

Research Article

The Virtue of Saying, “I Don’t Know”: When Uncertainty Is a Reasonable Alternative to Belief

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Abstract

To say “I don’t know” appears at first as absence, yet this phrase contains within it a disciplined stance that resists premature conviction. Human discourse often leans toward certainty, but certainty offered without ground can corrupt inquiry and spread error. The practice of hesitation deserves close study, for it is not silence but a particular form of speech that refuses to disguise ignorance. If belief is written as Bp and knowledge as Kp , then the admission “I don’t know” can be expressed as $\neg Bp \wedge \neg Kp$, which reveals its logical form as suspension rather than negation of truth. This article examines the virtue of uncertainty in philosophy, logic, and science, showing how hesitation can serve as a method of clarity rather than as deficiency. Socratic dialogue begins with acknowledged ignorance, modern logic admits undecidability, and probability theory advises suspension when $P(p) < t$, with t as the threshold for rational acceptance. To embrace uncertainty under such conditions is not to abandon truth but to keep the space open for truth to arrive. This article draws from classical and modern sources, examines with logical symbols that clarify the structure of belief, and reflects on the ethical weight of honest hesitation in domains such as science, ethics, and public reasoning. The conclusion offered is that uncertainty is a reasonable alternative to belief, a posture that, far from weakness, affirms the responsibility of thought and shields inquiry from the hazards of unwarranted assertion.

Keywords

Uncertainty, Belief, Knowledge, Rationality, Logic, Probability, Epistemology, Philosophy

1. Introduction

Human reasoning often carries a tension between the desire for certainty and the reality of limited knowledge. To speak with conviction is commonly admired, while hesitation is regarded with suspicion. Yet the world presents questions to which no immediate or confident answer is possible. To admit “I don’t know” interrupts the rush to assert, and that interruption can itself become an act of reason. Philosophy, science, and ordinary life each confront moments when evidence is absent or inconclusive. In such moments, silence or hesitation guards against the dangers of error. The phrase

does not mark surrender, but rather a refusal to present belief as truth.

The philosophical interest in uncertainty stretches back to antiquity. Socrates, in his dialogues, often began with acknowledgment of ignorance, treating it as the starting point of inquiry. This Socratic tradition was developed into a systematic practice by the Pyrrhonian skeptics, who advocated for *epoche*, the suspension of judgment on all non-evident matters, as a path to tranquility [19]. This acknowledgment does not diminish the value of thought. Instead, it keeps dis-

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course open, prevents the false closure of questions, and respects the difference between belief and knowledge. If knowledge is represented as Kp and belief as Bp , then the refusal to assert either can be expressed as $\neg Kp \wedge \neg Bp$. Such a position reflects not apathy but discipline, for it blocks unwarranted inference.

The problem at hand is that uncertainty is often misunderstood. In philosophy, dismissing “I don’t know” overlooks its role as a safeguard in argument. In science, the absence of careful hesitation has led to premature claims later overturned by evidence. Francis Bacon, a key architect of the scientific method, warned against the “idols” of the mind—biases that lead to unwarranted conclusions—and advocated for a methodical approach grounded in empirical doubt [1]. In daily reasoning, overconfidence can mislead choices and harm relationships. This article argues that acknowledging uncertainty is not only permissible but necessary. It protects the integrity of thought, shields communication from error, and ensures that inquiry remains faithful to truth rather than illusion.

2. Research Questions and Methodology

The guiding question of this study is straightforward yet demanding: When is it rational to say “I don’t know,” and can this stance serve as a reasoned alternative to belief? From this question arise several sub-questions. First, how can uncertainty be represented formally within logic so that its relation to belief and knowledge is made clear? Second, in what contexts does suspension of judgment yield better outcomes than premature belief, both in philosophy and in scientific practice? Third, what role does probability theory play in shaping the decision to withhold judgment when evidence is incomplete? Finally, how does the acceptance of uncertainty affect the ethical responsibility of inquiry in academic and everyday reasoning?

The methodology employed here is philosophical and analytical, grounded in formal reasoning. It draws on the tradition of logical notation to clarify relations between belief, knowledge, and uncertainty. If belief is represented as Bp and knowledge as Kp , then uncertainty is modeled as $\neg Bp \wedge \neg Kp$. The use of quantifiers and conditional operators assists in testing the rationality of suspension. For example, $\forall x(\neg Kx \Rightarrow \text{rational}(\neg Bx))$ expresses the principle that for every proposition x , the absence of knowledge justifies withholding belief. Likewise, $\exists x(\neg Bx \wedge \text{truth}(x))$ captures the possibility that truth exists without being known or believed. Such symbolic representations allow precision in showing how uncertainty operates.

This approach is informed by works in epistemology that distinguish between belief and knowledge [7, 17], by probabilistic accounts of rational choice that require thresholds of confidence [9, 16, 18], and by philosophical reflections on the virtue of admitted ignorance [5, 15]. The analysis therefore integrates logical form, probabilistic reasoning, and

philosophical argument to demonstrate that uncertainty is not an absence but a deliberate stance that resists error and sustains inquiry.

3. Literature Review

The question of uncertainty has accompanied philosophy since its earliest inquiries. The ancient Greek schools of skepticism, both Academic and Pyrrhonian, established the suspension of judgment as a central philosophical practice. Academic skeptics like Carneades argued that certainty is impossible and we should therefore withhold assent, while Pyrrhonists sought to achieve a state of tranquility by suspending judgment on all matters of belief [2, 19]. This tradition was revived in the Renaissance by Michel de Montaigne, who famously employed the essay to explore the fallibility of human reason and question dogmatic certainty [13].

Bertrand Russell later argued that philosophy thrives not by delivering final answers but by enlarging the range of questions left open, thereby resisting the illusion of certainty [17]. For Russell, the act of withholding belief was not weakness but an acknowledgment of the limits of human reasoning. Ludwig Wittgenstein pressed the matter further in *On Certainty*, where he examined the boundary between doubt and knowledge. He suggested that the very practice of doubt presupposes a framework of belief, but that some claims remain outside the reach of proof, making “I don’t know” an honest and even necessary response in the economy of language and thought [22].

John Dewey placed uncertainty at the center of human experience, treating it as the condition that calls forth inquiry. For Dewey, genuine thought begins when the settled world is disrupted, and the admission of not knowing becomes the engine of investigation [4]. This aligns with the American pragmatist tradition, particularly the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, who introduced the concept of fallibilism, the view that no belief can be held with absolute certainty, and argued that genuine doubt, not “paper doubt,” is the engine of inquiry [14]. Karl Popper later transformed uncertainty into a principle of scientific reasoning. He argued that science advances not by confirmation but by falsification, a method that depends upon admitting that any claim may be wrong and that truth, if it is to be approached, requires humility before error [15].

In the twentieth century, Richard Feynman offered another voice in favor of uncertainty. He insisted that scientific integrity rests on the willingness to admit ignorance, stressing that “I don’t know” is better than pretending to knowledge not yet secured [5]. Contemporary epistemologists have extended this tradition by connecting uncertainty to probabilistic reasoning. Foundational work in decision theory distinguishes between risk (where probabilities are known) and true uncertainty (where they are not), suggesting that in the latter case, withholding judgment is often the only rational course [11]. Formal theories of rational belief treat suspen-

sion of judgment as justified when the probability of a proposition falls below an accepted threshold, $P(p) < t$, where t represents the standard of acceptance [9]. This tradition, which builds on the development of subjective probability by thinkers like Frank Ramsey [16], gives a formal basis for the virtue of saying “I don’t know.”

4. The Epistemic Status of “I Don’t Know”

The phrase “I don’t know” occupies an unusual position within the structure of thought. Knowledge has long been defined in terms of justified true belief, though the debate over this definition remains unresolved since the challenge introduced by Gettier [7]. If we let Kp stand for “the agent knows that p ,” and Bp for “the agent believes that p ,” then the act of saying “I don’t know” is not merely the denial of knowledge, $\neg Kp$, but often also the denial of belief, $\neg Bp$. This compound stance, $\neg Kp \wedge \neg Bp$, marks the refusal to accept either condition. Its status is not that of contradiction but of suspension. As contemporary epistemologists argue, suspended judgment is a distinct doxastic attitude, not merely the absence of belief [6]. Where belief affirms without full warrant, and knowledge affirms with justification and truth, uncertainty refrains. In epistemic terms, it is not negative but neutral, preserving space for future revision.

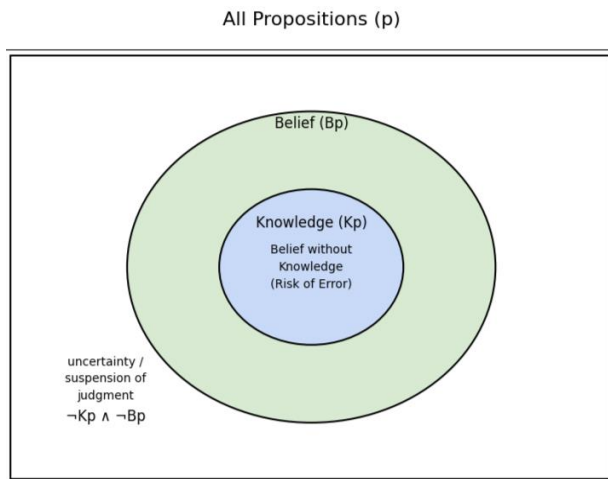


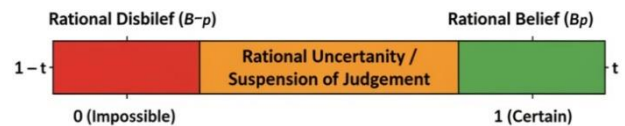
Figure 1. This diagram illustrates the relationship between knowledge (Kp), belief (Bp), and uncertainty. Knowledge is a subset of belief, while uncertainty $\neg Kp \wedge \neg Bp$ occupies the distinct epistemic space of suspension, representing a rational refusal to affirm ei .

The importance of this position can be shown by contrast. If one asserts Bp without Kp , one risks error. If one asserts Kp falsely, the risk is greater, for knowledge claims carry authority. The position of $\neg Kp \wedge \neg Bp$, however, avoids both risks. It allows discourse to continue without closing prematurely. Philosophically, this stance echoes the Socratic ad-

mission of ignorance, which created the possibility of genuine inquiry. Formally, it demonstrates that the absence of belief and knowledge need not entail contradiction or nihilism, but rather a coherent third position.

5. Formal Representation of Uncertainty

Logic provides the tools to express uncertainty with precision. Let the domain of propositions be represented by $p, q, r \in P$. Knowledge can be defined as an operator K , belief as an operator B . Then the position of uncertainty is captured as $\forall p(\neg Kp \wedge \neg Bp \Rightarrow U(p))$, where $U(p)$ designates the state of uncertainty toward p . This shows that for all propositions, if one neither knows nor believes, then one is in uncertainty with respect to that proposition.



Example: If threshold $t = 0.9$, uncertainty spans the probability range $(0.1 > P(p) < 0.9)$

Figure 2. when the probability of a proposition p falls below the acceptance threshold t but above the disbelief threshold $1-t$, suspension of judgment becomes the rationally required response.

Probability theory offers further clarity. If belief is justified when $P(p) \geq t$, where t is the threshold of acceptance, and disbelief is justified when $P(p) \leq 1-t$, then uncertainty occupies the interval $1-t < P(p) < t$. Within this range, neither affirmation nor denial is rational. For example, if $t = 0.9$, then belief requires 90% confidence, disbelief requires less than 10% confidence, and uncertainty spans the range between. Thus probability formalizes the intuitive stance of hesitation: when evidence is inconclusive, suspension of judgment is required. Foundational work on subjective probability established that such degrees of belief can be rationally constrained, providing a formal basis for withholding belief when the evidence is not strong enough [16].

6. Suspension of Judgment as Rational

The question arises: when is suspension rational, and when does it lapse into indecision? The answer lies in the relation between evidence and assertion. If one affirms without sufficient evidence, one risks falsehood. If one denies without sufficient evidence, the risk is similar. Suspension becomes rational when evidence fails to meet either threshold. In formal terms, $\forall p(\text{evidence}(p) < t \Rightarrow \text{rational}(\neg Bp \wedge \neg Bp))$. This states that for every proposition, if the evidence is below threshold, then suspension of judgment is

the rational stance.

Philosophical traditions affirm this principle. Descartes insisted that belief should be withheld in cases of doubt [3]. Hume argued that the wise proportion belief to the evidence [10]. Modern epistemology continues to affirm that suspension prevents epistemic recklessness. Rationality, then, is not found in always having an answer, but in knowing when an answer cannot yet be given.

7. Examples from Mathematics, Science, and Ethics

Mathematics demonstrates the virtue of uncertainty in the most formal way. Gödel's incomplete-ness theorem shows that for any consistent formal system S , $\exists p$ such that neither p nor $\neg p$ can be proven within S [8]. This logical barrier means that suspension of judgment is not only rational but necessary, since proof is unattainable within the system. To assert knowledge here would be false, to assert belief without justification would be reckless, and only uncertainty remains coherent.

The Virtue of Uncertainty in Practice

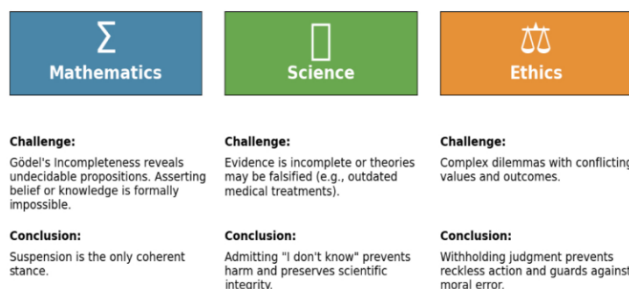


Figure 3. from the logical necessity in mathematics to the methodological integrity in science and the moral caution in ethics, suspension of judgment serves as a safeguard for truth and responsible inquiry.

Science too thrives under the protection of hesitation. The practice of falsifiability requires scientists to admit that current theories may fail under new evidence. To claim certainty when evidence remains incomplete is to distort the scientific method. The history of medicine offers clear examples. Treatments once believed to be effective were later abandoned when evidence showed otherwise. To have said "I don't know" in such cases would have preserved lives. This scientific ethos has deep roots; Francis Bacon argued for an empirical method that systematically guards against premature conclusions and the biases inherent in human thinking [1]. In ethical reasoning as well, uncertainty becomes essential. When faced with dilemmas where evidence for action is inconclusive, suspension prevents harm. To act under unwarranted conviction risks violating duties. In such cases,

$\neg Bp \wedge \neg Kp$ is a position of caution, not of weakness.

8. Connection to Gödel, Turing, and Probability

The deeper significance of uncertainty emerges in formal systems of mathematics and computation. Gödel's theorem reveals that within arithmetic, truths exist that are undecidable: $\exists p(\text{True}(p) \wedge \neg \vdash p)$. Turing extended this insight with undecidability in computation, showing that no algorithm can decide the halting problem for all cases [21]. These results prove that "I don't know" is not a matter of ignorance alone but is built into the structure of formal reasoning itself.

Probability theory complements this by formalizing the conditions under which rational suspension arises. If rational belief requires that $\forall p(P(p) \geq t \Rightarrow Bp)$ and rational disbelief requires that $\forall p(P(p) \leq 1-t \Rightarrow \neg Bp)$, then rational uncertainty is defined as $\forall p(1-t < P(p) < t \Rightarrow \neg Bp \wedge \neg \neg Bp)$. This provides a clear mathematical framework in which hesitation is not arbitrary but systematic. Decision theory further distinguishes between "risk," where probabilities are known, and "uncertainty," where they are not, with the latter often demanding a suspension of judgment until more information can be gathered [11]. Together, these traditions show that uncertainty is not a flaw in reasoning but a necessary outcome of logic, mathematics, and probability.

9. Practical Applications

The relevance of uncertainty extends far beyond abstract philosophy. Its practical force can be seen in the communication of science, where the refusal to claim more than evidence permits has become essential to public trust. During moments of crisis, such as global pandemics, scientists and health officials face pressure to provide immediate answers. Yet premature certainty often collapses under scrutiny, leaving the public distrustful. The simple admission of uncertainty, expressed as "I don't know," can preserve credibility by aligning communication with the state of knowledge rather than the desire for closure. Richard Feynman argued that scientific integrity requires leaning toward doubt when evidence is incomplete, since any claim of certainty unsupported by data invites later disillusionment [5]. In logical terms, this is a refusal to assert Bp until $P(p) \geq t$.

Medical decision-making provides another clear demonstration of the virtue of uncertainty. Physicians are often asked for definitive answers about diagnoses and treatments. Yet the state of evidence does not always permit clarity. Admitting uncertainty prevents harm, since overconfident treatment can worsen outcomes. The history of medicine is filled with examples where procedures once assumed beneficial, such as bloodletting, were later shown to be destructive. The physician's willingness to say "I don't know" has the power to protect patients from unnecessary risk. Dewey ar-

gued that inquiry begins in doubt and proceeds toward resolution only as evidence accumulates [4].

Epistemic Approaches and Their Consequences

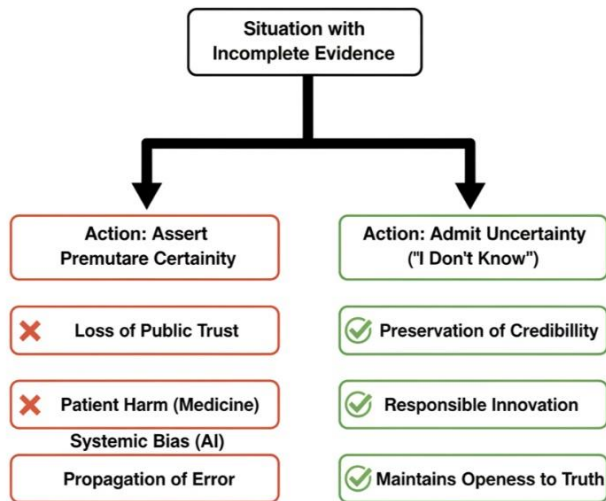


Figure 4. While premature assertion leads to error and harm, the disciplined stance of admitting uncertainty preserves integrity, prevents negative consequences, and maintains the conditions for future learning.

The field of artificial intelligence brings the same lesson into contemporary focus. Machine learning systems produce probabilistic predictions, yet these outputs are often interpreted as authoritative. The truth, however, is that prediction models generate probabilities that rarely exceed certainty. A responsible system must be designed to communicate “I don’t know” when the probability of a prediction lies in the uncertain range. Without such caution, the risk of overconfidence becomes serious, especially when AI systems are applied in criminal justice or medical triage. Popper’s principle of falsification can be applied here as well: every claim must remain open to revision, and algorithms should be judged not only by their successes but by their capacity to admit limits [15].

Ethical dilemmas also demand the virtue of hesitation. When decisions involve conflicting values and uncertain outcomes, premature assertion can cause harm. Consider dilemmas in public policy where trade-offs must be made between health, economy, and liberty. To claim certainty where none exists is to mislead. The moral weight of “I don’t know” lies in its refusal to force clarity where reality offers none. In logical terms, this corresponds to the suspension position $\neg Bp \wedge \neg B\neg p$, which holds back from false assertion in either direction. Hume argued that the wise person proportions belief to the evidence [10], and in ethical reasoning this proportionality becomes a safeguard against reckless action.

10. Discussion

The contrast between uncertainty and overconfidence exposes the epistemic consequences of premature assertion. Overconfidence occurs when an agent affirms belief, Bp , without sufficient evidence or justification. In logical terms, if $\forall x(Bx \Rightarrow \text{error}(x))$, then asserting belief universally leads to mistakes in every case. By contrast, the stance of uncertainty, $\neg Bp \wedge \neg Kp$, preserves alignment with truth, allowing for the possibility that $\exists x(\neg Bx \wedge \text{truth}(x))$. This formal distinction demonstrates that while overconfidence actively increases the likelihood of error, suspension of judgment maintains openness and prevents falsehood from propagating. Overconfidence carries costs not only for the agent but also for others, particularly in contexts where belief is communicated or acted upon. Furthermore, some forms of ignorance are not accidental but are actively produced and maintained to uphold social and political hierarchies, an idea explored in what has been termed the “epistemology of ignorance” [12]. Recognizing this forces a deeper ethical reflection on when saying “I don’t know” is a responsible admission versus a form of willful blindness.

Epistemic humility is the virtue that underlies rational uncertainty. It acknowledges the limits of one’s evidence and recognizes the possibility that current understanding is incomplete or incorrect. Humility allows the thinker to accept $\neg Bp \wedge \neg Kp$ without experiencing paralysis or indecision. Contemporary virtue epistemology emphasizes the importance of such intellectual character traits for reliable cognition [20]. In probabilistic terms, when $P(p) < t$, epistemic humility advises withholding assertion, even if some desire for closure exists. By contrast, overconfidence occurs when agents disregard thresholds and assert Bp despite $P(p) < t$. The outcomes differ sharply: humility preserves inquiry and guards against error, whereas overconfidence propagates mistakes and undermines credibility.

Moreover, humility encourages continuous reassessment. Because $\neg Bp \wedge \neg Kp$ is not static, new evidence can update the state of knowledge, transforming uncertainty into justified belief or knowledge. Logical representation captures this fluidity: if $\text{evidence}(p) \geq t \Rightarrow Bp$, then uncertainty is provisional, awaiting sufficient warrant. In social, scientific, and ethical reasoning, this flexibility is crucial. Those who admit “I don’t know” cultivate conditions for learning and correction, whereas those who overstate certainty risk entrenching falsehoods. In short, the epistemic value of uncertainty lies in its preservation of truth, the limitation of error, and the promotion of responsible reasoning.

11. Conclusion

The examination of uncertainty throughout philosophy, logic, and science demonstrates that the admission of “I don’t know” is not an expression of weakness. Rather, it is a deliberate stance that preserves the integrity of reasoning and

shields inquiry from error. By distinguishing between belief, Bp, and knowledge, Kp, it becomes clear that suspension, -Bp $\wedge$ Kp, allows agents to navigate situations where evidence is insufficient or inconclusive. Logical and probabilistic frameworks confirm that acting without sufficient warrant leads to mistakes, whereas withholding assertion maintains alignment with truth and rationality. The case studies explored, ranging from science communication to medical decisions, AI predictions, and ethical dilemmas—illustrate that admitting uncertainty functions as a safeguard, preventing harm and protecting credibility in contexts that demand careful judgment.

The analysis further shows that epistemic humility underpins this stance. Recognizing the limits of current knowledge does not entail passivity; it preserves openness for new evidence, enabling inquiry to evolve responsibly. Overconfidence, by contrast, propagates error and undermines trust. Logical representation such as $\forall x(Bx \Rightarrow \text{error})$ and $\exists x(-Bx \wedge \text{truth})$ highlights the structural advantage of uncertainty over unwarranted belief.

In reflecting on philosophy, science, and human decision-making, the virtue of saying “I don’t know” emerges as a foundational principle. It honors the distinction between what is known, what is believed, and what remains open. It sustains inquiry, protects against false certainty, and cultivates conditions for learning and ethical action. In an age where rapid information and complex systems demand careful judgment, the rational alternative of uncertainty is not merely permissible—it is indispensable.

Abbreviations

VOSIDK	The Virtue of Saying, “I Don’t Know”
SoJ	Suspension of Judgment
JTB	Justified True Belief
EH	Epistemic Humility
EoI	Epistemology of Ignorance
GIT	Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem
THP	Turing's Halting Problem

Author Contributions

Mohammed Zeinu Hassenis the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



Mohammed Zeinu Hassen is a senior researcher and is a philosopher at Addis Ababa Science and Technology University. His research spans across epistemology, ethics, and philosophy of science. Currently a PhD candidate at the University of South Africa, his research explores the nature of belief, rational uncertainty, and knowledge. He explores the essential role of intellectual humility in complex spaces, ranging from analytical philosophy to AI and public policy. His earlier works have discussed questions in pragmatism and Cartesian doubt and emphasized his consistent interest in responsible inquiry's conditions.

Research Field

Mohammed Zeinu Hassen: Consciousness, Human purpose, Analytical philosophy, Axiology, Indigenous knowledge, Philosophy of science, Epistemology, Intercultural dialogue, Philosophy of education, AI and Public policy, Social and political philosophy.