

# Sceptical Rationality

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## Abstract

It is widely assumed that it is rational to suspend one's belief regarding a certain proposition only if one's evidence is neutral regarding that proposition. In this paper I broaden this condition, and defend, on the basis of an improved ancient argument, that it is rational to suspend one's belief even if the available evidence is not neutral – or even close to neutral.

Keywords: suspension, belief, rationality, inquiry, truth, scepticism, dogmatism

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## 1. Introduction

Most of us happen to believe lots of things. That we are mortal. That most companies are corrupt. That we want a nice job. That human life is an accident. That there are gods who punish us. That nothing travels faster than light. That Socrates did not corrupt the youth. That our friends are not projections of our mind. And so on.

Yet the ancient sceptics, at least as represented by Sextus Empiricus, had no such beliefs: they suspended them. They believed neither that we are mortal, nor that we are immortal: they were neutral on the issue, and indeed about many other issues (if not all). In this paper I will argue for the claim that it is rational to have such a neutral attitude in many more cases than we usually think.

It is widely assumed that it is rational to suspend one's belief regarding a certain proposition only if the available evidence is neutral (or more or less neutral) regarding that proposition.<sup>1</sup> In this sense it is rational, for example, to suspend one's belief regarding the proposition that the next coin will land on heads.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Feldman's evidentialism: "If a person is going to adopt any attitude toward a proposition, then that person ought to believe it if his current evidence supports it, disbelieve it if his current evidence is against it, and suspend judgment about it if his evidence is neutral (or close to neutral)." (2000: 679)

The main aim of this paper is to broaden the conditions for suspension, and argue that it is rational to suspend belief on a certain issue even if one's current evidence is *not* neutral (or even close to neutral).

To make my case, I shall employ an argument from Sextus himself, and set out an improved version of it in contemporary terms. Given that this argument has hardly been explored from a systematic perspective (especially compared to the Agrippa modes), the main portion of this paper will be devoted to stage-setting. In §3, I distinguish the argument from Sextus that I will be interested in (i.e. the argument from inquiry) from two other ancient motivations for suspension. In §4, I consider Sextus' argument from inquiry and raise a systematic worry about it. In §§5-8, I make this worry precise and defend an improved, qualified version of the argument. Yet first things first: the attitude of suspension.

## 2. Suspension

What is it to suspend one's belief on an issue? To suspend one's belief regarding a certain proposition  $p$ ,<sup>2</sup> I will assume, is to hold a neutral attitude concerning  $p$ 's truth, i.e. to regard  $p$  as neither true nor false.<sup>3</sup>

Suspension of belief is to be contrasted with the two other doxastic attitudes: belief and disbelief. All three express an opinion about the truth of a given proposition (cf. Table 1). Belief and disbelief differ from suspension in that they are non-neutral attitudes. To believe  $p$  is to hold a positive attitude towards  $p$ 's truth, i.e. to regard  $p$  as true. To disbelieve  $p$  is to hold a negative attitude towards  $p$ 's truth, i.e. to regard  $p$  as false.<sup>4</sup>

Recently, Turri considered a fourth possible attitude, which is to be wholly distinct from the previous three: withdrawing. Crucially, withdrawing is not the same as suspending. The important distinction is this: "To suspend judgment on a proposition is a way of being engaged with it. To withdraw from a proposition is to disengage and move on" (Turri 2012: 361). So, if you withdraw from  $p$ , then you do not care about  $p$  or its truth. This need not be the case if you suspend on  $p$ .<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Henceforth, ' $p$ ' is a name for a proposition; not a schematic letter for a sentence.

<sup>3</sup> For a defence of the claim that suspension is a genuine attitude of neutrality or indecision, and not merely a state of non-belief, cf. Friedman (2013).

<sup>4</sup> Both belief and disbelief may of course be divided into further sub-attitudes or degrees, and I will say something about this later on.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. "Suspending judgment is a way of sticking your neck out." (Comesaña 2011: 220)

<i>Attitude</i>	<i>Opinion about p's truth</i>
Belief	Positive
Disbelief	Negative
Suspension	Neutral
Withdrawal	–

Table 1: Doxastic attitudes

What I take from Turri's suggestion is that the three-fold division of doxastic attitudes holds as long as the interest in truth is in place. That is: (Triad) If a subject S has an interest in and indeed opinion about p's truth, then S either believes, disbelieves, or suspends belief about p. For example: if you have no interest in the truth of the proposition that Agrippa, the alleged author of the five Agrippa modes, was a fictive person, then it does not follow that you either believe it, disbelieve it, or suspend your belief about it. But if you do have such an interest and form an opinion at all, then you do have one of the three attitudes.

Four qualifications. First, (Triad) is an improvement on the proposal by Barnes (1990: 9, 15) which has 'when S has investigated or considered p' rather than 'if S has an interest in p's truth'. For if you have investigated the matter, but no longer an interest in its truth, then, as Barnes (2007: 324) himself points out, you might still withdraw.

Second, this interest in p's truth is of an epistemic sort, and to be contrasted with moral or prudential interests in taking up a doxastic attitude towards p. You have such latter interests in the proposition, for example, that your friends are not projections of your mind, if believing this makes you happier. Relatedly, for all I will say in the following, (Triad) might just be one-directional. That is, it might still be possible to adopt one of the three doxastic attitudes for moral or prudential reasons without having an interest in the truth of the matter.

Third, I will assume that there is a clear difference between belief, disbelief and suspension, and that it is not possible to take up more than one of these three attitudes towards the same proposition at the same time. Thus, it is not possible, for example, to at once have a positive and a neutral opinion concerning p's truth.<sup>6</sup> These brief clarifications should suffice for our purposes in the following.

Finally, as noted the focus of this paper is a systematic one. This has a relevant implication. Namely, when I speak of suspension, I refer to the

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<sup>6</sup> This does not mean, of course, that propositional attitudes of distinct kinds could not be positive and neutral at once. E.g. one might be positive about p's truth, yet neutral regarding its certainty.

attitude just described: the attitude of having a neutral opinion about p's truth. This attitude, then, may differ in some respects from the attitude Sextus had in mind. For one thing, as we shall see in detail, the attitude of suspension does not directly entail any inquisitive stance such as the attitude of awaiting further evidence or the attitude of awaiting resolutions of the given disagreements.

### 3. Ancient motivations

Ancient scepticism as we know it from Sextus' works suggests at least three motivations for suspending our beliefs:

- (a) we cannot justify them,
- (b) doing so is necessary for the good life, and
- (c) doing so is necessary for inquiry.

Reason (a) is by far the most familiar aspect of ancient scepticism, particularly the arguments known as Agrippa's modes (PH 1.164-77). There are various ways of making them explicit. Here is one clear reconstruction:<sup>7</sup>

- (1) S can justify a belief x only if S can defend x against all possible challenges in a non-question begging way.
- (2) S can defend x against a challenge in a non-question begging way only if S can have a reason y for x which S can justify.
- (3) Hence: S can justify a belief x only if S can justify an infinity of beliefs. [from 1, 2]
- (4) S cannot justify an infinity of beliefs.
- (5) Hence: S cannot justify any belief. [from 3, 4]

Probably the most controversial premise is the first. Lammenranta (2013), for example, suggests the following weakening of (1): S can justify a belief x only if S can defend x against all appropriate, rather than all possible, challenges in a non-question begging way. Still, from this slightly weaker premise a great deal of suspension might be derived as well. For example, as Lammenranta notes, many of us are not able to defend our religious or political beliefs against appropriate challenges. Generally, all (a)-type reasons set high standards for justification such that it is difficult to satisfy them,

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<sup>7</sup> The format of this reconstruction is taken from Wieland (2011: 362-3). For detailed discussion of these modes, cf. Barnes (1990) and Lammenranta (2008).

leading one to suspend one's beliefs because one cannot justify them given those standards.

Reason (b) is that we should suspend our beliefs because of prudential reasons. This doxastic attitude, unlike the attitudes of belief and disbelief, has beneficial effects on the subject adopting it. In particular, it is supposed to induce peace of mind (or tranquillity). The basic idea is that beliefs about whether it is important or valuable to become rich, wise, famous or whatnot often leave us distressed about how to fulfil those aims. Yet this distress disappears, according to Sextus (PH 1.25-30), once we drop those beliefs.

Reason (c) is that we should suspend our beliefs because of epistemic, rather than prudential, reasons: this doxastic attitude, and not the attitudes of belief and disbelief, is required for inquiring and particularly for inquiring in the sense of truth-seeking. In the following I will focus exclusively on this reason, setting (a) and (b) aside. I will defend an improved version of Sextus' argument which basically concludes that it is rational to suspend our beliefs so long as we are inquiring into their truth.

Importantly, (c) (just like (b)) is a positive reason for suspension, and does not depend on the success of the negative reason (a). That is, it purports to show that suspension is a good thing even if Agrippa's modes fail, i.e. even if it is possible to justify some of our beliefs.

One controversial issue is the range of these motivations: whether they demonstrate that we must suspend belief concerning *all* propositions, or only some of them. Regarding (a), the issue is whether certain disputes can be decided after all (e.g. those about the propositions that slavery is immoral, that the Earth is not the centre of the universe, and many others that are no longer disputable). Regarding (b), the issue is whether suspending belief always has beneficial effects, or has them only when the propositions in question concern matters of value (such as the propositions that it would be good for me to have a nice job, or to have all and only true beliefs). Regarding (c), the issue is whether one should suspend belief in all the propositions one wants to investigate, or only some of them. We shall see about this last issue later on (§8), but it is important to keep these qualifications in mind.

Even though (c) will be my main concern in what follows, it is worth pointing out that it may conflict with (a) and (b). Let me take up the two issues briefly in turn.

The (a)/(c) issue is: If you always suspend belief and know, because of Agrippa's modes, that you will never adopt any belief whatsoever, then it is useless to continue your investigation (cf. Palmer 2000: 355ff, Striker 2001: 126-8).

As a solution to this worry, it has been suggested that sceptics have no reason to suppose that the application of Agrippa's modes must be successful in all instances. That is, sceptics have no reason to believe that there will never be a point where one is entitled to say that one has resolved all disagreements about the proposition in question and discovered the truth about the matter. Hence, they must proceed case-by-case and continue their inquiries (Perin 2010: 27-31, cf. Machuca 2011b).

The (b)/(c) issue is: If you investigate in order to reach peace of mind, how can you aim, beyond that, to discover the truth?<sup>8</sup> Of course, the two goals can coincide: If you are distressed by a desire to find out the truth about *p*, then you might reach peace of mind as soon as you think you have discovered whether *p* is true. However, this does not work for sceptics, for they never think they have discovered any such thing (more on this soon). Rather, sceptics suspend their belief on whether *p* is true, and so, according to Sextus, find peace of mind in this different sense. Independently of how this story is cashed out in its details (cf. Grgić 2013), the problem remains: If the sceptics' primary goal is to reach peace of mind, then once they reach that state they no longer seem to have any reason to continue their inquiries.

Solutions that have been suggested to this problem are of two sorts. The first strategy is to argue that the two motivations are coherent after all. For example, Perin (2010: 7-27) argues that the sceptics have not a single goal of inquiry, but two of them: a serious, primary interest in the discovery of truth, plus an additional interest in peace of mind.<sup>9</sup>

The second strategy is to accept that sceptics cannot inquire in the sense of truth-seeking, but defend the claim that they still can inquire in a different sense, i.e. with a different goal in mind. For example, Vogt (2011: 43-6, 2012: ch. 5) argues that even if sceptics cannot aim to discover truths, they can still aim to avoid falsehoods.<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, Bueno (2011: 192) suggests that the goal of sceptical inquiry is something different altogether, namely understanding.

In this paper I shall stick to the truth goal, and ask: do we need the doxastic attitude of suspension in order to inquire with the aim of discovering the truth about the matter? My discussion will be primarily systematic, and I do not aim to contribute to the reading of Sextus' works. Rather, I want to

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Sedley (1983: 21-3), Loeb (1998: 214), Palmer (2000: 369), Striker (2001: 117-8), Barnes (2007: 328-9).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. "The sceptic is distressed, and so motivated to seek tranquillity, precisely because he has an interest in the discovery of truth that is not an interest in it as a means to tranquillity." (Perin 2010: 24)

<sup>10</sup> Cf. "One might devise strategies that reflect [...] values according to which, for any given question, it is preferable to acquire no view at all as compared to acquiring a view that could turn out to be false." (Vogt 2011: 44)

know whether *we* should, or should not, hold beliefs about propositions in order to inquire into their truth.

#### 4. Sextus' argument from inquiry

Sextus' argument from inquiry, in a nutshell, is this: we should suspend our beliefs if we are interested in their truth. His words:<sup>11</sup>

When people search for something, the likely outcome is that either they find it or, not finding it, they accept that it cannot be found, or they continue to search. [...] The skeptics continue to search. (PH 1.1-3)

For inquiring [is inconsistent] in those who think they have accurate knowledge of them, since for the latter the inquiry has already reached its end, as they think, whereas for the former the supposition on which every inquiry is based still holds – namely, that they have not already found out the facts. (PH 2.11, cf. M 8.321)

Sextus thus distinguishes among three kinds of people. First, the dogmatists, who say that they have found the truth. Second, a group of philosophers (i.e. the academics, at least on Sextus' account), who say that the truth cannot be found.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the sceptics, who say neither that they have found the truth, nor that it cannot be found. Instead, the sceptics, and only the sceptics, continue to search for the truth. The first group cannot search because they think that they have already found it, the second because they think the search is useless as the truth cannot be found.

A first reading may appear convincing. There is something to it: searching is incompatible with having found what you were looking for. For if you have found something, you can no longer search for it. Still, Sextus' classification is misleading. The problem is that searching is not incompatible with thinking or suspecting that you found what you were looking for (or at least not obviously). As Barnes (2007: 322-3) puts it, there is a significant difference between how things are (whether one has found it or not), and how

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<sup>11</sup> Trans. Mates (1996). Cf. Annas & Barnes (1994).

<sup>12</sup> This position has sometimes been called 'negative dogmatism' (e.g. Palmer 2000: 351ff, Perin 2010: 2ff). Below I will re-label it (or at least a kindred view) as 'negative scepticism', for reasons to be explained.

the inquirers conceive of how things are (whether one thinks or suspects one has found it or not).

The same applies in terms of beliefs. The analogs are the following. To say that one has discovered that *p* is true is to believe *p*. To say that one has discovered that *p* is false is to disbelieve *p*. To say neither of these things is to suspend one's belief about *p*.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the analogous problem for Sextus' reasoning is that investigating whether *p* is true is not obviously incompatible with believing *p*. The question is: Why would dogmatists (i.e. people with beliefs) not be able to continue their inquiries?<sup>14</sup>

One quick response would be to say that if beliefs require certainty then one cannot believe something and still inquire into its truth. For to claim something of the form 'I am fully certain that *p* is true, yet I still continue my investigation regarding whether *p* is true' is to claim something paradoxical (cf. Barnes 2007: 323). Likewise, if your evidence regarding *p* guarantees *p*'s truth such that it cannot be defeated by further evidence regarding *p*, and if you are aware of this, then there seems to be no need for you to be open to further inquiries regarding *p*. For again claims of the form 'I believe that no further inquiries will make a difference to my evidence regarding *p*, yet I am still open to further evidence about *p*' appear paradoxical, if not downright incoherent.

Yet this suggestion fails, as it is controversial to assume that beliefs require certainty, whether subjective or objective (i.e. absence of counterevidence that is or is not among one's beliefs). For if we believed nothing unless we were certain (or unless we could show that our actual evidence cannot be defeated by further evidence), then we would believe hardly anything, and in that case the road to scepticism would be short indeed.

This reasoning does not rest on the particular view that beliefs fundamentally come in degrees as opposed to the view that beliefs are fundamentally full or flat-out. Roughly, to say that beliefs come in degrees by their very nature is to say that all flat-out attitudes can be explained in terms of partial attitudes. For example, it has been suggested that *S*'s flat-out belief in *p* could be explained in terms of the fact that her degree of belief or confidence in *p* is greater than her confidence in  $\sim p$  (for a discussion, cf. Frankish 2009: 79-81). But this is compatible with saying that beliefs need not block further inquiry.

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<sup>13</sup> Or even to withdraw from the issue. For the difference between suspension and withdrawal, see §2.

<sup>14</sup> In the cited texts, Sextus does not literally say that beliefs block inquiry. He rather states that beliefs *that one has accurate knowledge about p* block inquiries into *p*. To be sure: I do not wish to cast doubt on this last claim, merely on his three-fold classification.

All that is required to cast doubt on Sextus' classification is to assume that claims of the form 'I believe p, yet still continue my inquiry regarding its truth' are not always incoherent. Furthermore, if we suppose that believing p does not commit one to regarding further inquiries and evidence regarding p's truth as irrelevant (or at least not always), then Sextus' three-fold distinction among people is to be revised. As I will show next, in that case there are four, rather than three kinds of people to be distinguished.

### 5. A fourth category

My four-fold classification will depend on two sorts of attitudes, or dispositions:

- Does one admit beliefs regarding p?
- Is one open to investigating p, in the sense of truth-seeking?

The second question can be read in two distinct ways. I shall be assuming both readings, yet it is important to keep them apart. First (passive) reading: Is one willing to consider new evidence regarding p's truth if it happens to cross one's path? Second (active) reading: Is one actively gathering new evidence regarding the truth of p?

One may give a positive answer only to the doxastic question, or only to the inquisitive question (no matter its reading), or else to both or to none, making for four positions: Positive Scepticism, Negative Scepticism, Positive Dogmatism, and Negative Dogmatism (see Table 2).

	<i>Beliefs</i>	<i>No beliefs</i>
<i>Inquiry</i>	Positive Dogmatism	Positive Scepticism
<i>No inquiry</i>	Negative Dogmatism	Negative Scepticism

Table 2: Four mixed attitudes

We can assign terminology as follows. If one admits no beliefs, one is a Sceptic. If one admits beliefs, one is a Dogmatist (so, generally, dogmatists are regarded as people who hold non-neutral opinions about the truth of propositions, and not as people who are not willing to change their opinions). If one is open to inquiry (or even actively inquiring), one is Positive. If one is not open to inquiry, one is Negative.

The corresponding classification is as follows. Positive Sceptics do not admit beliefs (even if the evidence supports them) and are (open to)

investigating. Their attitude of suspension is regarded as provisional, i.e. they are awaiting further evidence about p.<sup>15</sup>

Negative Sceptics do not admit beliefs, and are not (open to) investigating (as they rely on meta-arguments that investigations will never succeed in determining the truth about the matter). Their attitude of suspension is regarded as permanent, i.e. as impervious to the discovery of further evidence about p.

Positive Dogmatists admit beliefs (if supported by the evidence) and are (open to) investigating. Their attitude of belief is regarded as provisional, i.e. they are awaiting further evidence about p.<sup>16</sup>

Negative Dogmatists admit beliefs and are not (open to) investigating. Their attitude of belief is regarded as permanent, i.e. it will not be affected by further evidence about p.

To be sure: my claim is not that Pyrrhonism, or Sextus' scepticism, is best considered as a 'Positive Scepticism'. (I am tempted to think this to some extent, yet in the remainder of this paper I shall elaborate this view in a way that goes beyond the letter of Sextus' writings.) Rather, my claim is that Sextus did not distinguish clearly between Positive and Negative Dogmatists. For Positive Dogmatism is exactly the view that combines belief (i.e. provisional belief) with investigation. In the next section I will further clarify these four positions by linking them to a distinct principle of epistemic rationality. I will close this section with two comments on the connection between the doxastic and inquisitive attitudes.

First, presumably no doxastic attitudes at all are required for inquiry. To see this, consider the propositional attitude of taking a proposition as a hypothesis. To have a doxastic attitude towards p is to have an opinion about it (positive, negative or neutral). By contrast, to hypothesize p is merely to consider it, i.e. to have p's content available without necessarily having an opinion about it. Moreover, the idea is that all one needs for inquiry is the latter, propositional attitude of hypothesizing. Indeed: a hypothesis is just a proposition to be investigated, a proposition pending further inquiries. Still, even if inquiry does not require any belief or opinion

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<sup>15</sup> This idea about provisional attitudes is not unfamiliar in the sceptical literature, cf. Barnes (1990: 17ff), Striker (2001: 122), Perin (2010: 21-2), Machuca (2011b: 252), Vogt (2011: 41). However, if it can apply to suspension, it may just as well apply to belief: see Positive Dogmatism below.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Klein: "The answer is simply that although every proposition is only provisionally justified. [...] Once that is recognized, surprisingly enough, the Pyrrhonian goal of avoiding dogmatism while continuing to inquire is obtainable." (1999: 313, cf. his 2000: 21). One can accept this, it seems, even if one does not accept Klein's broader infinitist's framework.

about *p*'s truth, it might still require the belief that *p* is worthy of pursuit. I will return to such background beliefs in §8.

Second, it has sometimes been objected that one cannot at once suspend and investigate, because suspension is the conclusion of one's investigation such that one can suspend only *after* having investigated (cf. Sedley 1983: 22, Barnes 2007: 327). The same puzzle can be raised for doxastic attitudes generally: If one can take up doxastic attitudes only when one's investigations are finished, then one should have no such attitudes at all during one's investigations. As we have just seen, however, it does not seem impossible to adopt doxastic attitudes during one's investigations so long as they are regarded as provisional (rather than permanent).

## 6. Epistemic rationality

The question of epistemic rationality is this: What doxastic attitude (belief, disbelief, or suspension of belief), if any at all, should a subject *S* adopt towards a proposition *p* at a time *t*, epistemically speaking?

Contrast: What doxastic attitude should *S* adopt morally or prudentially speaking (or all-things-considered)? For example, suppose that it holds that people do better research if they actually believe the investigated propositions (because of their psychological make-up, cf. Kelp & Douven 2011: 107). In that case they have a prudential, rather than epistemic reason to believe the investigated propositions. Also, the setting is that you have epistemic obligations regarding *p* only if you adopt any doxastic attitude towards *p* at all. If you have no opinion at all about *p* (whether positive, negative or neutral), then you have no epistemic obligations regarding *p* (cf. Feldman 2000: 677-9).

There are at least two (potentially) relevant factors to answering the question of epistemic rationality:

- what *S*'s evidence about *p* supports at *t*;
- whether *S* is open, at *t*, to considering new evidence regarding *p* at a subsequent time *t*\* (or even actively gathering new evidence regarding *p* at *t*).

According to Feldman's evidentialism, the second factor does *not* matter to epistemic rationality.<sup>17</sup> According to his virtue epistemological opponents

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. "Evidentialism [...] does not address questions about how to gather evidence, when one ought to seek additional evidence, and so on. In my view, these

(e.g. Baehr 2009), it *does* matter. I will not take sides here, but only invoke both factors to link the four positions distinguished above with different principles of epistemic rationality:

**Suspend+**

S epistemically should suspend her belief about p at t so long as S is open, at t, to considering new evidence regarding p at t\*/ gathering new evidence regarding p at t.

**Suspend-**

S epistemically should suspend her belief about p at t, no matter what her evidence for or against p at t, or any other t\*.

**Stick+**

S epistemically should stick to her belief about p at t, which is supported by her evidence at t, yet be open, at t, to changing her position in the light of new evidence regarding p at t\*/ that one is gathering regarding p at t.

**Stick-**

S epistemically should stick to her belief about p at t, and never change position in the light of new evidence regarding p at t\*/ never gather new evidence regarding p at t or any other t\*.

If you adhere to Suspend+, then you are a Positive Sceptic. If you adhere to Stick-, then you are a Negative Dogmatist. And so on.

To be sure: my claim is not that people fall into one or another of these four categories full-stop. Probably no one is a Negative Dogmatist, for example, throughout their whole life (or regarding all propositions). Still, each of these four principles can be used to characterise an episode in someone's doxastic life. In some cases someone might adhere to Stick+ (say) in order to regulate her doxastic attitudes, while in other cases she might adhere to Suspend-.

To see more clearly the differences among these principles, let us consider a scenario. Suppose that S's evidence at a time  $t_1$  supports  $\sim p$  (in terms of degrees, S's evidence at  $t_1$  indicates to S that the likelihood of p is, say, 0.3). Suppose furthermore that if S were open to further evidence about p, then her evidence at a subsequent time  $t_2$  would in fact support p (in terms of degrees, S's evidence at  $t_2$  would indicate to S that the likelihood of p is

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diachronic questions are moral or prudential questions rather than epistemic questions." (Feldman 2000: 689)

0.7). Of course, if she is not open to this further evidence, then her evidence at  $t_2$  would still support  $\sim p$  (and indicate a likelihood of 0.3). We may ask: What doxastic attitude should S adopt at  $t_2$  according to the four principles in this scenario? Table 3 presents the results.

<i>Principle of rationality</i>	<i>p's likelihood given S's evidence at <math>t_1</math></i>	<i>p's likelihood given S's evidence at <math>t_2</math></i>	<i>Attitude to be adopted at <math>t_2</math></i>
Suspend+	0.3	0.7	Suspension
Suspend-	0.3 <sup>18</sup>	0.3	Suspension
Stick+	0.3	0.7	Belief
Stick-	0.3	0.3	Disbelief

Table 3: Application of the four principles

One the basis of such scenarios, it can also be shown that only the positive positions are really interested in truth.

Negative Dogmatists who adhere to Stick- have no interest in truth, as can be seen in the following scenario. Suppose that a Negative Dogmatist believes  $p$ . In that case, she would stick to  $p$  even if her new evidence supports  $\sim p$ . This conflicts, however, with the interest in truth, for if you are really interested in the truth of  $p$ , you should not believe  $p$  in the face of a preponderance of evidence against it.

Negative Sceptics who adhere to Suspend- likewise have no interest in truth, as can be seen in the following scenario. Suppose that all the evidence available to a Negative Sceptic supports  $p$ . In that case, Negative Sceptics will neglect all this evidence and suspend. This, again, is in conflict with an interest in truth, for if one is interested in the truth of  $p$ , one should not ignore relevant evidence.

Furthermore, if neither of the negative positions have an interest in truth, they cannot be said to inquire with that aim in mind, though this does not mean that they cannot inquire (i.e. gather evidence) with other aims in mind. Particularly, they may still gather evidence with the aim of settling a doxastic attitude (cf. Loeb 1998). The latter aim does not clearly converge with the truth aim. For working yourself into evidential circumstances where it is easy for you to believe or suspend on  $p$  might have nothing to do with, and indeed might conflict with, an inquiry into  $p$ 's truth (cf. Lammenranta 2008: 15).

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<sup>18</sup> If S is not even going to look at what the evidence at  $t_1$  says, then it might be more accurate to put '0.5' in this row.

## 7. Two worlds

So far, I have argued that inquiring into a proposition  $p$  with the aim of discovering the truth about it is compatible both with (provisionally) believing  $p$ , as well as with (provisionally) suspending one's belief about  $p$ , i.e. the two positive positions.

The main thought here is fairly straightforward: belief and suspension of belief are doxastic attitudes (i.e. attitudes that express opinions about a given proposition), and as such entail no particular attitude towards or view about inquiry and new evidence.

Still, to say that both doxastic attitudes are possible is not to say that both are similarly appropriate. That is, even if it is possible to believe  $p$  while still inquiring into the truth of  $p$ , it may be more appropriate in such situations to suspend belief. To address this issue, I would like to invoke the following two imaginary worlds:

### *World of Equality*

This world is populated only by Positive Sceptics. That is, all its inhabitants are rational in the sense of Suspend+. If one of them is asked whether  $p$  is true, where 'p' stands for a proposition that interests her, she will answer that she suspends her belief about  $p$ . All propositions are treated on par with one another: a World of Equality.

### *World of Difference*

This world is populated only by Positive Dogmatists. That is, all its inhabitants are rational in the sense of Stick+. If one of them is asked whether  $p$  is true, where 'p' stands for a proposition that interests her, she answers that she either (i) believes  $p$  if her evidence tells her that  $p$  is true, (ii) disbelieves  $p$  if her evidence tells her that  $p$  is false, (iii) suspends belief about  $p$  if her evidence is neutral regarding  $p$ .<sup>19</sup> Not all propositions are treated on par with one another: a World of Difference.

Now ask: In which world does the interest in truth fare better? To be sure, the question is not concerned with determining in which world inhabitants have more true beliefs. For in that case the answer is clear: the inhabitants of the

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<sup>19</sup> If  $S$  does not find  $p$ 's truth interesting, and has no further moral or prudential interests in adopting a doxastic attitude towards  $p$ , then  $S$  withdraws. But this is the same in both worlds.

World of Equality have no beliefs, and consequently no true beliefs. Instead, the question is this: In which world is it more appropriate to maintain an interest in the truth of the matter?

As this paper's main aim is to show that both of these worlds are perfectly coherent, and so both possibly rational, I will leave this question open. Nevertheless, as the reader might still feel uncomfortable about the World of Equality, let me say something about why one might want to live in such a world.

Assume that S has a serious interest in the truth about p. If S has this interest, then it is plausible to think that she must aim to avoid holding inadequately examined beliefs about p. And if so, S must be open to the possibility that her actual evidence about p requires further attention. Now, in such circumstances where S is awaiting the outcome of further inquiries, i.e. awaiting new evidence of which S does not know yet what it will support, it is appropriate for S to adopt a neutral and impartial attitude. That is, in such circumstances it is appropriate to suspend in the meantime, and less appropriate to stick to beliefs (even beliefs that do, indeed, enjoy widespread support at the moment). Hence, by transitivity: If S has a serious interest in the truth about p, then, even if at the moment she has more evidence for or against p, S should suspend her belief about p.

Consider, for example, the proposition that nothing travels faster than light. This proposition (and hence the belief in it) enjoys widespread support despite some disconfirming and non-robust experimental results. Now the question is what attitude to adopt if you are really interested in the truth of the matter. The two worlds above present two options: you can either provisionally believe that nothing travels faster than light, or provisionally suspend belief in it. The argument just given for the second option admits that it is possible to believe in such circumstances, yet concludes that it is still more appropriate to suspend for inquiry related reasons. Namely, if you are awaiting the outcome of further inquiries, it is appropriate to adopt a neutral and impartial attitude, which is exactly the attitude of suspension.

'Neutrality' here does not imply that one is willing to consider further evidence in the future and revise one's opinions in an impartial manner. Rather, it refers to the stance of holding a neutral opinion about p's truth (see §2 above). In terms of the example: if you are awaiting further evidence regarding the proposition that nothing travels faster than light, and given that you are not yet in the position to know what this evidence will support, it is appropriate for you to stay neutral about its truth.

Some further clarifications are in order. First, this is an epistemic argument rather than a prudential one. I am not claiming, that is, that it is appropriate to stay neutral because this would have certain beneficial effects for inquirers (such that they would do better than their biased colleagues, cf.

Kelp & Douven 2011: 107-8). Rather, I am claiming that it is appropriate to stay neutral on  $p$ 's truth because one is awaiting the outcome of further inquiries and one is not in the position to know what new, further evidence about  $p$  will support. Again, this reasoning applies to everyone holding a doxastic attitude towards  $p$ , and not just to those that do actual research about  $p$ . On inductive grounds, one might suspect that it is *often* the case that we do not know yet what further evidence will support. If this is so, then according to Suspend+ we should often suspend our beliefs. In the next section, I shall consider this consequence in some detail.

Second, I am not claiming that it is irrational to stick to beliefs, or that Stick+ is simply wrong-headed. My aims are more modest: namely, to make a case for Suspend+ and show that it is not irrational to suspend even if one's evidence is not neutral.<sup>20</sup>

Third, and as I announced already in §3, this argument does not rest on high standards of justification.<sup>21</sup> It does not assume, that is, that  $S$  is epistemically justified in adopting beliefs only if she is certain about them, or if she can successfully defend them against all appropriate or even all possible challenges. Nor does it conclude, negatively, that  $S$  should suspend her beliefs because she does not yet meet such standards. Rather, the argument rests on premises related directly to inquiry, and concludes, positively, that  $S$  should suspend because doing so is the appropriate attitude to adopt when one is awaiting the outcome of further inquiries.

## 8. Global scepticism?

Importantly, Suspend+ entails unusual, yet interesting, conditions for suspension. Namely, by this principle it is rational to suspend one's belief regarding  $p$  so long as one is open to investigating  $p$ , and thus it can be rational to suspend even if one has, at the moment, more evidence for or against  $p$ .

The more familiar conditions for suspension, in contrast, are set by Stick+. According to these, it is rational to suspend one's belief regarding  $p$  only if one's evidence is neutral regarding both  $p$  and  $\sim p$ .<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Moreover, even if a similar case could be constructed for Stick+, then the choice between Suspend+ and Stick+ must be left undecided, which would imply that is equally rational to provisionally suspend or provisionally believe in the same evidential circumstances.

<sup>21</sup> See the (a)/(c) distinction.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. "Rationality requires one to suspend judgement about whether  $p$  if one believes there is no reason to believe either  $p$  or its negation." (Perin 2010: 40)

Moreover, it is easier to reach Global Scepticism from Suspend+ than from Stick+. Let Global Scepticism be the view that it is rational to suspend one's belief about all propositions which are such that one has an interest in their truth. Clearly this view is less global than saying that it is rational to suspend one's belief about all propositions whatever (including those that one does not care about), yet no such view can be reached from (c)-type motivations for suspension (see §3 for these types).

In the case of Suspend+, Global Scepticism follows at once. For if one has an interest in p's truth, then one is open to considering new evidence regarding p, and these are exactly the circumstances where one should suspend according to Suspend+.

In the case of Stick+, in order to reach Global Scepticism one must also assume that the subject's evidence is neutral in all cases (or close to neutral, allowing for a small deviation, cf. Comesaña 2011: 219). This means that the evidence has to support propositions and their negations at the same time (including in cases where there are positive arguments for both p and ~p, as well as in cases where there are no arguments at all for p or ~p). Yet usually this is not the case: most often one's evidence is not neutral with respect to a proposition. For example, my evidence is not neutral with respect to the propositions that I am mortal, that I like my music collection, that not everyone likes my music collection, etc.

Yet, there is problem with Global Scepticism that particularly concerns inquiry. For inquirers at least need beliefs, one might expect, about what the evidence supports at a certain time. Inquirers surely do not merely collect more and more evidence; they also have opinions, and should have them, concerning what it supports (e.g. opinions concerning the second and third column in Table 3).

There are at least three possible responses to this problem. First response: One might accept it, and hold that sceptics, in so far as they are inquirers, do have such beliefs. In that case, scepticism would no longer be a fully global position (and Suspend+ has to be restricted accordingly).

Second possible response: One might again accept that sceptics have such beliefs about what the evidence supports, but add that these beliefs differ in kind from the propositions in which they have suspended belief. In fact, ancient sceptics themselves made such a distinction. On the one hand, there are propositions that can be debated and investigated, such as the proposition that honey is sweet (to take Sextus' example). On the other, there are propositions that cannot be debated and investigated, such as the proposition that it appears to me now that honey is sweet. We can disagree about how things are, yet not about how things appear to me at the present moment (modulo qualifications). Furthermore, the idea is that sceptics suspend belief in all propositions that can be investigated, yet retain beliefs

about what appears to them at given points in time, indeed including beliefs about what the evidence seems to support.<sup>23</sup>

Third possible response: One might accept that sceptics employ beliefs about what the evidence supports, yet with the qualifier that they will suspend them once the latter themselves are questioned and put to an inquiry. For example, if they inquire into the proposition that Agrippa existed, then they may believe that the evidence so far does not support it. Still, as soon as they start inquiring into the different proposition <the evidence so far does not support the proposition that Agrippa existed>, they will suspend belief concerning the latter as well.<sup>24</sup>

More related problems about Global Scepticism have been raised in the literature. It has been objected that in order to seek the truth about p, you need not only background beliefs about what the evidence so far supports regarding p, but also background beliefs that the truth can be found, that you have not found it yet, that such a search is worth pursuing, and finally concerning what the investigated proposition means and refers to (in order to understand it in the first place). Most of these worries derive from the contemporary literature (cf. Sedley 1983: 21-2, Palmer 2000: 368-9), and only the last has classical origins.<sup>25</sup>

In response to these additional worries, I take it that sceptics can say two things. First option: they can deny that such background beliefs are required (cf. Machuca 2011a: 252-3). For example, they may deny that understanding the proposition that the gods have no foreknowledge of future events (another example from Sextus) requires background beliefs about the existence of gods and future events. Indeed, does one really have to regard the proposition that gods exist as true, or does one merely have to *treat* it as true for the practical purpose of basing one's inquiries on it (i.e. an attitude called 'acceptance')? I shall not attempt to settle this issue here; what matters is that it is not obvious that beliefs are required.

Alternatively, they could accept that such background beliefs are required, and opt for one of the three responses set out above.

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<sup>23</sup> This distinction is meant to explain how sceptics are able to act in general (Sextus, PH 1.23, cf. Descartes, *Discourse* III). For critical discussion, cf. Burnyeat (1980), Mates (1996: 11-6), Perin (2010: ch. 3), Wieland (2012: 280-2).

<sup>24</sup> This response does not coincide with *Stick+*, but rather with the version of *Suspend+* that relies on an active inquisitive attitude: S epistemically should suspend her belief about p at t so long as S is gathering new evidence regarding p at t (see §§5-6 above).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. PH 2.1-12, and the commentaries by Mates (1996: 24-6), Grgić (2008), Fine (2010), Vogt (2012: ch. 6).

## 9. Epilogue

It is time to take stock. In this paper I have done three main things. First, I have drawn renewed attention to Sextus' argument from inquiry from a systematic perspective, i.e. the argument that it is rational to suspend our beliefs whenever we are interested in their truth. Second, I have formulated a worry about the argument on the basis of precise distinctions between doxastic and inquisitive attitudes, and four related principles of rationality. Third, I have indicated to what extent this worry can be met, and tentatively argued that Sextus' argument may well be sound if certain assumptions are in place (particularly the assumption that if one is awaiting the outcome of further inquiries, it is appropriate to adopt a neutral attitude).

This is a significant result, as it is commonly thought that beliefs are required for epistemic rationality. Compare: "The best way to go about meeting this requirement [i.e. to minimize falsehoods] is by believing nothing, and this is hardly what we would regard as epistemically rational behaviour" (Pritchard 2006: 52). Agreed: believing nothing in order to avoid believing falsehoods seems irrational, or at least too easy, for in that case one is free to neglect all relevant evidence. Yet this does not imply, as the Positive Sceptics demonstrate (i.e. those who hold no beliefs even if their evidence is not neutral), that it is easy to believe nothing with the aim of believing truths.

To drive this point home, recall Sextus' analogy between truth-seeking and looking for gold in a dark room:

For if we were to imagine some people looking for gold in a dark room containing many valuables, it will happen that each of them, upon seizing one of the objects lying in the room, will believe that he has taken hold of the gold, yet none of them will be sure that he has encountered the gold – even if it turns out that he absolutely has encountered it. And so, too, into this universe, as into a large house, a crowd of philosophers has passed on the search for the truth, and the person who seizes it probably does not trust that he was on target. (M 7.52)<sup>26</sup>

So here is the clue. To refuse to grab at objects in a dark room in order to avoid grabbing objects which are not gold is too easy, for in that case one need not walk about the room and consider any objects in the first place. But again, this does not imply that grabbing nothing with the aim of grabbing the pieces of gold is easy as well.

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<sup>26</sup> Trans. Bett (2005). Cf. Barnes (1990: 138-9).

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