't allow reasoning with E – some of the evidence is either set aside or not available for use in a certain way – and as a result the perspective recommends a middling credence or agnosticism. For short we'll

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<sup>13</sup> Vavova might respond by claiming that the cases are disanalogous in the following respect: while we can understand the *concept* of alien etiquette norms without relying on any substantive beliefs about them, we can't possess moral concepts without relying on any substantive moral commitments. We can't have reasons to think we're wrong about morality, setting aside all of our moral commitments, because the resulting perspective lacks the conceptual resources to make sense of what it would mean to be wrong about morality, let alone provide us with a reason to think that we are. While certain views about moral semantics might vindicate such a response, the relevant views are not the target of Street's criticism. This is because views on which some of our basic moral commitments are analytic don't face the epistemological problem Street is pointing to, and so are not in the category of views Vavova is setting out to defend.

say that the non-doubtful perspective “permits making use of your reasoning about E” and the perspective of doubt “forbids making use of your reasoning about E.”

Now, imagine that you’re trying to decide whether to defer to the perspective of doubt. If you’re trying to decide whether to defer to doubt, and your aim is truth or accuracy, you’re deliberating, and deliberating always takes place from some perspective. So here’s a question: when you’re deliberating about whether to defer to doubt, is the deliberative perspective you’re occupying one that permits making use of the reasoning about E, or not? I’m going to argue that either way, the structure of reasons will look irrelevant to you. So the argument will go like this (I’ll defend each of these premises after presenting the argument):

- (1) If the perspective from which I’m deliberating permits making use of my reasoning about E, the perspective will permit maintaining belief (i.e. *not* deferring to doubt), even if the perspective of doubt contains good reasons for thinking I made a mistake.
- (2) If the perspective from which I’m deliberating forbids making use of my reasoning about E, the perspective from which I’m deliberating will recommend abandoning belief (i.e. deferring to doubt), even if the perspective of doubt contains no good reasons for thinking I made a mistake.

So...

- (3) There is no deliberative stance I can take which will recommend deferring or not deferring to doubt on the basis of whether or not the perspective of doubt’s recommendation is based on good reasons.

Let’s look at each premise individually starting with (1):

If I’m deliberating from a perspective which permits making use of my reasoning about E, then I can engage in “lucky me” reasoning.<sup>14</sup> Recall: *independence principles were brought into this literature precisely because it’s accepted by all parties in the debate that reasoning with E leads to the result that I’ll*

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<sup>14</sup> Note that I’m assuming that you’re not adding or removing any further commitments (beyond what’s been bracketed in the perspective of doubt) for the purpose of deliberation. For example, if you’ve set aside induction, you don’t randomly add the commitment that the sun either always rises or never rises, or remove the commitment that the sun has risen every day in the past. If you think you might add or remove additional commitments in deciding whether to defer, there will definitely be no principled story which distinguishes the deferring and non-deferring cases, since the answer will just depend on whether the additional commitments you’ve added (or removed) provide a deliberative route to the belief in question. It certainly won’t depend on the structure of reasons *in the perspective of doubt* (which at this point would no longer even be the relevant perspective).

*think I got lucky.* This argument is concerned with cases in which conditionalizing on E + whatever else is known about the situation, results in a high credence in P, so an accuracy-aimed agent who is able to make use of E will want to conditionalize.<sup>15</sup> If I'm reasoning with E, I'll be happy to acknowledge that the perspective in which I'm *not* doing so is one that contains good (undefeated) reasons for thinking that I made a mistake. But that will not translate into *me* having good (undefeated) reasons for thinking that I made a mistake. Compare: my neighbor doesn't know that our moving truck is coming today. She has good reasons to think she'll be able to park on the street. I know that the moving truck is coming and that she won't be able to park on the street. The fact that her perspective contains good (undefeated) reasons for thinking she can park on the street is a result of her lacking resources I have at my disposal. This fact about her perspective doesn't translate into *me* having good (undefeated) reasons to think she can park on the street. Similarly, facts about undefeated reasons in the perspective of doubt, won't translate into *me* having such undefeated reasons if I'm occupying a perspective that has more epistemic resources available.

Let's move on to (2): suppose that, in deliberating about whether to defer to the perspective of doubt, I'm deliberating from a perspective that forbids making use of my reasoning about E. If that's the case, then, unless I'm adding or removing additional commitments (see note 14) the perspective from which I'm deliberating about whether to defer to the perspective of doubt *just is* the perspective of doubt. For the perspective of doubt in this case is just the perspective that results from taking my original perspective and bracketing the reasoning about E. That perspective is going to recommend deferring to doubt, regardless of the structure of reasons. Why? We've already stipulated that we're dealing with cases in which the perspective of doubt recommends abandoning belief. If you're occupying some deliberative perspective, and you ask it: "should I adopt the beliefs you recommend?" the answer is going to be a resounding yes. This is true regardless of what sorts of reasons the perspective has to go on. Suppose that your perspective of doubt recommends a credence in P of 0.5 on the basis of the Principle of Indifference: there aren't reasons to believe P or  $\sim$ P so it recommends dividing your credence evenly between them. If you ask such a perspective: "should I assign a 0.5 credence to P?" the answer is going to be yes. If you say: "But you don't have much to go on in recommending 0.5. You're just assigning 0.5 because you're in a very evidentially unfortunate position with respect to P. You lack reasons to believe

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<sup>15</sup> For accuracy based motivations for conditionalization see, e.g. Greaves and Wallace (2006) and Briggs and Pettigrew (forthcoming).

one thing or another” – the perspective will respond – “exactly. That is why I’m telling you to assign 0.5 to P.”

In sum, if the perspective you’re in is one that permits reasoning with E, it will permit thinking “even if the perspective of doubt has good reasons to assign middling credence to P, I’m going to believe P anyway (because of E!).” If it forbids reasoning with E, you’re going to think “even if the perspective of doubt lacks good reasons for assigning middling credence to P, I’m going to assign middling credence to P. For that’s what the perspective I’m deliberating from recommends!” So even if the distinction that Christensen and Vavova are drawing were extensionally adequate in terms of securing our intuitive judgments about cases (which I’ve raised some doubts about), it’s hard to see how anything about the presence or absence of reasons in the perspective of doubt could motivate a deliberator, aiming at accuracy, to defer in SLEEPY but not in SKEPTICISM.

### 6.3. Objections

Before defending my view that accuracy-aimed deliberation in general won’t help us decide whether or not to defer to doubt, I’d like to address two objections:

*Objection 1:* When we’re deliberating about whether to defer to doubt, we’re deliberating from neither of the two perspectives you described: We’re deliberating from a *third* perspective: one that hasn’t yet made up its mind about whether or not to permit the reasoning about E.

*Response:* A perspective is just a set of commitments. So it’s a logical truth that every perspective is one whose commitments permit the reasoning about E or not. There is no “third” perspective that is “neutral” with respect to whether it permits reasoning with E. It may, however, be indeterminate which of two perspective you’re occupying. If it’s indeterminate which perspective you’re occupying then it’s indeterminate whether your perspective recommends deferring to doubt. This still doesn’t provide us with a consideration that favors doing one thing rather than another.

*Objection 2:* I suggest we reframe the role of GIRP-not-NIRP. The idea is not to tell us what to do when we *can’t* recover a belief from a perspective of doubt (i.e. defer to doubt or not). Rather, Christensen and Vavova are trying to help us *recover* belief from certain perspectives of doubt. So I’m not meant to think: “Hmm...I can’t recover my belief that the sun will rise tomorrow from

such and such perspective of doubt. Fortunately, GIRP-not-NIRP tells me I can maintain it anyway.” Rather, I’ll think “Hmm...I can’t recover my belief that the sun will rise tomorrow *in many of the usual ways* I recover a belief from doubt. But my perspective of doubt also includes a commitment to GIRP-not-NIRP (*that* hasn’t been subject to doubt when I started doubting induction). So this particular skeptical perspective of doubt is one from which I can recover my belief that the sun will rise.

*Reply:* First, I want to clarify what theses I am and am not aiming to defend. My claim is that once we grant that certain perspectives of doubt recommend abandoning belief, it’s difficult to see how criteria like GIRP-not-NIRP will motivate deferring in some cases but not others. So officially, any view which aims to tell us that in fact we *can* recover belief from skeptical perspectives of doubt – in other words, that we can “convince the skeptic” – is simply not within the purview of my project (see section 4).

That being said, GIRP-not-NIRP does not actually offer a way to recover belief from doubt. To see why, it will be helpful to first make note of a principle that, if included in the perspective of doubt, *would* arguably allow us to recover belief. This would be something like:

BELIEF-WITHOUT-REASONS: When you have no reasons to believe either P or  $\sim$ P, it’s permissible to believe P.

If we had BELIEF-WITHOUT-REASONS at our disposal, then somebody who has set aside their commitment to induction might recover belief as follows: “True, I have no reason to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow (I’ve set aside induction). But I also don’t have reasons to believe that it won’t. So BELIEF-WITHOUT-REASONS tells me that it’s fine for me to believe it will rise tomorrow.” But GIRP-not-NIRPers don’t (and shouldn’t) accept BELIEF-WITHOUT-REASONS. They’re not claiming that it’s fine to believe empirical propositions for no reason at all. (Presumably they don’t think you can rationally believe that a black marble will be drawn from an urn of black and white marbles with unknown ratio just because you lack a reason to believe both that it will be black and that it won’t be). They’re only claiming that it can be permissible to believe some propositions with no *independent* reason – no reason that exists *in some trimmed down version of your perspective*. But if your perspective *is* the skeptical perspective, then the skeptical perspective isn’t a trimming down of your perspective – it’s all you’ve got. The issue, for the inductive skeptic, isn’t a lack of independent reason – it’s a lack of reason at all. That’s why BELIEF-WITHOUT-

REASONS might help a skeptic recover belief from doubt, but the permission to believe without *independent* reason will not.

One might be able to come up with some related principle that *would* allow for recovery. For example, perhaps one has the commitment that if at some previous time one formed the belief that P, that in itself is a reason to believe P. So unless the perspective of doubt contains reasons to think P is false, if I earlier formed the belief that P is true, then P is likely to be true. If that's a commitment that makes it into your perspective of doubt, congratulations! You may be able to recover your belief (unless we're considering skepticism about the past). Christensen himself explicitly argues against such forms of conservatism,<sup>16</sup> so I don't think this is what he and Vavova have in mind. But I want to flag once again that I'm not aiming to give an argument for the claim that nobody could have commitments that allow them to recover beliefs from skeptical perspectives. People might have all sorts of commitments that allow them to make all sorts of interesting moves from a variety of different perspectives. I might think that seeing a black cat makes it likely that the sun will rise tomorrow. Nothing I've said here tells against this commitment. But GIRP-not-NIRP, at least as stated, is not a commitment that allows for recovery from doubt. For this reason, I think Christensen and Vavova are most charitably interpreted as offering us a way of ignoring the skeptic not of convincing her.

## 7. My Proposal

In this section, I will propose my own view concerning the following questions:

Question 1: Why do we have the doubt-deferring tendencies that we actually have?

Question 2: How might we try to figure out, on any given occasion, whether to defer to the perspective of doubt?

You may have noticed that my short list conspicuously lacks the question: when is it *rational* to defer to the perspective of doubt. I'll explain why at the end.

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<sup>16</sup> Christensen (1994)

### 7.1. Question 1

I'll begin with a warm-up thought experiment. Suppose I'm programming a robot that's going to explore Mars. The robot is going to form all sorts of beliefs about Mars based on the evidence it receives. Suppose I think my robot is excellent. I'm sure that it will respond to evidence in exactly the way I tell it to, no matter what. (I'm not claiming this is realistic). Now I'm wondering, should I program the robot in such a way that it doubts its capacities to respond to evidence? No! For *I* know that its capacities are ship-shape. So even if the robot were to encounter some Martians who say to it: "you know, robots like you tend to malfunction in our environment" and provide a track record of malfunctioning robots like this one, I'll want my robot ignore all that, since *I* know that such evidence would be misleading (my robot will not malfunction).

The less confident I am in my robot's capacities, the more I'll want the robot to take into account the possibility that it malfunctioned. Suppose, for example, that my prior probability in  $P$  is 0.7. And suppose I think the robot is going to examine a sample of Martian rock and do some calculations on the basis of its findings. If done correctly, these calculations will yield the correct verdict concerning  $P$ . Suppose further that I think that if the robot's battery is running low, then it will do no better than chance at performing these calculations. Then, I'll want to program the robot in such a way that if it performs a calculation concerning  $P$ , and then discovers that its battery is low, it abandons the results of the calculation and reverts to its prior probability of 0.7. In other words, if I'm leaving open the possibility that the robot will make a mistake, I'll sometimes want the robot to defer to the perspective of doubt. Note that this will be true no matter how much the robot has to set aside. Maybe the robot has collected loads of samples and come up with a complete theory about Mars. It then discovers that the entire time its battery has been low. I won't want the robot to think "well, if I set aside all of my beliefs about Mars I won't have anything left to go on, so it must be okay for me to maintain my beliefs." Regardless of how much needs to be set aside, if I think that the robot won't be doing any better than chance, then I'll want the robot to abandon the beliefs that it formed while its battery was low.

However, even if I leave open the possibility that my robot will malfunction in certain conditions, I certainly will not want the robot to defer to any old perspective of doubt it might entertain. Suppose, for example, that I know all sorts of things about Earth that I want the robot to take into account when making comparisons about how things are on Earth versus Mars. If the robot sets aside all of its Earth beliefs it won't be able to recover them from doubt. But so what?

I'll just program the robot so that it defers to doubt under all and only the circumstances in which I have doubts about its capacities. If the robot tried to come up with an epistemology that justified its dispositions it would most likely fail. Its dispositions are simply a result of the varying degrees of confidence that I, the designer, have.

What's the moral of this story? My very speculative answer to Question 1 is that, in some sense, we're like this robot. We've been "programmed" to be sensitive to the possibility of certain sorts of errors (Did I reason about this particular matter correctly?) but not the possibility of other sorts of errors (Is there an external world? Will the future be like the past?). If which sorts of errors we're concerned with is explained by the fact that concern about certain sorts of errors rather than others was conducive to survival, then it's likely that the sorts of errors we're sensitive to are errors that we were, at some point, in fact prone to make. If there is, in fact, an external world, it certainly won't do you any good to worry that there isn't, and if the past proceeded in a relatively patterned and unsurprising way for a while, creatures that made inductive inferences would have done better than inductive skeptics.

What we take for granted and what we're inclined to doubt is a fundamental aspect of the way we cognize. What I'm suggesting is that what explains the fundamental ways we cognize might not be accessible to us, just like what explains the fundamental ways the robot cognizes is not accessible to it. The sorts of errors we find ourselves sensitive to might be quite a hodgepodge, and there might not be much to say about what the members of the hodgepodge have in common that goes beyond the fact that concerns about some errors are or were, for completely contingent reasons, more useful than others.

But don't take any comfort in this hypothesis. Don't think that you can motivate your tendency to get worried about your reasoning when you're sleepy, but not be a skeptic, by appealing to the proposal that you've been programmed in ways that make you sensitive to errors you in fact are prone to make. For this proposal is only plausible from a perspective in which you're not doubting the external world or induction. Currently, I'm not occupying a perspective of doubt with respect to these matters, so I'm perfectly happy putting this proposal on the table as a possible answer to Question 1. It does nothing, though, to help with Question 2.

## 7.2. Question 2

Suppose I recognize that, in some particular case, a perspective of doubt, which forbids making use of certain reasoning concerning evidence E recommends abandoning belief in P, while the non-doubtful perspective permits (and perhaps recommends) belief. I'm wondering whether to defer to the perspective of doubt (PD). What I want to propose now is that the question, when asked from an accuracy-aimed first-person perspective, of whether to defer to doubt on any given occasion is not, ultimately, resolvable by rational deliberation. The argument is a generalization of the argument I gave in the discussion of the GIRP-not-NIRP view:

- (1) If the perspective from which I'm deliberating permits making use of my reasoning about E, the perspective will permit maintaining belief (i.e. *not* deferring to doubt).
- (2) If the perspective from which I'm deliberating forbids making use of my reasoning about E, the perspective from which I'm deliberating will recommend abandoning belief (i.e. deferring to doubt).
- (3) The question of whether to defer to PD is determined by whether, the deliberative perspective I'm currently using to deliberate (about whether to defer to PD), permits reasoning with E, or not.
- (4) The question of whether to defer to PD is answered by introspection, not deliberation.

Let's start with Premises (1) and (2): Once again, the idea is that if the perspective I'm reasoning from permits making use of my reasoning about E, and so permits or recommends believing P, then the fact that some perspective which doesn't make use of all the epistemic resources available to me recommends abandoning belief in P, won't motivate me to abandon belief. If, however, I'm deliberating from a perspective that forbids making use of my reasoning about E, then I'm deliberating from the perspective of doubt. If we're in a case in which the perspective of doubt recommends abandoning belief, and I'm deliberating *from* the perspective of doubt, abandoning belief will, of course, be the recommendation.

It's a truth of logic that my deliberative perspective is one that permits reasoning with E or it's not one that permits reasoning with E. So in order to figure out whether to defer to the recommendations of the perspective of doubt, all I need to do is look inwards and see whether the perspective I'm currently deliberating from is one that permits such reasoning or not.

## 8. What about Rationality?

I haven't answered the following question: when is it *rational* to defer to the perspective of doubt? I don't know whether this is an answerable question and if it is, what the answer is. For all I know, something like GIRP-not-NIRP describes an objective truth about rationality. But, *as a deliberator*, I'm not satisfied by GIRP-not-NIRP because the view can't be motivated from the perspective of somebody, aiming at accuracy, who is trying to determine whether to defer to doubt. For GIRP-not-NIRP is telling us to be sensitive to considerations which will seem irrelevant from the truth-seeking deliberative perspective. All this is to say is that, given the way that I'm approaching the question, (imagining a deliberator trying to decide whether to defer to doubt) principles like GIRP-not-NIRP, whether they are truths about rationality or not, have no traction.

My own view is that rationality is important because truth is important, and principles of rationality are meant to help us in our pursuit of the truth. So I'm inclined to think that if a proposed principle of rationality can't be motivated from the truth-seeker's perspective, that should cast suspicion on the principle. You may disagree with me on this front, and here is not the place to get into these metaepistemological questions. Suffice it to say that if your view is right and my view is wrong, then there may just be two interesting intellectual projects worth pursuing: in addition to theorizing about what's rational, it may also be interesting to try to figure out what deliberative moves are available from our own perspective, when we're seeking the truth.

## 9. Conclusion

Patrick Shanley, in his play *Doubt* describes doubt as “a wordless Being” that “moves just as the instant moves; it presses upward without explanation, fluid and wordless...(viii)”. I agree with this characterization. We can always choose to *entertain* doubt – we can notice what would follow if we did or didn't rely on various things that we generally take ourselves to be committed to. But whether to actually *take up* that perspective – to form or abandon the beliefs it recommends – is not something we can decide deliberatively. Deference to doubt should be thought of as something that simply happens to us, without explanation, fluid and wordless.

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