Reflective Endorsement

Catherine Z. Elgin

Abstract: To reflectively endorse a theory is to consider it worthy of acceptance. To accept a theory is to be willing and able to use it in inference and action when one's ends are cognitive. I argue that reflective endorsement is the attitude philosophers do and should take toward their own theories. I show how construing their attitude as belief or as an elaborate intellectual game falls short.

Keywords: acceptance, reflective endorsement, understanding, theory, belief.

Introduction

Philosophy, Sellars maintains, seeks 'to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term' (1963:1). That's probably as good a characterization of the discipline as we are likely to find. It properly leaves a lot open. What are the things? What is it for them to hang together? What is it to *understand* how they hang together? The history of the subject might be cast as a congeries of disagreements about the answers to these questions. Despite the opportunities for dispute, one thing that seems plain from Sellars's characterization is that philosophy seeks a *systematic* understanding. We wouldn't be satisfied with a list of the things that there are or a list of how those things individually are. We want to know how the things on the lists relate to one another. A philosophy ventures an answer to that question. The unit is a theory – a system of mutually reinforcing commitments. Needless to say, many philosophical theories limit their purview. *A Theory of Justice* restricts itself to how factors that pertain to permissible political arrangements hang together; *On the Plurality of Worlds* restricts itself to how metaphysical matters hang together; *Languages of Art* restricts itself to how items in the aesthetic realm hang together. But regardless of where the boundaries between subfields are delineated, a philosophy purports to provide a systematic understanding – a network of contentions backed by, consisting of, and supplying reasons.

A philosophical theory then is a network of mutually supportive commitments purporting to explain how things in a given domain hang together. This characterization does not differentiate philosophical theories from theories in other systematic disciplines – those in the natural or social sciences, for example. But for our purposes a demarcation criterion is not required. The questions that concern us here is what attitudes a philosopher *takes* and what attitudes a philosopher *should take* in doing philosophy – where doing philosophy consists in using a philosophical theory to pursue philosophical ends. I assume that the best philosophers do pretty much what they should. If so, the relation between the attitudes they take and the attitudes they should take may be expected to be close. Let us say that when someone considers a philosophical theory correct she *credits* it. This is purposefully vague, since it says nothing about what it is to consider a philosophical theory correct. Nor, apart from taking thinking correct to be a pro-attitude, does it say anything about what it is to credit a theory.

Because the justification for specific philosophical claims derives from its place in a network, few are credited in isolation. At least part of the reason to credit 'To be is to be the value of a variable' or 'We should call no man flourishing until he is dead' or 'Monads have no windows' is because of its role in a specific theory – that is, because of what supports it and what it supports.

I will argue that the attitude philosophers should take to the theories they credit is *reflective endorsement*. Reflectiveness is integral to the attitude because the agent credits a theory on reflection. The theory is not one she holds simply because she was brought up with it or because has not given the issue much thought. Endorsement is a matter of considering the theory worthy of acceptance. What this requires spelling out. One question is what makes it reasonable to accept a theory. A second question is what reflective endorsement adds. After venturing answers, I will consider what attitudes philosophers do and should take to rival theories that they do not reflectively endorse.

Belief

Endorsement and acceptance might seem unnecessary epicycles. Why shouldn't we simply say that philosophers believe the theories they credit? Probably some do. A well-developed philosophical theory

consists of arguments. If a philosopher believes the premises and considers the arguments good enough, it seems reasonable for her to believe the conclusions. The argument then is credible. Maybe so. But belief is laden with problematic baggage. I will argue that many of us – even many who are highly committed to our own theories and devote our professional lives to developing and championing them – do not believe them. I will further argue that we should not believe them, but that this does not diminish either the strength or the value of our commitment to them.

Belief is an attitude toward a propositional content. *S* believes that *p.* So to believe a philosophical theory is to take it that a particular proposition accurately represents whatever its content is about. That theories are complex is no problem. *A Treatise on Human Nature* or *The Sources of Normativity* can just be thought of as a long, complex conjunction. If to credit a theory is to believe it, then those who credit *A Treatise on Human Nature* or *The Sources of Normativity* believe a long, complicated conjunction.[1]

Propositions have truth values. To believe a proposition entails believing that it is true. The complex proposition that constitutes *The Sources of Normativity* is composed of numerous shorter propositions. The truth value of the complex proposition is a function of the truth values of the shorter propositions that comprise it. But it is unlikely that every one of the shorter propositions has the truth value it needs to have to make *The Sources of Normativity* come out to be true. The conviction that there is no mistake, no oversight, no infelicitous conceptualization anywhere in it is doubtful. Moreover, many philosophical theories involve thought experiments. To demonstrate that something must be so, they entertain unrealistic scenarios. The malevolent demon, the ailing violinist, the experience machine are ineliminable elements of the positions they figure in. But they are fictions. And fictions ought not be believed.

[1] I admire every philosophical work I mention in this paper. In saying that they are not matters of belief, and that they are not free from flaws is not to say that they are not worthy of admiration. Rather it is to raise questions about what we admire in philosophy and why.

Another worry is this: since to believe that *p* entails believe that *p* is true, it is reasonable to believe that *p* only if one believes that any considerations that tell against *p* are misleaders. If so, genuine advances in understanding should not discredit *p*. If that is an agent's attitude toward a philosophical theory, then she should think that this very theory – composed of these very propositions – will, or anyway should, be believed by right-thinking philosophers in 200 or even 2000 years. I doubt that many philosophers think this, even about the theories they are most strongly committed to. Perhaps philosophers who are strongly committed to their views expect that something in the neighborhood of their position will be the dominant view in the field in 200 years. But this expectation is not all-out belief in the specific theory they hold. It is not a commitment to a particular truth, and is probably not a commitment to something that can be expressed in a proposition.[2]

We do not have to await the verdict of history though. If crediting a philosophical theory is a matter of believing it, then crediting it commits us to holding those who believe otherwise harbor false beliefs about the matter the theory pertains to. Philosophers disagree. With the possible exception of allegiance to the law of non-contradiction, there is probably no philosophical position on which there is anything close to consensus. Fumerton (2010) maintains that we should not believe our own theories, given the number of peers who disagree with us. If evidence of evidence is evidence, then the number of smart, well educated, conscientious philosophers who disagree with it is evidence that any given theory is false. That evidence brings the likelihood that it is true down to below the threshold of creditability. Arguably then, no one should believe any philosophical theory.

It might seem that we could evade this predicament by moving from full belief to weak belief. Rather than believing that their theories are true simpliciter, perhaps philosophers believe that their favored theories are slightly more likely to be true than not.[3] It is no help. The evidence gleaned from the

[2] Whether this is so depends on what propositions are. But the vagueness of the expectation tells against the idea that it has a determinate truth value.

[3] I thank Mark Walker for suggesting this alternative.

widespread disagreement about any particular position brings the likelihood that it is slightly more likely to be true than not below the threshold of credibility as well.

Barnett raises a related worry. Suppose a consequentialist recognizes that the plausible rivals to his theory are deontology and virtue theory. (To keep things simple, we ignore his attitudes towards rival consequentialist theories.) Although he holds that consequentialism is more likely to be true than either deontology or virtue theory, he might still assign the probabilities as follows:

consequentialism – 40%

deontology – 30%

virtue theory – 30%.

In that case, he does not think the theory he is committed to is more likely to be true than not. He thinks it is more likely to be true than any one of its rivals (2019:114). If philosophers honestly compare the likelihoods we assign to our own theories and their rivals, the situation Barnett describes is probably the best we can hope to achieve. Often we get less.

Another phenomenon that tells against the thesis that we believe the theories we credit is that we admire theories and theorists we disagree with. We may be convinced that there is no chance that Spinoza's or Lewis's or Plato's theory is true. But we appreciate them. We regularly revisit them and think we are not wasting our time in doing so. We insist that our students study them. Why? They introduce principles, entities, or procedures or premises we cannot credit – monism, possible worlds, the forms. They reject items, approaches, or rules that we think need to be retained – the material realm, modal logic, sensory knowledge. They adopt orientations that occlude things we think ought be manifest, such as the importance of special projects to a life well lived. Why do we even tolerate, much less admire, theories that have such objectionable features? Why don't we dismiss them without a second thought?

Aristotle ventures an answer: In developing and assessing a position, we should begin with a survey the views of the many and the wise. The reason is that 'some of these views have been held by many men and men of old, others by a few eminent persons; and it is not probable that either of these

should be entirely mistaken, but rather that they should be right in at least one respect or even in most respects' (§1098b 25-30). His suggestion then is that, even if we do not fully agree with the views of the many and the wise, we should recognize that there may be something worthwhile in the way they approach a problem. By suspending disbelief, and respectfully entertaining the views of Leibniz, Carnap, and Mill, I may find that they were right in some, if not all respects. If, despite my commitment to nominalism, I seriously entertain the position Lewis articulates in *On the Plurality of Worlds,* I may see that by extending my metaphysical commitments, I can get the powers of modal logic without sacrificing nominalist convictions. Even if I still think that countenancing materially real but non-actual possible worlds is a bridge too far, I come to better appreciate how logic and metaphysics interact; I recognize the costs that my scruples exact and perhaps identify features of Lewis's view that I can export by adopting a fictionalist stance toward modality. Minimally, by studying Lewis's position and coming to grips with my disagreements with it, I come to better understand the powers and limitations of the position I hold.

This raises questions, though. Even if I suspect that Lewis's theory may be right in some respects, if I believe that my alternative is right in all respects, what value is there in going back to Lewis? What makes it fruitful to entertain Lewis's metaphysics as an alternative to my own, but a waste of time to entertain astrology? What is the difference? It can't be that the astrology is too crazy to take seriously. The existence of infinitely many real but inaccessible possible worlds is crazy too. I do not think that philosophers have or need a shared criterion that specifies what views should taken seriously. Each makes her own choice. Some dismiss hyperintensional theories, idealist theories, or dualist theories out of hand. When entertaining alternatives to their own positions, these do not make the cut. Other philosophers take such theories seriously. Nor, of course, does each philosopher do this in isolation.

Those who share philosophical commitments typically share views about what alternatives should be entertained. They may jointly disparage positions that fail to acknowledge the force of alternatives within a specific range. Epistemologists might agree that for a theory of testimony to be taken seriously, it better have something to say about Lackey's Creationist Teacher. Moral theorists might

agree that for a consequentialist theory to be taken seriously, it better have something to say about Lenman's charge that we are clueless about long term consequences. There is wide agreement among those working in the field that these are important issues.

This, so far, is just a description of the sociology of the profession. If you want your work to be taken seriously, it seems, you ignore certain issues at your peril. But if the views of folks in the field are responsible, then the fact that an issue or a topic, or an orientation seems important to them is a pro tanto reason to not dismiss it out of hand. This is a normative, not merely a sociological claim. The prohibition is, of course, not absolute. A philosopher can ignore what others think are important issues and through the effectiveness of her own argument demonstrate that addressing them is not mandatory. My point in recognizing their weight is that individual philosophers are typically not intellectually isolated. We are apt to both be aware of and think we should be aware of what other members of our communities take seriously; and we are apt to frame their positions accordingly.

I suggest then that philosophers either individually or collectively mark out a range of alternatives that are worth taking seriously. We do not, nor do we think we ought to entertain every position that happens to be on offer. Because the positions we think we should entertain are ones that might be right in at least in one respect or even in most respects, and not trivially so, we can be intolerant of hogwash, disparage ad hockery, refuse to take seriously arguments lacking in rigor. We can dismiss positions that make what we take to be untenable trade-offs. Some might, for example, reject consequentialist moral theories that countenance torturing one to gain a modest increase in the happiness of many. They have, by their own lights, no reason to take such a position seriously. A critical issue in deciding such questions is the strength of the argument for a position. The extreme positions taken by Spinoza, Carnap, and Korsgaard merit attention because they are backed by strong arguments. They in effect say, 'If you don't like our conclusions, what is wrong with the arguments for them?' That is and is recognized as a fair challenge. It brings us back to the question of belief. Is believing a theory compatible with seriously entertaining views that are incompatible with that theory?

It might seem that to seriously and responsibly entertain opposing views effectively an agent should both suspend belief in her own theory and disbelief in her rival's. That would put the two on a par. But complete neutrality seems excessive. Even if I am open-minded enough to suspect that Lewis is right in some respects or even in most respects, it does not seem that to entertain his position and see what I can glean from it, I should think that modal realism is as likely to be correct as my own view. If my adoption of my own position was epistemically responsible, it ought not be sacrificed or set aside cavalierly. Fallibilism requires me to recognize that I might be wrong. I should be willing to change my view if I become convinced that I am wrong. But it does not require sacrificing my commitments merely because I recognize that I might be wrong. That would be spineless. So both the attitude involved in crediting a view, and the attitude involved in seriously entertaining an alternative seem antithetical to taking crediting to be matters of belief.

The problems is this: If we think that crediting a philosophical position consists in believing it, then we are committed to holding that theories that are incompatible with ours are false and that the arguments in favor of them are inadequate. If we think that crediting a position is thinking it is more likely to be true than not, we are committed to holding that theories incompatible with ours are more likely to be false than not. Why then do we or should we seriously entertain such alternatives? Why do we or should we admire them or the philosophers who argue for them? In entertaining alternatives we are not manifesting intellectual insecurity. I am not confident that my position is right. But I am confident that Hobbes, Spinoza, and Berkeley are wrong. So why, do I take them seriously?

Game Playing

If philosophers do not believe the theories they credit, maybe they are simply playing a game. Games have rules that specify moves one can make, options one should to entertain, modes of behavior one is barred from engaging in. Ends, such as checkmate, and means, such as queen capture, are defined within the game (see Rawls 1955). Players voluntarily constrain their behavior to comply with the rules in order to gain the goods internal to the game – points scored, pieces captured, victories won (see Nguyen 2020).

Excellence is determined within the game. Good plays are those that promote the game's ends while complying with the game's rules. If philosophy is a game, admirable philosophies are those that achieve the ends the game defines, using the means that the game allows. The admirable philosophers are those who win while abiding by the rules. And to play in the big leagues is to engage with the acknowledged winners. One of the merits of the game model is that it provides a normative structure and a set of incentives. It provides resources for explaining what makes a philosophical theory or theorist good.

We could extend the model by incorporating it into a Waltonian framework, and saying that doing philosophy is a matter of engaging in a game of make-believe (1990). Pretend play is not governed by strict rules in the way that football and chess are. But there are shared constraints that give such games focus and direction. If we adopt a Waltonian framework we construe philosophical positions as fictions, and say that reasoning within such a position is in effect pretending that a position – or own or someone else's – is so. The children pretend that the stump is a bear in the woods, and play accordingly. The rules may be tacit, but they are nonetheless real. The Platonist pretends that abstract entities are real, mind-independent entities, and plays accordingly. The nominalist too can pretend that Platonism is correct, and pretend that abstract entities are real. She thereby enters into the Platonist's fiction. Reasoning about the strengths and weaknesses of a philosophical position is just reasoning about what holds within the confines of a fiction. Asking what follows from Platonism is the same sort of question as asking what follows from Elizabeth Bennet's dismissal of Mr. Darcy.

This might work if we only argued within particular theories. But we pit positions against one another. When the nominalist argues with the Platonist, she maintains and provides reason to maintain that her position is better than his. Can the game model provide room for that? Would pitting Platonism against nominalism be like playing checkers against someone who is playing chess? This does not seem promising. In entertaining theories we reason both within frameworks and across frameworks. The game model does not seem to help explicate the latter.

In any case, philosophers do not treat their practice as a game, at least if we think of a game as an idle pass time. We devote our lives to it. Nor do outsiders always treat philosophical positions like fictions. Socrates was executed; Aristotle, exiled; Spinoza, excommunicated; Schlick, assassinated. Many others have been silenced for their views. This is hardly consonant with philosophy's being a mere game or pretense or matter of make-believe.

Philosophical theories have real world implications and applications. Consequentialists argue, often successfully, that prior to adopting a policy we should consider and evaluate its foreseeable consequences. Reliabilists argue, often successfully, for the rejection of measurements and proxies that are not reliable indicators of the phenomena they purport to measure. These are important in policy and practice. Works like Korsgaard's (2018) on our moral obligations to other animals have convinced people to become vegetarians. The route from an ideal theory to the non-ideal situation is often circuitous and poorly marked. There is often little hope of a direct application of a philosophical view. But most philosophers think that what we do in the real world should be suitably informed by what we think. That is not our attitude toward tennis or poker or chess. The appropriateness of bluffing in poker does not afford any reason to think that bluffing, lying, or misleading is permissible outside the game. Nor would we consider someone who is scrupulously honest in everyday life to be a hypocrite if he bluffed while playing poker.

The upshot is this: The conviction that philosophers believe the theories they hold is too restrictive. The conviction that we are merely pretending or playing a game playing is too lax. Neither model fits with features that we consider aspects of best philosophical practices. So what attitude do we take to the philosophical positions we favor?

From Belief to Acceptance

The problem stems from an uncritical adoption of the everyday notion of belief. L. Jonathan Cohen (1992) argues that the everyday notion has two distinct components. One consists in feeling that things are as the belief-content says they are. This is purely naturalistic and may be beyond our control. The

other is a willingness to use that content as a premise in inference or a basis for action when one's ends are cognitive. This is normative and a matter of choice. The first component he continues to call 'belief'. The second, he labels 'acceptance'. I have argued that understanding involves acceptance, not belief. (see Elgin 2017). Although I draw on Cohen's explication, my conception of acceptance is both broader and narrower than his. It is narrower in that I restrict acceptance to suitability for assertoric inferences. Acceptance for reductio is too short-lived to serve my purposes. It is broader in that I do not restrict acceptance to propositions. As I see it, we accept norms, orientations, methods, rules of inference, taxonomies, and orientations in much the way we accept propositions. They are all figure in understanding. A proposition ought to be accepted only if it satisfies the relevant norms, is sanctioned by the relevant methods, is cast in the relevant terms, is justified by the appropriate rules of inference. Moreover, it is not enough to be willing to use φ, one also must be able to do so. To accept φ then is to be willing and able to use φ in assertoric inference and action when one's ends are cognitive.

Acceptance, as I use the term, involves rejection as well. An understanding of a topic involves rejecting certain sorts of commitments as antithetical to one's cognitive aims. It might seem that we reject whatever we do not accept. If so, we could just mandate accepting a negation. But this is too simple. An understanding of a topic incorporates certain items and excludes others as incompatible with its take on things. It makes no commitment about others. In some cases this is because the jury is still out on those matters; in others it is because for the purposes of that particular account, it simply does not matter what is the case with respect to them. Van Fraassen's constructive empiricism, for example, holds that science yields knowledge of the observable realm, but no knowledge of unobservables (1980). Two pillars support his position. One is the acceptance of the underdetermination of theory by evidence. The other is the rejection of inference to the best explanation. The empirical evidence is, let us suppose, that the light goes on whenever the switch is flipped. Arguably, the best explanation of the phenomenon involves a flow of electrons through a wire connecting the switch to the lightbulb. But other explanations, which lack the commitment to electrons, could be provided that would equally explain the correlation. Because

he rejects inference to the best explanation, van Fraassen maintains that the success of the electron flow explanation, even if it is the best explanation, is inadequate to justify ontological commitment to electrons. His account, as I have sketched it, is noncommittal as to what the limits on the observable are. It simply says that whatever they are, science affords no support for commitment to whatever lies beyond those limits. Accepting a theory then is a matter of accepting certain considerations that are integral to the theory and rejecting considerations that are antithetical to the theory; and, when reasoning with the theory, taking no stand on matters that make no difference to the understanding the theory aims to provide.

Ordinarily belief and acceptance align. One is willing to *p* as a premise for inference or as a basis for action when one feels that *p* is so. One is willing to use a norm, method, or rule because one thinks that it will yield propositions that one feels are so. But sometimes the two diverge. Someone who is superstitious, for example, might feel that something is so but, recognizing that her belief is unfounded, refuse to use it our serious cognitive endeavors. Belief without acceptance is for my purposes epistemologically irrelevant since it is, and is recognized as, to some degree irrational. Acceptance without belief, however, is both rational and commonplace. Science is rife with models and idealizations that are acknowledged not to be true. Scientists understand the behavior of gases by representing them as dimensionless perfectly elastic spheres and using the ideal gas law to reason about them; they understand the dynamics of predator and prey populations by representing predators as insatiable and prey as immortal-unless-eaten, and reasoning about predator and prey populations via the Lotka-Volterra model.

Models and idealizations play a significant role in philosophy as well. Rawls does not believe that the conditions required for deliberation behind the veil of ignorance actually obtain. The veil of ignorance is a model that enables us to identify arrangement would strike us as just if we set aside the propensity to privilege a particular place in society. Thomson uses a thought experiment involving an ailing violinist to argue that the permissibility of abortion is not settled by the metaphysical status of the fetus. Examples of idealizations and thought experiments within philosophy can easily be multiplied.

Reliance on such devices at least complicates the idea that what we believe when we endorse a philosophical argument is that the premises are true and that they entail the conclusion. If we are convinced by Rawls or Thomson, it is not because we think their arguments consist exclusively of truths. Still, one might argue, these are devices within philosophical accounts. We need to accommodate their contributions, but it still doesn't tell us what our attitude should be to account as a whole.

A theory, as I use the term, is a network of commitments that collectively aim to afford an understanding of a topic. A philosophical theory is one that affords an understanding of a philosophical topic. To accept a theory is to take it to both realize one's immediate cognitive goals and to promote one's longterm goals. It realizes the immediate goals if it is as good as any available account of the topic. It promotes longterm goals if it is suitably susceptible to correction, extension, strengthening, and refinement.

This is consonant with but does not require holding that our longterm philosophical goal is truth. Whatever the ultimate goal, my focus is on what we do and think, and what we should do and think, here and now. An acceptable theory on my view is not merely instrumentally valuable; it is intrinsically valuable in that it currently embodies an understanding, even if a less than perfect understanding, of its topic.

Understanding admits of degrees along a multiplicity of axes. A rough account affords some understanding; a refined one affords more. A partial account affords some understanding; a fuller one affords more. A superficial account affords some understanding; a deeper one affords more. An account that omits or distorts sometimes yields a better understanding than one that hews more closely to the truth. Rawls's and Thomson's devices highlight relevant factors that are overshadowed by confounding factors that occur in everyday life. If we think of justice in terms of the veil of ignorance, or think of abortion in terms of the violinist's predicament, we set aside real but irrelevant factors that prevent us from discerning something important.

Moreover, understandings typically involve trade-offs. One might sacrifice detail to achieve generality; other sacrifice generality to provide a more detailed understanding of a limited target. Consequentialist ethical theories emphasize that in acting we aim to produce a particular outcome; they maintain that the acceptability of act should be assessed in terms of the outcome. This involves downplaying intention and responsibility. Deontologists recognize that we are hostage to fortune. Our best efforts sometimes, through no fault of our own, come a cropper. They emphasize the moral significance of matters that are under our control, sidelining long-term effects, and random events that are beyond our ken. Tradeoffs are reasonable, all things considered. But no particular tradeoff is mandatory. Others maybe equally good either because they serve the same purpose equally well or because they serve other equally good purposes.

When we consider a theory as a whole, we may think that it embodies and promotes understanding even though we recognize that it is not wholly satisfactory. There are valid questions that it cannot answer; legitimate problems that it cannot solve. We may recognize that other, equally good candidates are available. They may be other routes to the same end; other aspects of the phenomena we prefer to highlight, or competing ends we consider equally worth pursuing.

I suggest that to reflectively endorse a theory is on reflection to consider it as good as any available alternative. Reflective endorsement goes beyond simple acceptance in that it requires that theory acceptance stand up to reflection. It is possible to accept a theory unreflectively. It may simply strike us as right, as it comports well enough with what we were already inclined to accept. Reflective endorsement is a product of scrutiny. Like simple acceptance it is consonant with recognizing that competing systems are equally good. So one can accept φ without believing it. One might, of course, believe φ by holding that although ψ is equally tenable, ψ is false. But that would be unreasonable. If φ and ψ are equally supported by the evidence, and are on a par with respect to theoretical virtues, there is no ground for holding one to be true and the other false, nor is there any ground for thinking one is even slightly more likely to be true than the other. In accepting φ in such circumstances, one thinks that φ is as

good as any alternative on offer. Looking at the phenomena through the lens it provides reveals interesting and important features; reasoning with the modes of inference it licenses yields conclusions that seem plausible and strengthen the account as a whole. If so, φ provides a good platform to build on. Perhaps some elements are false. They might be felicitous falsehoods, such as effective models and idealizations, or infelicitous ones that are incorporated because as things currently stand, the system as a whole is stronger with them than without them. They may contain elements that are, by the acceptor's lights, inadequately justified. Even so, if the network of commitments is stronger with them than without them, they are admissible into an acceptable account. Similarly, acceptance allows for reliance on methods that yield false positives or false negatives when no more accurate method can be incorporated into the network, and inferences that sometimes mislead when none better do the job. It is then reasonable to reflectively endorse φ while suspending judgment as to whether φ is true, or more likely to be true than its rivals. It is even reasonable to reflectively endorse φ while thinking that φ is probably false. One might easily think, for example, that all currently available positions on the problem of free will are false, and yet think that one is worthy of reflective endorsement because it seems the most promising. When despite its vulnerabilities, a philosophical position is at least as good as any available alternative, it supplies a viable platform on which to build. In reflectively endorsing φ one stands behind one's acceptance.

A network of commitments that is and is recognized as being as good as any available alternatives is acceptable. Those who reflectively endorse it recognize that they are fallible and finite, and that the accounts they accept are susceptible of correction, expansion, and refinement. So endorsing a philosophical theory is not a matter of regarding it as complete or conclusive. It is a matter of thinking that one's philosophical objectives are currently best served by looking at the phenomena through the lens it provides, respecting the constraints it imposes, and reasoning about the phenomena using the modes of inference it sanctions, all the while being alert to identify and, if possible correct, any shortcomings one finds. An account that is reflectively endorsed is not thought to be a permanent contribution to human understanding. It is a stepping stone.

Alternatives may be equally viable. So there is no ground for rejecting a competitor simply because it is incompatible with one's own account. Philip Kitcher (1990) argues that the scientific community best serves its collective epistemic ends by countenancing a range of conflicting views. When there is a non-negligible chance that a currently disfavored view is correct, it is be premature to consider the matter closed. The same holds a fortiori in philosophy. Since there is, as Fumerton (2010) maintains, nothing close to a consensus view in philosophy, we should be even more reluctant to foreclose inquiry. Such reluctance should be manifest in active engagement, not just passive acquiescence. We should engage with competing positions –testing them against our own, looking for strengths and weaknesses that our favored positions do not possess. This is what underlies our appreciation of positions we do not endorse, and admiration of philosophers who endorse them. The lens their account supplies may reveal something that the one we reflectively endorse does not.

So what attitude ought we take to competitors that we do not accept? We have no grounds for flatly rejecting alternatives that are as viable as our own. Tolerance is called for. The question remains how we can both favor our own position and be suitably respectful of viable alternatives. Something like Waltonian picture I sketched above might be appropriate. Rather than dismissing it as flatly false, we might treat it as a fiction, and reason within that fiction. That is, we can pretend that it is true and see what follows. We have to do more than just pretend, though. For we want to ask how the fiction sheds light on the phenomena it deals with. This, however, is what we do with actual fictions as well. We learn from fictions by learning to recognize patterns, predicaments, opportunities, and obstacles in fictional settings, then figuring out how to recognize their counterparts in everyday life. (See Elgin 2017, Lewis 1983).

It might seem that having conceded this, I should advocate treating the theory we reflectively endorse in exactly the same way. Then all philosophical theories should be treated as fictions. This may be a good first step if we are entering into a new field and do not know what to think. If, for example, we've never given any serious thought to the metaphysics of mathematics, we might begin by entertaining a variety of accounts on their own terms and see how they fare. But once we've arrived at a

theory we consider worthy of reflective endorsement, we treat it differently. The take-aways from the fictions we entertain are then integrated into a systematic understanding *of the phenomena*. We've moved away from a mere fiction, and the perhaps piecemeal insights a fiction provides. We take the theory we reflectively endorse to be a basis for inference and action. That is, we do not just entertain it or think about it, we think with it. We use it.

Hogwash?

I have argued that to reflectively endorse an account is not a matter of thinking it is true and therefore is not a matter of thinking that all alternatives that are incompatible with it are unacceptable because false. Alternatives that conflict with the position one reflectively endorses may be equally worthy of acceptance, and may be justifiably accepted by one's peers. This, I suggested, requires tolerance and open-mindedness. The worry is that it commits us to being too tolerant and open-minded. Is the sort of tolerance I advocate compatible with rejecting any positions as unacceptable? Must we be epistemically tolerant of conspiracy theories, astrology, dogmatism? That seems wrong. We want, and think we have, good reasons to reject such views. I agree. Some accounts ought to be rejected because they are inconsistent or incoherent. They do not satisfy the basic rules of logic or they do not satisfy the standards they set for themselves. A conspiracy theory that treats friends and foes differently fails to satisfy the general methodological principle that like cases should be treated alike. A theory of language that says that every declarative sentence is either true or it is false engenders the liar paradox. Such a theory cannot be accepted. A dogmatic account that takes some considerations as exempt from challenge allows of no way to discover that its core commitments are untenable. That is inconsistent with fallibilism. Some accounts then can be rejected out of hand, as they do not stand up to the most basic requirements for rational endorsement.

Others can be rejected pending further development. One might, for example, reject Cartesian dualism because it cannot explain how mental entities give rise to physical changes. The mind/body link remains mysterious. Such rejection could stand until a plausible link is found and a plausible argument

for it is presented. One might doubt that this will ever happen; nevertheless one should be open to reconsidering the position should the link be proposed. Astrology maintains that detailed information about human affairs is determined by the configurations of celestial objects. It makes predictions. The predictions do not pan out. Either they predict things that would have been expected anyway or their predictions are so vague that there is no way to tell whether they are confirmed or not. Moreover, astrology provides no account of how celestial configurations cause human events. Pending solutions to such problems, it is reasonable to dismiss astrology. Perhaps we should dismiss it as we do Cartesian dualism – that is, pending future developments. But if we think the commitments are incoherent, it is open to us to dismiss it out of hand.

In other cases, the grounds for rejection consist in a view's simply striking an epistemic agent as incredible. Nothing, she might think, could persuade her that a this view is a viable contender. Perhaps Spinoza's monism or Lewis's realism about possible worlds are cases of this kind. We should be circumspect here, however, not only because Spinoza and Lewis gave exceedingly good arguments for their positions, but also because we may find that the positions that strike us as more tenable turn out to be so defective that we are pushed to extremes. That we had to replace the simple, but untenable, view that every declarative sentence is either true or false with theory of language that admits an infinite hierarchy of types may serve as a reminder of the perils we face.

There are, of course, a variety of other accounts that do not measure up. They purport to provide an understanding of a topic, but they do are not as good as the best available accounts. There is, we may think, something to be said for them, but not enough. These are rejected for the nonce, but remain open to reconsideration if things change. Perhaps their advocates will provide stronger reasons, or advocates of the currently favored positions will find problems they cannot solve. So we find that there are at least four categories into which views we currently reject fall.

- Hogwash: there is nothing to be said for these theories and no foreseeable way to improve them.

- Untenable: the theories may have some merits, but they face problems that we do not see how to solve.
- Unviable: the theories have some assets, but other theories do better.
- Tenable: each of these is as good as any of the others, and there is currently none better.

Our attitudes toward the four should be different. We can slam the door on hogwash. But for all of the others, the door should be left at least slightly ajar. Even if we think there is no chance that they will be able to solve the problems they face, we might be wrong. So we should be sure to put ourselves in a position to recognize if we turn out to be wrong.

Conclusion

I have argued that the proper attitude toward a philosophical theory one credits is reflective endorsement. To reflectively endorse a theory is accept it because one considers it on reflection to be as good any available alternative in embodying and promoting one's epistemic ends. This is an agential stance. It involves using, and considering oneself entitled to use a theory in one's cognitive endeavors. Doing so contributes to the advancement of philosophical understanding. The theory serves as a way station. It is not, and ought not be considered, the last word on the topic it concerns. It is a viable platform to build on when we attempt to extend and deepen our philosophical range.

I have provided a normative argument, saying this is what we should do given our fallibility and finitude. But it is also, I believe, what most philosophers actually do. We keep an open mind. We welcome opposing views. We develop, correct, and extend the positions we reflectively endorse; seriously entertain and admire alternatives that we do not endorse. The questions are hard, the journey is long. We do not want to foreclose options prematurely.[4]

[4]I am grateful to Mark Walker for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

References

Aristotle (1941). *The Basic Works of Aristotle* ed. Richard McKeon. New York: Random House.

Barnett, Zach (2019). 'Philosophy Without Belief' *Mind* 128:109-138.

Cohen, L. Jonathan (1992). *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Elgin, Catherine (2017). *True Enough*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Fumerton, Richard (2010). 'You Can't Trust a Philosopher' in *Disagreement* ed. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kitcher, Philip (1990). 'The Division of Cognitive Labor' *Journal of Philosophy* 87:5-22.

Korsgaard, Christine (2018). *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lewis, David (1983). 'Postscripts to Truth in Fiction' *Philosophical Papers volume 1.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 276-279.

Nguyen, C. Thi (2020). *Games: Agency as Art.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rawls, John (1955). 'Two Concepts of Rules' *Philosophical Review* 64:3-32.

Sellars, Wilfred (1963). 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man' in his *Science, Perception and Reality* New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 1-40.

Van Fraassen, Bas (1980). *The Scientific Image.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Walton, Kendall (1990). *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.