

# Do or Do Not, There is No Withholding

## An argument Against the Existence of Practical Withholding

ABSTRACT: There are three doxastic attitudes one may take towards some proposition, **P**: one may believe **P**, disbelieve **P**, or withhold **P**. Let us call the practical analogue of a doxastic attitude a *praxistic attitude*. I defend the claim that there are only two praxistic attitudes one may take towards doing **X**: intending to do **X** (which corresponds with believing **P**) and intending not to do **X** (which corresponds with disbelieving **P**). In short, there is no practical analogue to the doxastic attitude of withholding **P**. Call this the *nonexistence thesis*. This paper unpacks, clarifies, and defends the nonexistence thesis and shows how it undermines the assumption that belief and intention are governed by structurally similar consistency norms.

### 1. Introduction

It is often assumed that beliefs and intentions are governed by structurally similar consistency norms. For example, John Brunero claims that belief and intention are governed by the following consistency norms, respectively:

*Belief Consistency*: Rationality requires that [if one believes **P**, and believes **P** only if  $\neg\mathbf{Q}$ , then one not believe **Q**].

*Intention Consistency*: Rationality requires that [if one intends to **X**, and believes that if one will **X** then one will  $\neg\mathbf{Y}$ , then one not intend to **Y**].<sup>1</sup>

However, I believe that this assumption is mistaken because, inter alia, it overlooks an important disanalogy between belief and intention. While beliefs belong to a tri-attitudinal complex consisting in believing, disbelieving, and withholding<sup>2</sup>, intention belongs to a bi-attitudinal complex consisting in intending to do something and intending not to do it. In short, there is no practical analogue to withholding. Call this claim the *nonexistence thesis*. One upshot of the nonexistence thesis is that while a complete statement of the consistency norms for belief involves three distinct attitudes, a complete statement of the consistency norms for intention only involves two distinct attitudes. In this paper, I unpack, clarify, and defend the nonexistence thesis, and show how it undermines the assumption that belief and intention are governed by structurally similar consistency norms. My argument for the nonexistence thesis will proceed in two stages. First, I argue that the attitude of withholding is governed by a certain set of evidential norms. Second, I argue that there is no practical attitude that is governed by an analogous set of evidential norms. I conclude from this that there is no practical attitude that is the analogue of the attitude of withholding.

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<sup>1</sup> Brunero (2009: 314-315). See and cf. Kolodny (2008).

<sup>2</sup> This is the view that John Turri (2012) calls *Triad*. See and cf. Comesaña (2013).

## 2. Stage Setting

Let us begin our discussion by getting clear on a few key terms. The notion of a doxastic attitude is often taken to include a wide range of belief-like attitudes, including accepting (e.g., Weintraub [1990: 165]), presuming (e.g., Kapitan [1986: 235]), hypothesizing (e.g., Williams [1989: 124]), and having a degree of confidence in (e.g., Kaplan [1981: 310]). However, the term may also be more narrowly used to refer to any member of the tri-attitudinal complex consisting in believing, disbelieving, and withholding.<sup>3</sup> The narrow usage offers the convenience of allowing us to refer to all three attitudes with a single term. It is in its narrow sense that I will be using the term in this paper. Specifically, I will be presupposing the following narrow definition of a doxastic attitude:

**Definition 2.1.:** *Doxastic Attitude (Narrow)*

A doxastic attitude is any member of the tri-attitudinal complex consisting in believing, disbelieving, and withholding.

It will also be handy to have a catchall term for all the members of the attitudinal complex that includes intending, which roughly corresponds with the narrow usage of doxastic attitude. I will use the term *praxistic attitude* for this purpose. My claim that there is no practical analogue to withholding entails that intention is a member of a bi-attitudinal rather than tri-attitudinal complex. Hence, the conception of praxistic attitude I wish to defend is as follows:

**Definition 2.2.:** *Praxistic Attitude (Narrow)*

A praxistic attitude is any member of the bi-attitudinal complex consisting in intending to do **X** and intending not to do **X**.

However, at this stage in the discussion, it would be begging the question to define a praxistic attitude in this way since the primary aim of this paper is to argue that an intention is a member of a bi-attitudinal rather than tri-attitudinal complex. For this reason, I will be presupposing the following non-question begging definition of a praxistic attitude:

**Definition 2.3.:** *Praxistic Attitude (Non-Question-Begging)*

A praxistic attitude is any member of the multi-attitudinal complex that includes intending.

Unlike Definition 2.2, Definition 2.3 is neutral on the question of how many attitudes belong to the attitudinal complex that includes intention. We may now restate the nonexistence thesis as the claim that there is no praxistic attitude that corresponds with withholding **P**. In order to avoid confusion, I will generally refer to the doxastic attitude of withholding **P** as *theoretical withholding* and its would-be praxistic analogue as *practical withholding*. Given this terminology,

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of the narrow usage of the term “doxastic attitude” include: Feldman and Conee (1985), Steup (1988), Chisholm (1989), Sosa (1991), Feldman (2003), and Steup (2008).

we may restate the central thesis of this paper in terms of the claim that there is no such thing as an *attitude* of practical withholding.

I will conclude the present section by attempting to forestall a possible misunderstanding about what the nonexistence thesis claims. It may initially seem obvious that it is possible to practically withhold (and that the nonexistence thesis is therefore false) since one may be confronted with a choice between two different courses of action and decide not to perform either. For example, I may be presented with the choice between eating two poisonous mushrooms and opt not to eat either.<sup>4</sup> Such opting out, it may be thought, is an example of practical withholding. But this would be a mistake. While opting out in the way just described may fit a certain colloquial usage of the term “withholding”, it does not constitute an instance of withholding in the technical sense in which the term is typically used by philosophers. In order to see why, the following two points should be kept in mind.

First, the choice between believing **P**, disbelieving **P**, and withholding **P** involves a choice between three attitudes with one and the same propositional content. This means that the practical analogue to the choice between believing, disbelieving, and withholding should involve one and the same course of action. However, the choice between two poisonous mushrooms involves two distinct courses of action. Let us refer to the two poisonous mushrooms as ‘mushroom A’ and ‘mushroom B’. The choice between intending to eat mushroom A and intending to eat mushroom B is the practical analogue to the choice between believing **P** and believing **Q** (where **P** and **Q** are distinct propositions), and not the analogue of the choice between believing **P**, disbelieving **P**, and withholding **P** (where **P** is a single proposition).

Second, theoretical withholding is not equivalent to refraining from believing **P** and believing **Q**. Consequently, we should not equate practical withholding with refraining from intending to do **X** and intending to do **Y**. Consider the agent who disbelieves both **P** and **Q**. Such an agent is not thereby withholding **P** or withholding **Q**. For example, suppose I disbelieve the claim that there are currently three planets in the solar system and that I also disbelieve the claim that there are currently four planets in the solar system. I do not thereby withhold either claim. Hence, we cannot equate theoretical withholding with refraining from believing **P** and believing **Q**. Similarly, we cannot equate practical withholding with refraining from both intending to do **X** and intending to do **Y**. One may refrain from both intentions by simply intending not to do **X** and intending not to do **Y**. In sum, intending not to do **X** and intending not do **Y** is no more a case of practical withholding than is disbelieving **P** and disbelieving **Q** a case of theoretical withholding. Hence, the agent who refrains from adopting the intention to eat mushroom A and the intention to eat mushroom B is not thereby engaged in practical withholding. We may easily make sense of such an agent by saying that she intends not to eat mushroom A and intends not to eat mushroom B.

The take home message of the preceding argument is that the nonexistence thesis is fundamentally a claim about the number of praxistic attitudes that can be taken towards one and the same course of action. It is not a claim about the number of praxistic attitudes that can be taken towards two or more courses of action. Specifically, I claim that while there are three

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for drawing this objection to my attention.

doxastic attitudes one may take towards one and the same proposition, there are only two praxistic attitudes one may take towards one and the same course of action, owing to the fact that there is no such thing as an attitude of practical withholding. Hence, in order to properly assess the nonexistence thesis, it will be important that we restrict our focus to one course of action at a time.

### 3. The Evidential Norms for Belief

Discussions of rational requirements relating to belief have tended to focus on consistency norms. Indeed, there are some theorists who hold that all of the demands of rationality may be understood in terms of the avoidance of inconsistent beliefs.<sup>5</sup> However, it is plausible that rationality requires more from us than mere consistent beliefs. Consider an agent who perceives that **P** (and who lacks any defeaters suggesting that her perceptual evidence is unreliable), but who stubbornly continues to disbelieve **P** despite said evidence. It is plausible that such an agent would be rationally criticisable for failing to respond to her evidence in the right way. However, since perceiving **P** does not entail believing **P**, it is false that an agent in the above situation both believes **P** and disbelieves **P**. Hence, insofar as the agent who fails to respond appropriately to her perceptual evidence is irrational, it is not because of any inconsistencies among her beliefs. Instead, she is irrational because she did not respond appropriately to her evidence.

I take being subject to evidential norms to be a definitive feature of doxastic attitudes. For example, if the evidence available to an agent conclusively favours **P**, then the only doxastic attitude that agent is permitted to take towards **P** is one of belief. More work will need to be done to specify what it means for an agent's total evidence to conclusively favour **P**. If one's body of evidence is sparse or ambiguous, then it will plausibly fail to provide conclusive evidence for **P**. If there are defeaters in the vicinity this may also be enough to prevent an agent's available evidence from providing conclusive evidence for **P**. Hence, a complete account of what it means for an agent's available evidence to provide conclusive support for **P** will need to exclude such cases. Moreover, it is plausible that a complete account of evidence offering conclusive support for **P** will need to appeal to an agent's evidential standards, and these may vary across time and agents. However, these are not details we need settle here. It is sufficient for our present purposes to note that there are times in which one's evidence for **P** may be so great that one would be irrational if one withheld **P** or disbelieved **P**. Indeed, to deny this would be to leave us without the resources necessary for holding that agents who stubbornly ignore perceptual evidence are rationally criticisable for so doing. Hence, I take belief to be subject to the following evidential norm:

**Definition 3.5.:** *Evidential Norm (Believing P)*

Rationality requires that [if one's total evidence conclusively supports **P**, then one does not disbelieve **P** or withhold **P**].

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Brunero (2008: 322). For discussion, see: Bridges (2009).

The above evidential norm does not entail that if an agent has conclusive evidence that **P**, the agent must believe that **P**. Perhaps the agent is indifferent towards **P**, and therefore cannot be bothered to form the belief that **P**, even though the agent has conclusive evidence that **P**. It is not obvious that such an agent would be rationally criticisable. (Perhaps **P** is some piece of idle gossip about the royal family that I cannot be bothered to think about, though conclusive evidence for **P** is already at hand if I would but take the time to reflect on it.) According to the evidential norm described in Definition 3.5, if the agent were attentive enough towards **P** to form a doxastic attitude towards it, then the doxastic attitude had better be one of belief. Or to put the point more positively, Definition 3.5 claims that, on pain of irrationality, if an agent's evidence conclusively supports **P**, then they must believe **P**, insofar as they adopt any doxastic attitude towards **P** at all.

We may represent the corresponding evidential norms for disbelieving and theoretical withholding as follows:

**Definition 3.6.:** *Evidential Norm (Disbelieving P)*

Rationality requires that [if one's total evidence conclusively supports  $\neg\mathbf{P}$ , then one does not believe **P** or withhold **P**].

**Definition 3.7.:** *Evidential Norm (Theoretically Withholding P)*

Rationality requires that [if one's total evidence equally supports **P** and  $\neg\mathbf{P}$ , then one does not believe **P** or disbelieve **P**].

If there were such a thing as an attitude of practical withholding, it too should be governed by something along the lines of the evidential norm described in Definition 3.7. However, I shall argue that there is no praxistic attitude that satisfies this requirement. Here is a summary of the argument to come. I begin with the observation that intention, like belief, is governed by evidential norms. Given that practically withholding doing **X**, if it existed, would stand to intending to do **X** and intending not to do **X** in the same way that theoretically withholding **P** stands to believing **P** and disbelieving **P**, and given that theoretically withholding **P** is governed by an evidential norm that precludes believing **P** and disbelieving **P**, it should follow that practically withholding doing **X** would also be governed by an evidential norm that precludes intending to do **X** and intending not to do **X**. Since there is no praxistic attitude that satisfies this requirement, I conclude that there is no such thing as an attitude of practical withholding.

#### 4. The Evidential Norms for Intention

Like belief, intention is governed by evidential norms. For example, let us suppose that my recognition of the fact that my friend is severely intoxicated and about to drive herself home provides me with conclusive evidence that I should take her car keys. (One may fill in the details of the case however one pleases to make this plausible, such as specifying that my friend and I have the shared goal of keeping her safe, etc.) It would be irrational, given my goal of keeping her safe, for me to intend not to take her car keys. Hence, intention appears to be governed by something along the lines of the following evidential norm:

**Definition 4.1.:** *Evidential Norm (Intending to do X)*

Rationality requires that [if one has conclusive evidence that one ought to do **X**, then one does not intend not to do **X** (or practically withhold doing **X**)].

Definition 4.1 assumes that reasons for action take the form of evidence that one ought to do **X**. This is merely for the sake of convenience. The arguments in this paper may be revised, *mutatis mutandis*, in order to accommodate most of the standard theories of practical reasons found in the literature. For example, instead of evidence that one ought to do **X**, we may substitute evidence that one will do **X** (Velleman, 1989). Moreover, if one prefers to conceive of reasons for action as explanations of why the action is worthwhile rather than evidence that the action is worthwhile, then one may restate the evidential norm in terms of explanations (Kearns and Star 2008: 37; 2009: 216-217). Moreover, one may also hold that a reason for action only counts as such for an agent if the agent already has certain desires in place or would have certain desires if they were rational and sufficiently informed. The arguments in this paper will tolerate all such reformulations so long as the following condition is met: it should be possible to have conclusive reasons for performing an action such that one would be irrational for failing to act in light of those reasons. What the preceding evidential norm claims is that given that one possesses such conclusive reasons, it would be irrational to adopt any praxistic attitude other than intending that which one has conclusive reasons for. Hence, while in the discussion that follows I will generally speak of evidence that one ought to do **X**, buying into the present conception of practical reasons is not a requirement of my argument. The reader is free to substitute their preferred conception of practical reasons.

The counterpart of the aforementioned evidential norm for intending to do **X** is the following evidential norm for intending not to do **X**:

**Definition 4.2.:** *Evidential Norm (Intending not to do X)*

Rationality requires that [if one has conclusive evidence that one ought to do **X**, then one does not intend to do **X** (or practically withhold doing **X**)].

For example, suppose that I am at the train station and the train conductor tells me that the D train will be out of service for the next twelve hours and that this constitutes conclusive evidence that I should intend not to take the D train. According to the norm described in Definition 4.2, it would be irrational for me to intend to take the D train.

I have included practically withholding doing **X** (in brackets) in my statement of the evidential norms described in Definitions 4.1 and 4.2 in order to avoid begging the question against those who affirm the existence of practical withholding. Of course, given the aims of this paper, I ultimately wish to deny that there is any such thing as an attitude of practical withholding. Even so, its inclusion in Definitions 4.1 and 4.2 underscores a very important point. If there is such a thing as an attitude of practical withholding, then it should feature in the evidential norms for praxistic attitudes just as theoretical withholding features in the evidential norms for doxastic attitudes. Furthermore, practical withholding, if it exists, should be governed by an evidential norm analogous to the evidential norm that governs theoretical

withholding. Hence, if there is such a thing as the attitude of practically withholding, then the following evidential norm should be true of praxistic attitudes:

**Definition 4.3.:** *Evidential Norm (Practically Withholding doing X)*

Rationality requires that [if one's total evidence equally supports doing **X** and not doing **X**, then one does not intend to do **X** or intend not to do **X**].

However, as I shall argue at present, no such evidential norm exists. For example, suppose that the evidence I have in favour of stopping by the bookstore (e.g., I will be able to purchase a novel I have been meaning to read) is equal to the evidence in favour of not stopping by the bookstore (e.g., I will run into an unsavoury associate I have been actively trying to avoid), with the upshot being that my total evidence equally supports going to the bookstore and not going to the bookstore.<sup>6</sup> According to the norm described in Definition 4.3, I am not rationally permitted to intend to go to the bookstore or intend not to go to the bookstore. But this is clearly false. When confronted with such choice situations, I am free (rationally speaking) to simply pick one of the options. It follows that the rational requirement described by Definition 4.3 is false. In other words, the would-be evidential norm for practically withholding simply does not exist.

Two points of clarification about the above example are worth noting. First, when we find ourselves in the situation in which we have equal reasons for and against some course of action, we often resort to things like flipping a coin or reciting eeny-meeny-miny-moe. It may be claimed that in such situations, it is fact that we decided to flip a coin, and that the coin flip landed in favour of a particular option that gives us a reason to intend that option. However, this suggestion generates a bootstrapping worry. If simply flipping a coin is enough to provide me with a reason I did not previously have, then I can always give myself a reason to do something by flipping a coin. However, this seems to do violence to very concept of a reason. After all, reasons, at their core, are supposed to be non-arbitrary considerations that count in favour of a particular belief or intention. Moreover, flipping a coin or reciting eeny-meeny-miny-moe appears to introduce the very kind of arbitrariness into our decision-making that reasons are supposed to exclude. Consider an analogy from the case of belief. If I have equal evidence for and against **P**, I am not (rationally speaking) free to flip a coin or recite eeny-meeny-miny-moe to determine whether I should believe or disbelieve **P**. It would do violence to our conception of reasons as non-arbitrary to hold that I can give myself a reason to believe (or disbelieve) **P** that I did not previous have by simply flipping a coin.

The mistake that the above suggestion seems to make is that it assumes that the significance of flipping a coin or reciting eeny-meeny-miny-moe is normative, when it is in fact psychological. When we have equal reasons for and against a course of action, we are (rationally speaking) free to pick. However, in such cases, it may be psychologically difficult to decide to do one or the other. Consequently, we resort to things like coin flips, reciting eeny-

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<sup>6</sup> I have assumed, for the sake of simplicity, that the considerations in favour of going to the bookstore and not going to the bookstore are commensurable. I do not deny that there may be cases of incommensurability, nor do I deny that one may resort to picking in such situations as well. However, decisions involving incommensurable reasons introduce complications we need not enter into at present given the aims of this paper.

meeny-miny-moe, or some other arbitrary selection procedure. These arbitrary selection procedures do not perform a normative function. They do not, by fiat, generate new reasons we did not previously possess. Rather their role is psychological; providing us with the motivational push we need in cases when our reasons are insufficient for settling the question of whether we should act or refrain from acting. In short, coin flips and the like are extra-rational selection procedures that serve an important psychological function but lack rational significance.

Second, the bookstore example should not be confused with what Edna Ullmann-Margalit and Sidney Morgenbesser refer to as “picking situations proper”.<sup>7</sup> The classic example of a picking situation proper involves the selection between options that lack discernable differences, such as two indistinguishable cans of Campbell’s tomato soup on a supermarket shelf.<sup>8</sup> In such cases, one’s reasons, evidence, preferences, etc. are indifferent between two or more options because each consideration in favour of one option equally favours the other options as well. For example, suppose that my reason for buying Campbell’s tomato soup, instead of Heinz, is that Campbell’s tomato soup is cheaper than Heinz. This consideration is indifferent to whether I take the can of Campbell’s tomato soup just to the right of me, or the one next to it. This means that, insofar as I am in a picking situation proper, whatever consideration favours taking the can just to the right of me also favours taking the can next to it.

My bookstore example differs from the soup cans example in two important respects: Firstly, in the bookstore example, the considerations in favour of going to the bookstore are distinct from those that favour not going. By contrast, in the soup can example, each consideration that favours one option equally favours the other. Secondly, in the bookstore example, my options are going to the bookstore or not going to the bookstore. This means that my choice is between doing **X** and not doing **X** (where **X** picks out one and the same course of action). By contrast, in the soup cans example, the competing courses of action are taking soup can A or taking soup can B. This means that my choice is not between doing **X** and not doing **X** (i.e., taking can A and not taking can A), but rather between doing **X** and doing **Y** (i.e., taking can A and taking can B). This is significant since it means that the picking situation described in my bookstore example, unlike the picking situation involved in the soup can example, involves a single course of action. Consequently, while the bookstore example satisfies the requirement (defended in section 2 of this paper) that we restrict our attention to one and the same course of action, the picking situation described in the soup can example does not.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ullman-Margalit and Morgenbesser (1977: 763). In addition to “picking situations proper”, Ullman-Margalit and Morgenbesser also briefly discuss “picking situations by default” (763) and “deeper-level picking” (783).

<sup>8</sup> I borrow this example from Ullman-Margalit and Morgenbesser (1977).

<sup>9</sup> My example also differs from the widely discussed Buridan’s ass example, since the ass is confronted with a decision between two different courses of action (i.e., eat from bail of hey A or eat from bail of hey B). In order to assimilate the ass example to my own, we would need to reformulate it so that there is a single bail of hey, and the ass is confronted with the choice to either eat from it or not eat from it. As mentioned above, this change to the example is not merely cosmetic. In the traditional analysis of the ass example, the two bails of hey are the same in all salient respects, very much like the two aforementioned cans of Campbell’s tomato soup. This means that the reasons that recommend bail A also recommends bail B, which is why there is no basis for selecting between the two bails. By contrast, when confronted with the choice between eating from a given bail or not eating from the bail, there will be different considerations in favour of each option. For an in depth discussion of the Buridan’s ass example, see: Weintraub (2012).

Despite the above-mentioned points of contrast, there remains a deeper parity between my bookstore example and the soup cans example. In both cases, the agent's reasons are insufficient for settling the question of what they should do. I will refer to cases in which an agent's reasons equally support doing **X** and not doing **X**, and in which the agent selects one of the options based on extra-rational factors (like flipping a coin or reciting eeny-meeny-miny-moe) as *basic picking*.<sup>10</sup> I call it basic picking because unlike proper picking, which involves selecting between two or more independent actions, basic picking involves selecting between intending to and intending not to perform a single course of action. Hence, basic picking is the most basic case of picking. For ease of comparison, here are succinct definitions of the two kinds of picking just distinguished:

**Definition 4.4.:** *Proper Picking*

Cases in which one's total evidence equally supports doing **X** and doing **Y**, and in which one decides to either intend to do **X** or intend to do **Y** based on extra-rational factors.

**Definition 4.5.:** *Basic Picking*

Cases in which one's total evidence equally supports doing **X** and not doing **X**, and in which one decides to either intend to do **X** or intend not to do **X** based on extra-rational factors.

The soup can example is a case of proper picking in which the competing options are taking the can just to the right of me (i.e., can A) or the one next to it (i.e., can B). The bookstore example is a case of basic picking in which the competing options are intending to go to the bookstore and intending not to go to the bookstore.

The lesson of the bookstore example is that basic picking is rationally permissible when confronted with the choice between intending to do **X** and intending not to do **X**. This means that rationality does not require that in cases in which one's total evidence equally supports doing **X** and not doing **X**, one refrain from intending to do **X** or intending not to do **X**. One is instead free to pick. It follows that there is no praxistic attitude that corresponds to theoretical withholding. Indeed, if there were such an attitude, then an agent with equal rational support for doing **X** and not doing **X** would be rationally required to adopt it (insofar as they adopted any praxistic attitude at all towards doing **X**), just as an agent with equal rational support for **P** and  $\neg\mathbf{P}$  being true is rationally required to adopt an attitude of theoretical withholding (insofar as they adopt any doxastic attitude at all towards **P**). We may therefore conclude that there is no such thing as an attitude of practical withholding.

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<sup>10</sup> Ullman-Margalit and Morgenbesser claim that cases involving coin tosses are instances of "the picking situation *par excellence*" (770, *italics* theirs). Assuming this is so, it would follow that THE AGENT would fall under the umbrella of what they consider a picking situation *par excellence*, albeit not a picking situation proper.

## 5. Two Candidates for Practical Withholding

Scepticism about the nonexistence thesis tends to stem from the fact that there initially seem to be plausible candidates for practical withholding. Two candidates in particular are worth considering: (1) someone deciding to refrain from intending to do **X** and intending not to do **X**, and (2) someone being indifferent to whether they **X** or do not **X**. In the present section, I will examine both of these candidates for practical withholding and explain why they fail to fit the bill.

### 5.1. Is Refraining Practical Withholding?

There is a temptation to identify practical withholding with the decision to refrain from intending to do **X** and intending not to do **X**. However, I shall argue that this identification overlooks a crucial detail; namely, that we are here concerned with whether there is an *attitude* of practical withholding. It is one thing to say that an agent refrains from both intending to do **X** and intending not to do **X**, and quite another thing to say that they have adopted a third praxistic attitude towards doing **X**. This point becomes clearer when we examine the corresponding claim about doxastic attitudes. I shall do this at present.

There are three broad types of cases in which an agent neither believes **P** nor disbelieves **P**. First, there are cases in which an agent neither believes nor disbelieves **P** because she has simply failed to consider whether **P**. The question of whether or not **P** is true simply has not crossed the agent's mind. While such an agent neither believes **P** nor disbelieves **P**, she does not withhold **P** either. Indeed, it would be odd to say that the agent refrains from believing **P** and disbelieving **P**. To refrain from doing something means stopping oneself from doing it, and one cannot stop oneself from believing **P** if **P** has never even crossed one's mind. Let us say that in all such cases, the agent is in the *pre-consideration stage* with respect to **P**.<sup>11</sup> Given that an agent is in such a pre-consideration stage, she neither believes nor disbelieves **P**. However, such an agent is not withholding **P** either. The agent has simply failed to adopt any doxastic attitude towards **P**.

Second, there are cases in which an agent neither believes nor disbelieves **P** because she is still considering whether **P**. Such consideration includes, but is not limited to, cases in which an agent is in the process of deliberating about whether **P**. Considering whether **P** may go on indefinitely, and an agent may never arrive at a settled position with respect to **P**. An agent may also be stuck in the consideration stage with regards to **P** because she began deliberating about whether **P** but her deliberation was interrupted, and she never got around to deliberating further. It may also happen that an agent who begins deliberating about whether **P** loses interest in the question (perhaps because **P** now appears less pressing or because more important questions arise), and the agent never gets around to completing her deliberation. I will say that the agent in all such cases is in the *consideration stage* with respect to **P**. Significantly, an agent may qualify as being in the consideration stage, as I have characterised it, even if they are not currently considering whether **P**. All that is required to be in the consideration stage is that one considered whether **P** at some time, and that one's considering

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<sup>11</sup> Significantly, my use of the expression "pre-consideration" to describe an agent who has failed to consider whether **P** is not meant to suggest that the agent will eventually consider whether **P**. Indeed, the agent may never come to consider whether **P** and may therefore be stuck in the pre-consideration stage indefinitely.

whether **P** fail (whether due to distraction, disinterest, or death) to culminate in the formation of a doxastic attitude towards **P**.

Third, there are cases in which an agent neither believes nor disbelieves **P** because she evaluates her evidence as lending equal support for **P** and  $\neg\mathbf{P}$  and this prompts her to adopt the attitude of theoretically withholding **P**. Why should we distinguish between the agent who theoretically withholds **P** and the agent who is still considering whether **P**? One answer is that the two agents are subject to very different kinds of rational criticism. Since theoretical withholding is governed by evidential norms, it means that a theoretically withholding agent may be rationally criticised for failing to respond appropriately to their total available evidence. For example, we can imagine an agent who decides to theoretically withhold with regards to the existence of climate change, despite being presented with overwhelming evidence for it. Such an agent would be subject to a kind of rational criticism that an agent who is still in the process of examining the evidence for and against climate change is not.

To be clear, I am not here suggesting that it is not possible for one to be irrational by taking too long to examine the evidence for and against **P**. However, what one is rationally criticisable for in such cases is different from what one is rationally criticisable for in cases in which one withholds when one should not. In the latter case, one is rationally criticisable because one violates the evidential norms described in Definitions 3.5 and 3.6. For example, suppose that I withhold with respect to the existence of climate change, despite the fact that I have conclusive evidence in its favour. In such a case, I am guilty of irrationality because I violate the evidential norm described in Definition 3.5. Given that my evidence conclusively supports the existence of climate change, I satisfy the antecedent of the embedded conditional. However, since I theoretically withhold **P**, I fail to satisfy its consequent. A similar line of reasoning may be used to establish that if I theoretically withhold **P** when my evidence conclusively supports  $\neg\mathbf{P}$ , then I am violating the evidential norm described in Definition 3.6. In short, when one inappropriately withholds, one is rationally criticisable for either violating the evidential norm described in Definition 3.5 or Definition 3.6.

By contrast, one may be rationally criticisable for taking too long to examine one's evidence even if one does not violate the evidential norm described in Definitions 3.5 or 3.6. For example, suppose that I am highly motivated to believe in climate change because doing so is in my political best interest. However, let us also suppose that my total available evidence lends equal support for and against the reality of climate change. It follows that I should withhold with respect to the existence of climate change, insofar as I adopt any doxastic attitude towards the existence of climate change at all. However, because I am highly motivated to believe in climate change, I continue to examine and re-examine my evidence, checking and re-checking my sources, etc., all in an attempt to avoid having to adopt the attitude of withholding with respect to climate change. In such a case, it is plausible that I am rationally criticisable for examining my evidence too long. However, insofar as my evidence does indeed offer equal support for and against the existence of climate change, I fail to satisfy the antecedents of the conditionals embedded in Definitions 3.5 and 3.6. It follows that I am not violating the norms described in Definitions 3.5 and 3.6. Hence, even if we suppose that one may be irrational for examining one's evidence too long, one would be irrational for a different reason from when one is irrational for inappropriately withholding. The upshot is that the distinction between

theoretical withholding and refraining from believing and disbelieving in order to examine one's evidence needs to be preserved.

Let us say that an agent who has adopted one of the three possible doxastic attitudes towards **P** is in the *attitude-adoption stage*. On the present view, the agent who is still in the process of examining her evidence for and against **P** is not in the attitude-adoption stage because she has not yet adopted a doxastic attitude towards **P**. She is still considering whether **P**. One implication of the preceding distinction between agents in the pre-consideration, consideration, and attitude-adoption stages is that only an agent in the attitude-adoption stage can be said to withhold **P**. This means that if an agent is going to qualify as practically withholding, then she must be in the attitude-adoption stage. However, a careful examination of the kinds of cases that appear to be counterexamples to the nonexistence thesis reveals that the agent in question is in the consideration stage. Consider the bookstore example. Given that I have considered whether or not I should go to the bookstore, it is clear that I am not in the pre-consideration stage. This means that I am either in the consideration or attitude-adoption stage. If the imagined scenario is one in which I refrain from both intending to go and intending not to go to the bookstore because I am still mulling over the matter, then I am clearly still in the consideration stage. The same is true if the imagined scenario is one in which I get distracted and never return to the question, or one in which I grow bored and redirect my attention elsewhere. In all three scenarios, the thing to say is not that I have adopted a praxistic attitude that is the practical equivalent to withholding. After all, I can do all of these things in the theoretical sphere without theoretically withholding. Rather, the thing to say is that I have simply failed to adopt a praxistic attitude altogether.

To sum up, there may be a temptation to think that there is an attitude of practical withholding because we can imagine cases in which an agent refrains from both intending to do **X** and intending not to do **X**. However, the lesson of the preceding discussion is that theoretical withholding is not to be identified with refraining from both believing **P** and disbelieving **P**. If, for example, I refrain from both believing and disbelieving **P** because I am still considering **P**, then I am not ipso facto theoretically withholding **P**. Indeed, as I have argued above, the distinction between considering **P** and theoretically withholding **P** must be preserved owing to the fact that they make an agent subject to different kinds of rational criticism. Likewise, we should not equate practical withholding with refraining from intending to do **X** and intending not to do **X**. Practical withholding, if it exists, would involve the adoption of a praxistic attitude, and not merely the act of refraining from the adoption of a praxistic attitude.

## 5.2. Is Indifference Practical Withholding?

Another candidate for practical withholding is indifference. To say that an agent is indifferent towards doing **X** means that their reasons, evidence, and/or preferences equally favours doing **X** and not doing **X**. For example, if my reasons, evidence, and/or preferences equally favour going to the bookstore and not going to the bookstore, then I am indifferent towards going to the bookstore. On the present suggestion, someone practically withholds **X** just in case she is indifferent towards doing **X**.

The main problem with the above suggestion is that it conflates the circumstances that give rise to a certain choice situation with a response to that choice situation. Practical withholding,

were it to exist, would be an instance of the latter rather than former. However, close inspection reveals that indifference is an instance of the former rather than the latter. Consider the case of theoretical withholding. Having equal evidence in favour of **P** and  $\neg$ **P** is not itself an instance of theoretically withholding **P**. Rather, it is a description of the kind of situation in which one is rationally required to theoretically withhold **P**. However, we often fail to do what we are rationally required to do. An agent who has equal evidence for **P** and for  $\neg$ **P** may nevertheless decide to believe **P**. For example, an agent who has equal evidence for and against the existence of an all-powerful benevolent creator may nevertheless believe that such a being exists. This means that one may find oneself in the situation in which one's evidence equally supports **P** and  $\neg$ **P** and in which one fails to theoretically withhold **P**. Hence, theoretically withholding **P** cannot be identified with being in the situation of having equal evidence for **P** and  $\neg$ **P**. Similarly, if one's reasons, evidence, and/or preferences equally supports doing **X** and not doing **X**, this is not an instance of practically withholding doing **X**. Rather, it is the kind of situation in which one would be rationally required to practically withhold doing **X**, if there were such a thing. We can no more identify practical withholding with indifference than we can identify theoretical withholding with having equal evidence for and against **P**.

To briefly recap, in cases in which one's evidence equally supports **P** and  $\neg$ **P**, one is rationally required to theoretically withhold **P**, insofar as one adopts any doxastic attitude towards **P** at all. This means that if there were a practical analogue to theoretical withholding, then it would be an attitude that one is rationally required to adopt towards doing **X** in cases in which one's reasons, evidence, and/or preferences equally support doing **X** and not doing **X** (insofar as one adopted any attitude towards doing **X** at all). Given that there is no practical attitude that satisfies this requirement, it follows that there is no such thing as an attitude of practical withholding. Hence, there is no inconsistency or tension between acknowledging that we are sometimes indifferent towards doing **X** and the claim that there is no such thing as an attitude of practical withholding. The former is a claim about a certain kind of (deliberative) state an agent may find herself in (i.e., one in which her reasons, evidence and/or preferences equally supports doing **X** and not doing **X**) while the latter is a claim about the kinds of attitudes one may adopt in response to being in that (deliberative) state.

## 6. Implications for the Consistency Norms

While there have been a few theorists who question whether belief is governed by a consistency norm<sup>12</sup>, it still remains the predominant view among action theorists, epistemologists, philosophers of mind, and normativity theorists. The standard formulation of the consistency norm for belief is as follows:

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Harman (1984).

**Definition 6.1.: *Belief Consistency (Standard)***

Rationality requires that [if one believes that **P**, and one believes that **P** only if  $\neg\mathbf{Q}$ , then one does not believe **Q**].<sup>13</sup>

One limitation of the standard formulation of the consistency norm for belief is that it omits the attitude of withholding. This means that Definition 6.1 permits an agent to believe **P** and believe that **P** only if  $\neg\mathbf{Q}$ , and also theoretically withhold  $\neg\mathbf{Q}$ . However, it would certainly be irrational for an agent to simultaneously believe that they live in New York and believe that they live in New York only if they do not live in Australia, and also theoretically withhold that they do not live in Australia. Hence, a more complete version of the consistency requirement for belief will include the attitude of withholding. This points towards the following more complete version of the consistency norm for belief:

**Definition 6.2.: *Belief Consistency (Triad)***

Rationality requires that [if one believes that **P**, and one believes that **P** only if  $\neg\mathbf{Q}$ , then one does not disbelieve  $\neg\mathbf{Q}$  or withhold  $\neg\mathbf{Q}$ ].

Let us now turn our attention to intention. Action theorists typically take intention to be governed by the following consistency norm:

**Definition 6.3.: *Intention Consistency (Standard)***

Rationality requires that [if one intends to do **X**, and one believes that one will **X** only if one will not do **Y**, then one not intend to do **Y**].

If the nonexistence thesis is true, then there is no triad formulation of the consistency norm for intention. This means that while the consistency norm for belief features two distinct doxastic attitudes in the consequent of the embedded conditional (i.e., disbelieving  $\neg\mathbf{Q}$  and withholding  $\neg\mathbf{Q}$ ), the consistency norm for intention only features one praxistic attitude in the consequent of the embedded conditional (i.e., intending not to do **Y**). It follows that belief and intention are governed by structurally dissimilar consistency norms.

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<sup>13</sup> For examples of the standard formulation, see: John Broome (2007; 2009) and John Brunero (2009; 2014). It is here assumed that the beliefs in question are all-out beliefs. It is plausible that partial or graded beliefs (if they exist) are subject to different consistency norms. See Christensen (2004) and Holton (2008) for discussion on this point.

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