Neutrality in Epistemology: Suspension of Judgment, Agnosticism, and Inquiry

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Epistemologists generally agree that belief and disbelief do not exhaust one’s doxastic options. Plausibly, there are in addition graded doxastic states of confidence in propositions. But even restricting our consideration to “categorical” doxastic options, it’s agreed that there is a third neutral option.¹ Many labels are used, including ‘suspension of judgment’, ‘agnosticism’, ‘withholding of judgment’, ‘withholding’, etc. Despite their different nuances in meaning, epistemologists typically proceed as if they all pick out the same thing.² This supposedly common referent is not the mere absence of something such as belief/disbelief or judgment. Rocks lack these things but aren’t in any sense neutral. To be neutral whether p, instead, is to have a neutral attitude on the question whether p.³ Just as belief and disbelief are taken to be mutually exclusive, at least putting aside irrationality and fragmentation of mind,⁴ the same is thought to be true for the triad of belief, disbelief and the neutral attitude. Let’s call the thesis that belief, disbelief and the neutral attitude are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive of one’s categorical doxastic options the tripartite conception.

It is often thought, further, that the epistemology of the neutral attitude is continuous with that of belief and disbelief in certain key ways. I will use the label traditionalism for the conjunction of the tripartite conception with two further epistemological claims. The first is that all three doxastic attitudes admit of justification, both ex ante justification (justification to have a doxastic attitude) and ex post (having a doxastic attitude justifiably).⁵ The second is that the only factors that are relevant to the (ex ante) justification of doxastic attitudes are epistemic in the following narrow sense: whether they obtain or not helps fix how strong or weak one’s current epistemic position is with respect to whether p.⁶

Epistemic factors include:

a. How strongly or weakly your evidence supports p (or not-p).

b. Whether you know or appreciate (a).

The obtaining of (a) and (b) helps fix the strength of your epistemic position with respect to whether p. By contrast, factors 1-4, even when known, do not:⁷

1. Whether you will later have better (worse) evidence concerning whether p than you now have.
2. Whether you will later be a better (worse) assessor of your evidence.
3. How valuable, or how much you value, knowing whether p.
4. How likely it is that, if you tried, you could come to know whether p.

1 and 2 concern comparisons between the present and future in terms epistemically relevant features (e.g., the quality of your evidence, your ability to assess one’s evidence). Call these future-comparative factors. 3 and 4, by contrast, bear on whether you should aim to answer
the question at hand (e.g., the value of the goal, the likelihood of attaining it). Call these goal-related factors. Despite being about epistemic matters (e.g., knowledge, evidence), neither of these sorts of factors, nor the knowledge that they obtain, is purely epistemic in the narrow sense we have defined. They do not help fix how strong or weak your epistemic position is with respect to whether p.

Like many philosophers, I find traditionalism attractive. But it faces challenges. Some are familiar from the literature on practical reasons for belief.\(^8\) In this paper, I consider two less familiar challenges that target the neutral attitude. One focuses on future-comparative factors, the other on goal-related factors. I argue that the best response to these challenges on behalf of the traditionalist involves distinguishing several forms of neutrality a person can have with respect to questions.

However, this paper is not solely a defense of traditionalism. Whether you adhere to traditionalism or not, I hope to show you that you ought to distinguish several ways of being neutral on questions. Distinguishing these forms of neutrality gives us not only a way of finding room for non-epistemic factors in epistemology but also a richer picture of the relevance of agency and the conative to our doxastic lives.

1. Two Challenges to Traditionalism

Here are two examples, the first borrowed from Mark Schroeder (2012, 471) and the second a variant of an example given by Joseph Raz (1975, 37-9):

**Clearer and better evidence.** On several occasions you’ve had skin discolorations that seem suspicious for cancer. Each time your doctor has run the relevant tests and the tests have always come back negative. So, you have good reason to think the latest round of spots, too, are benign. Nevertheless, when your doctor notes the spots, she orders a test, which will come back in a few days.\(^9\) The results of this test, you know, will be definitive.

**Temporary impairment.** You know your abilities to make sound judgments on subtle matters, such as whether which of two insurance plans is a better deal overall, are currently mildly impaired. (Perhaps it’s 12am and you are tired, or you’ve had two drinks.) You also know that these impairments are only temporary and that tomorrow morning they will be gone. There is no need to decide on a plan today. The deadline for annual enrollment is the end of the day tomorrow, and you have time tomorrow to think it through.

In the “clearer and better evidence” case, it seems you have a good reason to suspend judgment on the question at hand, namely the fact that you will acquire clearer and better evidence a little later. In the “temporary impairment” case, again, it seems you have a good reason to suspend judgment, namely the fact that your powers of judgment will be better in the morning. In both cases, the good reason seems to bear on whether you are justified in suspending judgment. Thus, assuming these appearances are trustworthy, and making the usual assumption that suspension of judgment is the neutral doxastic attitude, it follows that traditionalism is false.\(^10\) The challenge for the traditionalist is to explain where this reasoning goes wrong.
That’s the first challenge. The second concerns the *point* of the neutral attitude. Jane Friedman writes:

"Why suspend judging? I take it that one sort of answer that people are initially tempted to give is something about one’s deficient epistemic standing on some matter. Why suspend judgment? Because one is not in the position to know or because one’s evidence fails to settle some matter or because one has insufficient reason to believe, and so on. But this sort of answer feels inadequate once we admit that suspending is a matter of taking up some attitude rather than merely not having some. Very plausibly, if my epistemic standing with respect to some propositions is deficient in the relevant senses, then I shouldn’t believe those propositions. But if suspending is different from merely not believing, then the claim that I shouldn’t believe those propositions is not equivalent to the claim that I should suspend judgment. Should I do this other thing, too? Why, as a rational subject whose epistemic circumstances are relevantly deficient, would I ever adopt this attitude of committed neutrality rather than simply not believe or stop believing? Again, why suspend judging?" (2017, 303-4)

Friedman is challenging us to explain the point of suspending judgment instead of simply lacking belief and disbelief. Appealing to epistemic factors such as such as insufficiency of evidential support won’t suffice, in her view, because it’s a fully proper response to epistemic deficiency on whether p to lack belief on whether p. You don’t need to go to the trouble of taking on some attitude like suspension. Friedman’s preferred alternative is to explain the distinctive point of suspension by connecting it closely with inquiry.¹¹ For her, suspension is the attitude the having of which is necessary and sufficient for inquiry. In having this “inquiring attitude,” you are in a goal-directed state, the goal being to know the answer to the target question (or at least have a true belief on it¹²). Merely lacking belief is not a goal-directed state at all, let alone a state that can ground inquiry. Why suspend judging on whether p? For Friedman, the answer is the same as the answer to the question of why inquire: in order to come to know whether p.

How good it would be to achieve a given goal, how much you care about achieving it, and the achievability of the goal all seem relevant to whether you are justified in taking on that goal. We regularly treat such factors as relevant to the justification of having a goal by taking on and giving up goals based on such factors. I might take on a goal of learning Italian because I think that it would be valuable to know it and that over time I can do so. I might give up goal of completing the 2020 Boston Marathon because I realize it’s very unlikely I could achieve it. So, if suspension of judgment is a matter of having the goal of knowing the answer to a question, then goal-related factors should matter to its justification. How good it would be to know whether p, how much you value knowing whether p and the likelihood of obtaining the knowledge – these should help fix whether you are justified in having the neutral attitude. But as we’ve seen, traditionalism denies the relevance of such non-epistemic factors.

The second challenge, then, is to give a traditionalism-friendly explanation of the point of the neutral doxastic attitude, i.e., to explain its point without going over to a view like Friedman’s which treats it as a goal-directed state, with the consequent relevance of non-epistemic factors.
Those are the challenges. I answer them on behalf of the traditionalist by arguing that there are several very different ways to be neutral on a question. I distinguish three: **suspension of judgment**, the **inquiring attitude**, and an attitude I call **agnosticism**. For the first two of these ways of being neutral, non-epistemic factors such as future-comparative and goal-related factors matter to their justification. But they are not genuine doxastic attitudes. There is a genuinely doxastic neutral attitude, agnosticism, but I argue that we have no reason, from the two challenges at least, to think that any but epistemic factors matter to its justification. Traditionalism thus survives the challenges.

2. Suspension of Judgment

Consider the verb ‘suspend’ as it is used in “S suspended X,” where X denotes an action or event that is not yet taking place. ‘Suspend’, used with that meaning, is a success verb. If a group suspends a planned protest, the group does not engage in the protest while it is suspended. If you suspend your decision on where to take your vacation, then you do not decide where to take it during the period of suspension. You can try to suspend the decision but still make the decision, in that case you didn’t suspend the decision. Similarly, if I suspend judgment on whether p over a period of time, I do not, during that period, make a judgment on whether p, and so I do not judge that p or judge that not-p. Let’s use ‘omit’ broadly so that failure to X suffices for omitting X. In general, omitting X is necessary but insufficient for suspending X. Consider someone who does not carry out a planned protest because he dies, or because he just forgets about it. He doesn’t thereby suspend the protest. The same goes for suspending judgment.

Talk of “suspending judgment” conveys something beyond the omission of judgment, something future-directed. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first category of senses for ‘suspend’ is summarized as “to debar, postpone, defer, and related uses.” I propose to take the notions of postponement and deferral as a basis for an account of suspending judgment:

To **suspend judgment** on a question is to **put off judgment** on it, that is, to omit judgment on it because one is pursuing an aim to judge the question later (and not before) or when and only when certain conditions obtain (which one does not yet believe obtains).

Several clarifications are needed. First, not just any explanatory connection, not just any **because**, is sufficient. The sort of connection needed is found in humdrum cases such as that of a child not eating her cake now because she is saving it for later. She is pursuing the aim of eating it later (and not before), and as a non-deviant result, she does not eat it now. I set aside difficult questions about how to explain non-deviance, and how to understand causation or explanation of omissions. Second, let me say something about my attempt to spell out what it takes to put off judgment. I suggest above that this is a matter of omitting judgment because one is pursuing an aim about judgment. The aim might be explicitly about the future – to judge tomorrow and not before. But it will often instead be an aim to judge when and only when certain conditions obtain which one doesn’t yet believe to obtain, e.g., to judge when you have
strong evidence on the question, when you learn how to reason better about these sorts of issues, when you rid yourself of a certain bias, etc. These aims are conditional on epistemic matters, but this is not strictly required. You might put off judgment on a question until the cult leader gives you the “okay,” until you are able to consider the question without becoming angry, or until you “feel like” judging the matter. Finally, the aim needn’t be a full-blown intention to judge (later or under certain conditions), at least not if intentions require beliefs that you will do what’s intended. You might have the aim by intending only to try.

Third, if you suspend judgment, plausibly you intentionally omit judgment during the period of suspension. Intentionally omitting X-ing plausibly does not require having an intention specifically not to X. Consider an example from Clarke (2014, 67). Suppose you come to a fork in the road and see that the left path would be scenic but that the right path is shorter. In this sort of case, if you intend to take the right path and execute that intention in a normal way, aware that there was another path, then you count as intentionally not taking the left path – despite not having the explicit intention – or aim – not to take the left path. What’s true of the fork-in-the-road case applies to cases of putting off. The child who doesn’t eat her cake now because she is putting off eating it until her friend comes over later intentionally omits eating it now. It doesn’t matter if she lacks the specific aim not to eat the cake now. Similarly, if you omit judgment because you are putting it off until better evidence comes in, you intentionally omit judgment, even if you lack an aim specifically not to omit it now.

Given this account of suspension, there is a readily available account of refraining.14 Suspending and refraining from judgment are obviously related, though talk of “refraining” does not convey postponement or deferral in the way talk of “suspending” does. The Oxford English Dictionary gives as the current meaning for the verb ‘refrain’, “to stop oneself from doing something; to abstain, forbear.” Refraining, abstaining, forbearing, all seem closely related intentional omission.15 Thus, I propose:

To refrain from judgment on a question is intentionally to omit judgment on it.

It is clear enough that intentionally omitting judgment implies refraining from judgment. The converse is plausible, too, given a broad view of intentional omission. Suppose your faucet is leaky. You take a look at the problem. Suppose you realize your tools are insufficient for the job, and so you don’t try to fix it yourself. Alternatively, maybe you’ve been trying to fix it but you come to realize that your tools are insufficient and so stop trying for that reason. In such cases, it’s plausible that you intentionally omit further repair-related activities. Many cases of refraining from judgment on a question are similar. Suppose you are asked a question by a friend. You might know you don’t know the answer and for that reason not even try to answer it. Or, perhaps you think about the question for a moment, consult your memory or consider your evidence, but, then, upon concluding you don’t know, stop your attempts. In such cases, plausibly you intentionally omit judgment.

Given my accounts, if you suspend judgment, you also refrain from judgment. But the converse fails. Often when you refrain from judgment you don’t put it off. Suppose your friend asks you a question about which you don’t care in the least. After thinking about it for a moment, you conclude you don’t know and stop deliberation. In a case like this you probably won’t be putting off judgment. You won’t be aiming to judge the matter later or when your
evidence is better, etc. You thus won’t suspend judgment, only refrain from it. A few minutes later, you may well not be refraining any more either.

One might look askance at dictionary-inspired accounts of suspending and refraining from judgment. But part of what I hope to show over the course of this paper is that these core meanings in ordinary English point us to philosophically important but neglected differences in ways of being neutral on questions.

Refraining from and suspending judgment are ways of exercising control over one’s judgment and, since judgment is a way of coming to have beliefs, over one’s beliefs. One can be responsible for how one exercises this control. If you suspend judgment for bad reasons or motivations, and you lack an excuse, you can be blameworthy for your suspension. For instance, a politician may suspend judgment on climate change in an effort, perhaps unconscious, to avoid feeling the pressure to act in ways that run contrary to the wishes of donors, or an employer may suspend judgment on whether an outgroup job candidate is suitable for prejudiced reasons. Arguably, someone suspending judgment on whether she has hands might also be blameworthy for being overly skeptical: she ought to believe, and so not suspend, and has no excuse for it.

My account also fits well with the practice of the Pyrrhonian skeptics, who did not merely omit judgment but did so intentionally while also holding out for the possibility of future judgment that meets epistemically acceptable conditions, and while inquiring further. Many of the modes of suspension Sextus Empiricus discusses are strategies for refraining from judgment in the face of some temptation to judge — constructing arguments for contrary sides on a question, recalling differences of opinion of experts, etc.

I now turn to two main objections to my accounts. The first objection is that my accounts fail to respect the fact that, barring irrationality and fragmentation, belief that p excludes refraining from judgment on whether p. One way to develop this objection is to appeal to an agential theory of judgment. Some have argued that judgment is itself a kind of action, e.g., a sincere affirmation that p, or an affirmation that p made with the aim of affirming truly and/or reliably (Shah and Velleman (2005, 503-5), Sosa 2015, 66). If some such theory is correct, it would seem that you could be rational in intentionally omitting judgment on whether p even if you already believed that p (and even if your mind was in no sense fragmented). You might know that the food you’re eating at a dinner party is awful but intentionally fail to sincerely affirm its awfulness. You might put the question of its awfulness out of your mind so that you can better enjoy the conversation. According to my account, this would be a case of refraining from judgment on whether the food was awful. But, so the objection goes, that’s the wrong result.

The core of this objection does not depend on assuming an agential theory of judgment. Plausibly, whatever the right account of judgment is, it is possible for someone to believe that p at a time but not judge that p at that time (without irrationality or fragmentation). Moreover, if this is possible, it ought to be possible, further, to believe that p at a time while intentionally not judging on whether p at that time (again without irrationality or fragmentation). For instance, maybe judgment that p consists in the non-agential but occurrent taking of p to be the case. You could intentionally omit such takings while believing that p. Intuitively, again, this doesn’t seem like suspension of judgment.
This objection is a curious one. If you are intentionally omitting X, then it seems plausible you are refraining from X, and similarly if you are intentionally omitting X because you are pursuing suitable aims concerning future X-ing, it seems you are suspending X. The problem seems to be with figuring out what judgment is, not what refraining or suspension are. What we need is an account of judgment that gives us the result that if you believe you don’t refrain from judgment (irrationality and fragmentation aside).

I consider two possible replies to the objection, one that upholds my original accounts using an account of judgment to thread the judgment-belief needle and another that imputes a kind of error in our talk and thought about suspending judgment.

The first reply asserts a close relationship between judgment and belief. To judge that p is to make up your mind that p, whereas to believe that p is to have your mind made up that p. You could have your mind up that p at a time, of course, without then making it up that p. (Plausibly you might never have made it up. Perhaps this happens when we acquire beliefs just walking around town (e.g., the belief that you’re walking across Main Street, or that it’s cold outside.) So, although belief doesn’t entail judgment, judgment does entail belief – judgment is the formation of a belief through making up your mind.

How does this account of judgment and its relation to belief help with the objection? There is something peculiar about a situation in which your mind is already made up that p and yet at the same time you are refraining from making up your mind on whether p. There may be no strict incompatibility here, but to be in such a situation without irrationality you would need to be self-blind in respect of your belief that p. For, if you knew your mind was already made up that p, you would be irrational in refraining from making it up that p. i.e., in intentionally not making it up. Compare: if I know I am at the company picnic, it seems irrational for me to have the sorts of mental states I would need to intentionally not arrive at the company picnic. The aim of not now arriving at the picnic would seem irrational because pointless: you know you’re there, so of course you know you won’t be arriving there, regardless of what you do. But the same goes for aims such as aiming to go to the picnic later and not before, or aiming to go to the picnic when and only when it stops raining. Finally, given that a mind self-blind about one of its beliefs is fragmented, we have the result that belief excludes refraining from judgment (and so suspending judgment), barring irrationality and fragmentation.

The second reply does not identify judgment with making up one’s mind. It concedes to the objector that it’s possible to judge that p, without irrationality or fragmentation, even when you already believe that p and know that you do. But it claims that when we ordinarily (and in philosophy) talk of “suspending judgment” what we really have in mind is suspending not just any old judgment but belief-forming judgment (and similarly for talk of refraining from judgment). So, my above accounts need a small revision – we must insert ‘belief-forming’ before ‘judgment’ in the right-hand side. The final part of this second reply is piggybacks off the first reply: absent fragmentation and irrationality, believing that p excludes intentionally not going in for belief-forming judgment. For, belief implies having one’s mind made up, and belief-forming judgment is a way of making up one’s mind.

There are costs to both replies. The first reply requires a controversial view of judgment. On this view, surprisingly, if I already believe that snow is white, I cannot judge that it is. This view of judgment may not fit very well with certain strands of ordinary thought and talk about judgment, though it does fit well with talk of suspending and refraining from judgment. The
second imputes a mismatch between what we’re wanting to talk and think about and the tools we use to do this. We want to talk and think about suspension of belief-forming judgment but we end up using the term ‘judgment’ (and concept of judgment) without any qualification.

In order to make room for views of judgment on which it isn’t necessarily a way of coming to believe, I rely on the second reply to the objection. Thus, I revise my accounts as follows:

To **suspend judgment** on a question is to put off belief-forming judgment, that is, to omit it because one aims to have it later (and not before) or when and only when certain conditions obtain (which one does not yet believe obtain).

To **refrain from judgment** on a question is intentionally to omit belief-forming judgment on it.

I want to make one final observation as I conclude my answer to this first objection. Given that we have the general notion of suspension as putting off and the general notion of refraining as intentionally omitting, we can apply them directly to belief itself. Whereas we must be careful in stating how belief excludes suspending and refraining from judgment, by noting qualifications about irrationality and fragmentation, we can say without qualification that belief excludes suspending and refraining from belief. (As noted above, these are success notions: if you suspend X, you don’t X, and similarly for refraining.) Moreover, these notions applied to belief are every bit as important to epistemology as they are when applied to judgment. The point of suspending or refraining from judgment in any normal case is to suspend or refrain from belief itself. We want to put off judgment on whether p because we want to put off belief on whether p, and similarly for refraining from judgment and refraining from belief. It is not an accident, of course, that we very often speak of suspending and refraining from judgment rather than belief, because as mentioned above one of our chief ways of exerting control over our beliefs is through exerting control over whether we judge on a question.\(^{18}\)

The second objection is that my account of refraining from judgment (and by extension suspension) goes too far in a voluntarist direction. If one can intentionally omit judgment, then won’t there be cases in which one omits judgment at will? And if so, it seems it is only be a short step to conceding that it is possible to make propositional judgments at will, i.e., to judge that p at will? If so, then given that one way of coming to believe something is by judging it to be so, it might seem we are another short step from doxastic voluntarism, namely the thesis that one can in some cases believe propositions at will.\(^{19}\)

In discussing judgment at will, it’s useful to begin by noting a process/product ambiguity in talk of “judging” or “judgment,” an ambiguity under the surface in much of the above discussion. When we say, for example, that someone should “judge an issue carefully” or should “use critical judgment” on the issue, we have in mind a process or activity. This activity can stretch over time and is marked linguistically by the use of progressive verb aspect (e.g., “they are judging the matter carefully”). It is more naturally referred to as “deliberation” and consists, roughly, in trying to answer a question with one’s current resources (evidence, memory). By contrast, when we say that someone “made a reasonable judgment,” we have in mind the product of this process when it is successfully completed, which is not something that
stretches over time. If you made a judgment on a question, you propositionally judged on the question, i.e., you judged that p for some candidate answer p to the target question. In discussions of suspending judgment, it is the refraining of the product that it is primarily at issue (similarly for refraining). Typically, though, we omit the product by omitting or stopping the process. You try to answer a question, conclude you don’t have good enough evidence, and so stop trying, with the result that you don’t make a judgment either way. This is not omitting judgment at will, since one is omitting it indirectly, by omitting the process. Can we ever omit judgment (the product) at will – that is, just by deciding to omit it and executing that decision directly? I don’t know. But, as I will try to show, I don’t think I need to decide this issue to answer the “involuntarist” objection to my account.

Suppose the answer is that, yes, we can omit judgment at will. Still, there is no short step to the possibility of (belief-forming) judgment that p at will. Audi (1999) points out that just because one can omit X-ing at will it doesn’t follow that one can X at will. Consider sneezing. One cannot sneeze at will. But presumably one can in some cases omit – suppress – a sneeze at will. It therefore does not follow from the assumption that one can in some cases omit judgment at will that one can ever judge at will, let alone come to believe at will. Not only does it not follow, I think it is independently more plausible, at least in the case of belief-forming judgment, that one can in some cases omit judgment at will than that one can ever judge and therein come to believe that p at will. One way we can see this difference in plausibility is to compare how natural it would be to adopt proximal intentions to now not make a judgment vs. to now come to believe that p. If it’s natural to have the proximal intention to X, then that is at least some evidence that we can X at will (though we would have to check whether one is omitting the judgment by omitting something else, namely the process of judgment). If it is not natural to have such an intention, that is similarly some evidence that we don’t X at will, and assuming that we would sometimes X at will if we could, it is also evidence that we can’t. Compare two possible avowals from jurors: 1) “I hereby decide not to make a judgment/form a belief right now on whether the defendant was at the scene of the accident” with 2)”I hereby decide to come to believe right now that the defendant was at the scene of the accident.” To my ears, (2) is much less natural than (1).

3. Suspension, Refraining and Agnosticism

If my account of suspending judgment is correct, then future-comparative factors, such as the fact that you would have clearer and better evidence later, or the fact that you would be a better judge later, can be relevant to whether you are justified in suspending judgment, even though those factors don’t help fix your strength of epistemic position. Someone suspending judgment might reason, quite appropriately, as follows: “I will do better to wait to form a belief on whether p; for, if I form it now, the belief I form might well be true and perhaps justified and even knowledge, but if I form it later, my belief will more likely be true, justified and a case of knowledge. This speaks in favor of waiting to form a belief – of suspending judgment.”

So far it might seem like I’m helping to bury traditionalism. My account of suspending judgment and the intuitions I’ve marshalled about the relevance of future-comparative factors to its justification seem to be mutually supporting strands of evidence against traditionalism. But this appearance is misleading, as I hope to show in the next two sections. There is a neutral
doxastic attitude of which traditionalism is true but it is not suspension. I will call it ‘agnosticism’. Suspension, even the state of being suspended, is not a doxastic attitude at all, nor is refraining. In this section, I argue that suspension (and refraining) are distinct from agnosticism. In the next, I use the results to answer the first challenge to traditionalism.

Let me explain how I will understand ‘agnosticism’. In many cases, we are to unsure/uncertain on a question to have a belief. I am (now in 2019) too uncertain on whether Trump will win reelection to have a belief either way. The uncertainty involved in such cases is not the mere lack of certainty or confidence. A rock is not uncertain about anything. I am in some state of confidence with respect to p; the rock isn’t. Ordinary talk of “being agnostic” is a fairly good, if imperfect22, approximation to the notion of being too uncertain to have a belief (or disbelief) on the matter. So, I will recruit it for my purposes:

I will use ‘being agnostic whether p’ to mean having an “intermediate” state of confidence concerning whether p, i.e., having states of confidence for p and for not-p such that one’s confidence that p is not strong enough for belief that p and one’s confidence that not-p is not strong enough for disbelief that p.

What do I mean by “states of confidence”? I rely on an intuitive notion here, making on only a few assumptions. I assume that a state of confidence concerning whether p consists of states of confidence for p and for not-p. And I assume as well that the latter sorts of states – states of confidence for particular propositions – are mental states that collectively ground facts about comparative confidences. For instance, I have a state of confidence about whether the coin in my hand will come up heads when I flip it. I am not confident that heads will come up, nor that tails will. But I am more confident that heads will come up than various other things, such as that neither heads nor tails will come up. Plausibly, I need to have a state of confidence in the proposition that heads will come up in order to help ground my comparative confidences.

On the other hand, I stay neutral on familiar controversies over the nature of states of confidence and their relations to belief. I do not claim that states of confidence are credences of the sort familiar from Bayesian epistemology.23 Nor, relatedly, do I claim that rational states of confidence must be measurable by any probability function.24 I stay neutral as well on questions of reduction, such as whether belief and disbelief are reducible to facts about confidences, or the converse, or neither.25 Although I am working with a rough and ready intuitive notion, I think the arguments below will not for the most part depend on how the notion is explicatured or refined. Where the details might matter, I indicate as much in the endnotes.

Is suspending judgment the same as agnosticism, so understood? Note, for starters, that there are different connotations in talk of “suspending” and talk of ‘being agnostic’ (either used in my stipulated way or in the ordinary way). Talk of “suspending judgment” suggests something about the future, whereas talk of “being agnostic” doesn’t. Talk of “refraining from” as well as “suspending” judgment also suggests something agential – refusal, intentional omission – in a way that “being agnostic” doesn’t. However, I want to go beyond the connotations of these terms. I will argue that there are both normative and non-normative differences between suspension of judgment and agnosticism, understood as having an intermediate state of confidence. These are two distinct phenomena. In fact, they come apart
in numerous ways that it is useful to chart, even beyond the question of whether they are identical. I’ll make similar arguments afterward for refraining from judgment.

Two methodological points are worth making before turning to the arguments. The arguments below are more forceful assuming the accounts of suspending and refraining from judgment I defend in the previous section. But they retain force even if we do not assume those accounts. Thus, I see those accounts and the arguments below as mutually supportive. The second point is that even putting aside whether I’m right about the notions of suspending and refraining from judgment, I may still be right in claiming that the *phenomena* I take those ordinary notions to get at come apart from agnosticism, i.e., from having an intermediate state of confidence. I of course think my accounts in the section 2 are right. But as I will explain further in section 4, the crucial point for the defense of traditionalism is that the phenomena are different from agnosticism.

I’ll start with normative differences. I claim that something can be a reason for you to suspend judgment but not a reason for you to be agnostic, and vice versa. If you want to make up your mind but haven’t done so yet, so that you neither believe nor disbelieve, the fact that clearer and better evidence will come in later can be a reason for you to suspend judgment, as illustrated in Schroeder’s case above. But can this fact be a reason for you to be agnostic? It doesn’t seem so. If there are genuine reasons here, it ought to be reasonable to acquire or continue to hold the relevant attitudes for the purported reason. But it doesn’t seem reasonable to acquire or remain in a state of intermediate confidence for the reason that better evidence is coming in. By contrast, it clearly can be reasonable for someone to suspend or continue to suspend judgment for this reason.

Similar arguments are available concerning other reasons. For instance, the fact that tomorrow morning, when you are more alert, you will be a better assessor of your evidence on an important issue can be a reason for you to suspend judgment on the question, but not a reason for you to be agnostic about it. Consider again the case of the two health insurance plans your employer offers. It’s a complex matter whether Plan A or Plan B is a better deal overall. You might well be able to come to a reasonable conclusion about which is best now, but you’re quite tired. You know that in the morning you’ll be better assessor of this evidence. Here the future-comparative fact that you’ll be a better assessor of the evidence and so better judge of the matter seems to be a reason for you to wait till then to make up your mind on this important question. But this same comparative fact does not seem to be a reason for you to be agnostic, to be in a state of intermediate confidence. One might try to argue that your current impairment is reason for you to be in such a state, but it’s far less plausible to think the comparative fact is.

Correspondingly, there are cases in which comparative facts that place the future in a poorer light than the present are reasons for one not to suspend judgment without being reasons for one to be agnostic. These are cases of “epistemic worsening.” For instance, suppose you know that you will never be better placed to believe the truth on whether p than you are now – you know that the only evidence that will ever be available on whether p is going to be destroyed in just a moment. Suppose, for vividness, the question is whether a certain political leader ordered the torture of a certain prisoner. You know that an official is coming in a few minutes to destroy the document you’re relying on, which is the only record there is. You know that everyone who knows about whether the leader ordered the torture is either dead or
would never risk the consequences of revealing the answer. Such facts seem to constitute a reason for you not to suspend judgment. But they clearly don’t constitute a reason for you not to be agnostic. Indeed, it may be that, despite the dramatic situation, the evidence you have from the document makes it about 50% likely that the politician ordered the torture. This seems to be a reason for you to be in a state of intermediate confidence on the question.

Something can also be a reason for you to be agnostic without being a reason for you to suspend judgment. Consider “don’t care” cases like the following. Take some question that does not interest you in the slightest, say (for certain Americans) whether the Manchester United or Chelsea football team has a better starting goalie. Suppose your UK friend is asking you about it, pushing you to give your opinion. Here it seems you have a reason to be agnostic, namely the fact that the evidence you have doesn’t weigh in favor of either answer about whose goalie is better; but this fact isn’t a reason for you to be suspend judgment, because it isn’t a reason for you to try to get back to the question later (or under certain conditions). Epistemic worsening cases are similar. The fact that your evidence makes a proposition, p, 50% likely is a reason for you to be agnostic about whether p, but it doesn’t seem like a reason for you to suspend judgment, because you know your judgment isn’t going to be any better later, only worse.

Agnosticism and suspending judgment can come apart non-normatively as well. From our examples above, we can see how you might be agnostic without suspending judgment if you are agnostic but know that your evidence and/or power of judgment will never be as good as they are currently, or if you are agnostic but don’t care about getting back to the question or knowing the answer later. You might well not suspend judgment in these cases.

Could the converse happen as well? Could you suspend judgment without being agnostic? This is less clear. But it could happen if you could ever intentionally omit judgment as well as all states of confidence. I adopt the following stipulation:

‘Opinion’ will be used inclusively to pick out belief, disbelief as well as states of confidence.

Are there cases in which someone intentionally fails not only to judge but to have any opinion? I think examples make this at least plausible. In the American legal system, judges often instruct jurors to suspend judgment on the defendant’s guilt until all the evidence has been presented. Suppose a juror complies with this instruction – as no doubt some do – by putting the question of the defendant’s guilt firmly out of her mind until the end of the trial. This juror seems not only to suspend judgment but to suspend “opinion” on the matter, so that she is not even agnostic. Here is similar case. Suppose a college freshman, flipping open the textbook on Day 1 of Intro to Neuroscience, reads a question about which neurotransmitters play certain roles in certain forms of depression. He doesn’t know the relevant evidence, and he can see that the question is given a detailed chapter-length treatment. In situations like this, a person might feel rather silly in having any state of confidence at all. Suspension of opinion might seem to make more sense until you have a much better sense of the lay of the land in this field. I take it this idea is familiar to novices in a field. True, the novice freshman and juror might have dispositions to bet certain amounts on various answers to the question on which they’re suspending judgment and opinion. But these dispositions, arguably, reflect dispositions to have attitudes (including states of confidence) which they currently lack. 28 29
Suspension is not the same as agnosticism. Might refraining from judgment be the same as agnosticism? Here I will be brief. Refraining and agnosticism come apart non-normatively. If one is in a state of being agnostic about something, one need not be refraining. A few minutes ago, I wasn’t considering many “don’t care” questions about which I have a stored agnosticism, e.g., the publication date of various articles, the middle name of some colleague, who won the Mexico Open, etc. I may not have wanted to have these attitudes, but sometimes we have them nevertheless. I wasn’t refraining from judgment about these, intentionally not judging them. It is a harder question whether one could refrain from judgment without being agnostic. As in the freshman and juror cases above, it is at least plausible that someone could suspend and so refrain from judgment it while not having any “opinion” and so not even agnostic attitudes. Normatively, agnosticism and refraining come apart as well. Consider again the case in which your powers of judgment on an important matter are temporarily impaired, and you know it. Suppose we add, further, that you are also impaired with respect to your capacity to have justified agnostic attitudes. Suppose, for instance, that your current condition makes it likely that you will arrive at unjustified states of confidence on the matter. If you can’t avoid “opinion,” then your situation will be an epistemic tragedy. In such a situation, though, the fact that both your powers of judgment and your power to have justified agnostic attitudes are impaired still is a reason for you to refrain from judgment, but it is not a reason for you to be agnostic. “Don’t cares” also give us cases in which something is a reason for one to be agnostic but not to refrain from judgment. Consider those boring questions on which I was agnostic a few minutes ago. The fact that my (stored) evidence was roughly equally balanced was a reason for me to be agnostic about the relevant questions. But plausibly it wasn’t a reason for me to refrain from judgment on them. Perhaps it would have been a reason for me to refrain if the question came up (say if someone asked me the question). But that didn’t happen.

4. Response to the First Challenge

Neither suspending nor refraining from judgment is the same as agnosticism.\(^{30}\) In light of these distinctions, let’s return to the first challenge to traditionalism. It seems clear that traditionalism is in good shape regarding the neutral attitude of agnosticism. Unlike suspension of judgment, whether you are justified in being agnostic about whether \(p\) does not seem to be sensitive to future-comparative factors. Nor do goal-related factors seem relevant: you can justifiably be agnostic about whether Manchester United or Chelsea has the better goalie, regardless of such factors. Agnosticism has a good claim to being a genuinely doxastic attitude, unlike suspension. For one thing, like belief and disbelief and unlike suspension, its justification is unaffected by non-epistemic factors. There is thus a normative similarity between agnosticism, belief and disbelief, and a dissimilarity with suspension (and refraining). But, in addition, agnosticism also appears no more agential than belief or disbelief. Suspension of judgment, by contrast, involves not judging because of the pursuit of a desire-like aim judgment-related aim (aiming to judge in the future, or under certain conditions). As with belief and disbelief, being agnostic does not seem to require any such aim. Nor do any of these three plausibly require any \textit{intentional} action or omission, even on a generous view of these notions, whereas refraining and suspension do. The latter are agential in a way that agnosticism, belief, and disbelief are not.
Finally, I return to methodological point from earlier. What is at issue in the cases from Schroeder and Raz is putting off judgment. I have given an account which, if correct, would explain why it is fitting to use the concept of suspending judgment in connection with those cases. But what ultimately matters to the defense of traditionalism, in the face of the first challenge, are two things: first, future-comparative factors matter to the justification for putting off judgment but don’t matter to the justification of the very different phenomenon of having an intermediate state of confidence; and second, having an intermediate state of confidence is a neutral doxastic attitude, while putting off judgment is not. Even if a traditionalist rejects my general account of suspending judgment, she could avail herself of this answer to the challenge.

5. Response to the Second Challenge

The second challenge to traditionalism, which draws on work by Friedman, is that there must be some point to adopting the neutral attitude as opposed to merely lacking belief and disbelief, but that as far as adequate responses to epistemic deficiencies are concerned, lacking belief seems just as good as taking some neutral attitude. Friedman proposes that we can explain the point of taking the neutral attitude once we identify it with the “inquiring attitude” of aiming to know the answer to a question: the point of the neutral attitude is to bring about the goal of coming to have this knowledge. But traditionalism is not amenable to such a tight connection between any doxastic attitude and goal-directed states, because such a connection commits one to the claim that goal-related factors are relevant to the justification of the neutral attitude.

I will give a rather flatfooted response to this challenge on behalf of the traditionalist. Agnosticism, a genuine doxastic attitude, serves functions that the mere lack of belief and disbelief cannot. I will mention two. First, agnosticism can exert rational pressure on other states, which lack of belief cannot. For instance, if I am agnostic about whether supernatural beings exist and I know that if God exists there are supernatural beings, then I cannot, without irrationality, believe that God exists.31 By contrast, lacking an attitude about whether supernatural beings exist can exert no such pressure. Second, unlike the absence of attitudes, one can be more or less agnostic on a question, insofar as one can be more or less confident of answers to it. I may be agnostic about whether candidate A, B or C will win the election, but if I have more confidence in A winning than in B or C, I am less agnostic than I am if I have equal confidence in each winning. In this way, states of agnosticism in a good epistemic agent can be a way of keeping track over time of comparative facts about evidential support, whereas merely lacking belief and disbelief cannot. Even the state of being agnostic simpliciter in a good epistemic agent can reflect the fact that one’s evidence at the time did not sufficiently support any of the answers to the question.

So, I think the traditionalist is in good shape as far as the second challenge goes. But in light of the distinction between agnosticism and suspension of judgment, an intriguing possibility opens up. Perhaps Friedman is right about suspension of judgment. Suppose the traditionalist is right about agnosticism, i.e., that it is a neutral doxastic attitude whose job is to respect certain sorts of epistemic factors. Suspension of judgment is distinct from that attitude; so, what’s its point? It is natural to wonder whether it is exactly what Friedman says it is: to
direct us, in the way a goal-directed state does, to the attainment of knowledge. Given that this paper attempts not merely to defend traditionalism but to distinguish different ways of being neutral on questions, I will examine the relation between suspension and inquiry.

6. Suspension of Judgment and Inquiry

In the discussion below, I will speak of “inquiry,” but, like Friedman, I mean this to refer not to the actions sometimes involved in inquiring but to the state of mind that makes one an inquirer, the inquiring state of mind. Like Friedman, I understand this state of mind to be that of “aiming to figure out/know the answer to a question,” and I take it to be closely related to “having a question on one’s research agenda.” My goal is to show that suspension of judgment comes apart from all such phenomena. Like these phenomena, suspension involves aiming but not in the same way that inquiry does. I start by comparing inquiry with refraining from judgment.

6.1. Refraining from Judgment and Inquiry

Refraining from judgment is distinct from inquiry. There are normative differences between them. Something can be a reason for you to refrain from judgment but not a reason for you to inquire, e.g., the fact that your powers of judgment are compromised. That fact (if known) is a reason for you to refrain from judgment, but it doesn’t seem to be a reason for you to put a question on your research agenda, or aim to figure out the answer to the question, etc. This is especially clear if we enrich this reason by adding that your abilities in this respect are permanently compromised. For instance, you might know you have a powerful bias that you will never overcome.

Something can also be a reason for you to inquire without being a reason for you to refrain from judgment. When known, the fact that it would highly desirable to learn the answer to a question and a very easy achievement to learn it – you could just think about it for a couple seconds, say, and know the answer – seems like a reason for you to inquire into it, but does not seem like a reason for you to refrain from judgment on it. One might protest that you’d have to refrain from judgment in order to inquire. I will dispute this claim in a moment, but even if it were true, in principle something could be a reason for a person to ϕ without being a reason for the person to ψ, where ψ-ing is a precondition for ϕ-ing. Consider Maya, a Wyoming resident in a voting booth looking at the list of candidates for Senate. Plausibly, the fact that Jones, although not an excellent candidate, is the best candidate running for senate in Wyoming is a reason for Maya to vote for Jones, but it doesn’t seem like a reason for her to be (or continue being) a resident of Wyoming.

Refraining from judgment and inquiry also differ non-normatively. One can refrain from judgment while also refraining from inquiry, i.e., while intentionally not inquiring. Again, if I know I’m hopelessly biased on a question, I might refuse to go in for either judgment or inquiry. Or, looking back to “epistemic worsening” cases discussed above, suppose I know that I won’t have any better evidence in the future than I now have but also that the evidence I have now is equally balanced between p and not-p. Because of the fact that the evidence will only get worse, I might give up inquiry on whether ϕ – I take the question off my research agenda. But,
especially if I’m tempted by one of the answers, say p, which confirms my pet theory, I might need to fight off temptation by refraining – and indeed “withholding” – judgment on the question. In such a case, I would refrain from judgment but not inquire.

It is a trickier question whether it’s possible to inquire without refraining from judgment. I want to look into this in some detail. Consider the following examples:

Example 1. You have taken a brief glance at two insurance plans, A and B, and A looks a bit better. But your glance was quite brief. You suspend judgment about which is better while you inquire into the matter further, e.g., by considering their advantages and disadvantages under various circumstances. Having done all this research, you return to the question whether A or B is better, but now with an aim of making a judgment on the matter without delay. You haven’t quite yet made a judgment, though. At this time, you are still inquiring, still “mentally asking” whether A or B is better, aiming to get it right based on good reasons (and perhaps even know), but you are no longer refraining from judgment.

Example 2. You’re an umpire in baseball. A pitch has just been thrown and the batter did not swing. You haven’t yet judged whether it was a ball or strike. But you’re trying to judge without delay whether it was a strike or a ball, and so you’re not refraining from judgment. You’re inquiring insofar as you’re mentally asking whether the pitch was a ball or strike, aiming to get it right, reliably.

Example 3. Consider someone with high need-for-closure in sense of Arie Kruglanski and colleagues (1996). The person very much wants to correctly answer the question whether p as soon as possible, e.g., because he has been told by an experimentalist that the speed of the correct answer correlates with intelligence. He jumps on the first piece of evidence he thinks of, which happens to support p. Just before thinking of that piece of evidence, the person is inquiring into whether p but not refraining from judgment on whether p.

The guiding idea behind these examples is that if you are trying to make a judgment without delay on a question – as opposed to planning to try to make a judgment after finishing some related sub-inquiry, or after reading another paper, or hearing another counterargument, etc. – then you are not refraining from judgment on the question. This fits with the account of offered in section 2: although the agent fails to judge in these cases, the agent is not intentionally failing to judge, and so is not refraining from judgment. Nevertheless, the agent is inquiring and so has whatever attitudes are necessary for inquiry. Thus, having those pro-attitudes cannot be the same as refraining from judgment.

One might object that this argument equivocates on what one refrains from in refraining from “judgment.” The objection is then this: in my cases above, the agent isn’t refraining from the process of judgment but is refraining from propositional judgment (the product), and so my cases are not ones in which a person fails to refrain from judgment while inquiring. Thus, for all I’ve argued, Friedman could be right that inquiry requires refraining from judgment.

What could it mean, though, to refrain from judgment (the product) while engaging in an activity (judgment as process) the aim of which is to bring about the product without delay?
Generally, if you are engaged in an activity with an aim to bring about X-ing without delay, you are not refraining from the product. If I am engaged in the process of throwing a dart at the bullseye, I am not refraining from hitting the bullseye. The same holds if anything more clearly for suspending: if you are trying there and then to X, you are not suspending X-ing – not putting it off.35

Consider also: would the Pyrrhonian skeptics, practicing their modes of suspension, ever find themselves in positions like the ones you’re occupying in those examples? Would a Pyrrhonian try right away – with no further delay – to make a judgment on a question? I think the answer is no. This fits well with the claim that in going in for making a judgment without delay one is not refraining from – and not suspending – judgment. Insofar as the Pyrrhonian refrains from and suspends judgment in the product sense, she does not go in for judgment in the process sense.

Perhaps there is a better way to press a related objection to my claims about the three examples. One might claim that in those cases you are not aiming to judge without delay. You are still putting off judgment insofar as you are aiming to judge on the question only when a certain condition is met, e.g., only when you are satisfied with an answer, and you are not so satisfied yet. The putting off will end as soon as you are satisfied. So, you are refraining from judgment in the product sense as well as in the process sense, but you are still inquiring. Perhaps even a Pyrrhonian could do what you are doing, if it meets this description.

The trouble with this objection is that it treats a judgment that p too much like an action one performs based on a judgment that p. Compare a contestant in a game show, who in response to a question “Is p true?” has 30 seconds to push one or neither of two buttons – a “yes, p is true” button and a “no, p is false” button. If she pushes the button corresponding to the truth on whether p, she wins $1000; if she pushes the button corresponding to the false answer on whether p, she’s out of the game and loses. If she omits button-pushing, she’ll be able to keep playing for another round. The seconds are ticking away but she still has a few left. She may well be putting off button-pushing until she determines which answer is correct. Once she determines the correct answer, she will push the corresponding button. In the case of judgment, by contrast, the “determination” involved is not something that precedes and rationalizes judgment as it does button-pushing in the game show case; the determination is the judgment. The objector’s talk of “being satisfied of an answer,” similarly, is itself talk of judgment. I will explain this worry further.

Although judgment is an event rather than a state, and although it is something one does and usually does for reasons, there is a danger in assimilating judgments to ordinary actions. We shouldn’t think of judgment that p in normal cases as something one does for instrumental reasons, even instrumental reasons concerning the goal of judging truly on a question. To think of judgment that p in that way is to think of it as motivated not only by pro-attitude (a desire or intention) to judge/affirm the truth on a question but also by a cognition to the effect that p is the truth on the question, a cognition that is itself based on (or partially constituted by) a cognition that p. Without the cognition, there is no rationalizing explanation of why one affirmed that p rather than that not-p. But what is this cognition that p? It is tempting to use language similar to that of ‘judgment’ for it – it is your taking p to be the case, your assenting to p, your accepting that p. But then we are explaining judgment that p as motivated in part by judgment that p. We can avoid this consequence by taking the cognition
not to be a judgment but instead a cognitive state, most likely a belief. But even on this view, judgment in the normal case is no longer itself something one does on the basis of evidence. It’s rather belief that is based on evidence, with judgment rationalized by belief + a pro-attitude. But this seems wrong: judgment at least in normal cases is based on evidence. Moreover, if judgment in normal cases is merely an action based on a belief that p, then judgment is not a way of forming a belief in those cases. But that is implausible: in many (if not all) cases, judgment is a way of forming a belief.

The examples of inquiry without refraining from judgment stand. I conclude that not only is refraining from judgment distinct from inquiry (and distinct from the desire-like attitudes involved in inquiry), but neither implies the other: one can refrain from judgment without inquiring and vice versa.  

6.2. A One-Way Implication?

Given that suspending requires refraining, the previous section shows that suspending judgment is distinct from inquiry and the attitudes distinctive of it. But it remains to be seen whether suspending requires inquiry. It is not enough to have shown that refraining from judgment doesn’t require inquiry, nor that something could be a reason for a person to refrain but not a reason for the person to inquire. Suspending unlike refraining essentially involves aims concerning judgment, aims that might seem to require inquiry. Because suspending involves an aim concerning judgment, I concede that it is much more commonly accompanied by “aiming to know the answer” and “putting the question on one’s research agenda” than mere refraining is. Still, I think there are reasons (related to some points made earlier) to deny that suspending requires such attitudes. If there is very little chance of learning the answer to a question, or even improving your epistemic standing on it, you might move it off your research agenda. There are only so many issues you can put on your research agenda. Thus, you might well suspend judgment on the issue, deferring judgment to a later time, if there is one, when your prospects for epistemic improvement on the question are better. Here a conditional aim about future judgment seems reasonable in a way that an outright aim to figure out the answer (or improve your standing on the issue) doesn’t.

I do not deny that suspension is closely related to attitudes as wishing one could know the answer, or hoping to someday be in a position to know the answer or being curious. (Even if it doesn’t require them, it is normally accompanied by them.) But such weak pro-attitudes are not sufficient for inquiry, not sufficient for having mental states that make one an inquirer. Inquirers must at least aim for epistemic improvement on the target question. Wishing and hoping for such improvement do not suffice for aiming at it.

7. Conclusion

According to traditionalism, there are three doxastic attitudes – belief, disbelief and a neutral attitude – and each is justified by exclusively in virtue of epistemic factors. Traditionalism is apparently threatened by the relevance of non-epistemic facts about obtaining better evidence in the future to the justification of suspending judgment. And it is threatened,
as well, by the argument that there must be some point to suspension of judgment as opposed to merely lacking belief, and the best account of its point – an account that identifies it with “the inquiring attitude,” a goal-directed state of aiming to know the answer to a question – commits one to thinking that goal-related factors are relevant to its justification. In my defense of traditionalism, I did not dispute the relevance of these factors to the justification of suspending judgment and inquiry, respectively. But I denied that the latter are doxastic attitudes. Agnosticism understood as having an intermediate state of confidence, by contrast, is. The challenges to traditionalism therefore leave it unscathed, because it is a view about doxastic attitudes.

In addition to defending traditionalism, I distinguished ways in which we can be neutral on questions.39 I argued that, unlike agnosticism, both suspension and inquiry involve desire-like aiming at cognitive goals (judging later or under certain conditions in the case of suspension and knowing the answer to a question in the case of inquiry), and thus enable us to control what we believe and their quality. There remained, though, a question about the relationship between suspension and inquiry. I argued that these are distinct as well, and that neither implies the other. Suspending, first, involves intentionally not judging, whereas inquiry does not; and second, suspending involves a weaker aim – a suspender need not aim at getting knowledge in the future. A suspender may even take a question off her research agenda. By suspending, she may only ready herself to acquire such future knowledge should the opportunity present itself, however unlikely that may be.

Let me conclude by flagging an important issue for future work. Suppose I am right that non-epistemic factors bear on the justification of suspension of judgment. Can we still characterize a useful notion of epistemic justification for suspension? Appealing to notion of “right kinds of reasons” is unpromising. As Schroeder (2012, 465) points out, the two main earmarks for distinguishing right from of wrong kinds of reasons for an attitude are motivational asymmetry and rationality asymmetry. But, by these earmarks, the fact that in a certain case someone will give me $1000 for suspending seems to be a right kind of reason to suspend: I can suspend for this reason, at least for the right sort of question, and it would not be irrational for me to do so.40 An approach with brighter prospects, I think, is to appeal to a kind of epistemic decision theory. Consider a situation in which I have pretty good evidence for p but know I will have decisive evidence on whether p tomorrow. Now, if I ought to believe that p or disbelieve that p, then plausibly I epistemically ought not suspend judgment. So oughts for belief and disbelief provide constraints on the epistemic justification of suspension. But assume no such oughts hold. What could determine whether I’m epistemically justified in suspending? My options are trying to judge the matter now vs. suspending judgment until tomorrow. We might think of these options as resulting in epistemically valuable or disvaluable consequences under various conditions, where these values would be weighted by the probability of those conditions obtaining. Numerous further questions arise about just what counts as epistemically valuable – knowing earlier rather than later? avoiding tedious inquiry? knowing truths that increase understanding or that are of great practical value? I leave further examination of these issues to a future occasion. But given the agential elements involved in suspending judgment, a decision-theoretical approach to its epistemic justification is likely more promising than it is for that of belief and other doxastic attitudes.41
References
[Author’s work cited omitted]

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1 See, for instance, Goldman (2010), Conee and Feldman (2004, 2010), Matheson (2015), Smithies (2011), and Sosa (2015), to list only a few.
2 Friedman (2017, 322n1) takes philosophers using these terms to be talking about the same thing. In some of her earlier papers, she uses ‘agnosticism’ (e.g., Friedman 2013a and 2013b), but in more recent papers she uses ‘suspension of judgment’ to avoid unwanted theological connotations in (2017, 322n1).
3 For arguments against non-attitude views of neutrality, see Friedman (2013a). The point about rocks comes from Wedgwood (2002, 272). For the most part, I focus on whether-questions, but one may of course suspend judgment on other sorts of questions.
4 If one’s mind is fragmented (Lewis 1996, Egan 2008), one might count as both believing that p and being neutral on whether p (perhaps even rationally). Lewis (565) suggests an existential account in the case of knowledge: the whole fragmented person knows that p iff some fragment knows that p.
5 I use ‘justified in believing’ to imply permissibility but not obligation (and so not that one ought to believe).
6 Some clarifications here. I use ‘fix’ here to mean metaphysical determination. The notion of strength of epistemic position comes from discussions of contextualism (cf. Cohen 2005: 61-2) and may be glossed in terms of meeting stricter or laxer epistemic standards, where these may be construed internalistically (e.g., in terms of evidence) or externalistically (e.g., in terms of reliability or truth-tracking). Traditionalists will thus disagree among themselves about which epistemic factors matter for justification. Such disagreements will not be important for my purposes. I will mainly focus on *evidentialist* traditionalism, which takes the epistemic factors to be evidential, i.e., to be evidence bearing positively or negatively on whether p. Finally, to make traditionalism inclusive, we might allow epistemic factors to include whether or not one’s epistemic position reaches certain thresholds, allowing moderate forms of pragmatic and moral encroachment to count as traditionalist.
7 This statement is not true in full generality. Let p be *I will live past today*. Then clearly knowing that I will gain decisive evidence on p tomorrow can help fix how strong my epistemic position today on whether p. Putting aside these special exceptions in which the getting of evidence on p is evidence for or against p, factors 1-4 do not help fix how strong one’s current epistemic position is on whether p. Thanks to NN for discussion.
8 For recent defenses of practical reasons for belief, see Reisner (2009) and Rinard (2019).
I have set up the case so that the test is automatically ordered and requires no doctor approval, thus ruling out the possibility that the doctor’s ordering the test is evidence that one has the disease. This blocks one of Cohen’s (2016) worries about Schroeder’s argument.

Schroeder (2012) draws a slightly different lesson. He claims that in the “clearer and better evidence” case you have a non-evidential reason not to believe p, but one of the “right kind” rather than the “wrong kind,” where Pascalian reasons to believe are paradigms of the latter. I think the putative reasons are more plausibly taken as reasons to suspend judgment on whether p.

Schroeder considers the possibility that future-comparative facts are reasons to withhold. He rejects this possibility on the grounds that even in cases of this sort when you are not deliberating, you have reasons not to believe/intend. He assumes here that withholding requires deliberation, an assumption I think is implausible at least concerning the nearby notion of refraining (2012, 477-8). The account I present in section 2 does not make deliberation a requirement for refraining from or suspending judgment.

I’ll often abbreviate ‘suspending judgment’ as ‘suspending’ and similarly for ‘refraining from judgment’.

In some cases, it might seem that inquiry aims not at knowing the answer but at less impressive outcomes such as having a true belief or perhaps a justified true belief. In my discussions of inquiry, following Friedman, I will speak of aiming at knowledge, but the reader should recall the possible weaker aims.

See Friedman (2017, 317) for similar claims about suspending judgment. Friedman takes these remarks to support the identification of it with the inquiring attitude. I consider her account in section 6.

I choose to use the term ‘refrain’ rather than ‘withhold’ to avoid the latter’s stronger association with holding back and resistance. These associations make it doubtful that suspending implies withholding.

Clarke (2014, 60-1) treats talk of ‘refraining’ and ‘intentional omission’ as getting at the same core phenomenon of someone intentionally not doing a certain thing.

This is true even for views on which judgment that p entails belief that p (cf. Roeber 2019).

For illuminating discussions of the relations between belief and judgment relevant to the discussion below, see Cassam (2010), Roeber (2019) and Sosa (2015).

Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to explain how belief excludes refraining from judgment exclude and for recommending that I discuss the notions of suspending and refraining from belief.

See Feldman (2001) for an argument against believing at will. See Steup (2017) for a contrary view. See also Audi (1999) for a limited defense of doxastic involuntarism. Following Steup (2017, 2674), I don’t build into my account of doing X at will that the intention to do X is voluntary. The key thing is the directness of X-ing based on an intention to do X. Thanks to NN for discussion on this point.

When X is a process already underway, it is natural to use ‘suspend X’ to mean to stop X, leaving open the possibility of taking it up again.

This section only scratches the surface of the issue of control over our beliefs. Even if we lack direct volitional control over what we believe, we may still have voluntary control in a certain sense of the word. As Weatherson (2008) points out, we often form beliefs when we had the capacity to hold off doing so: we could have stopped to think about other hypotheses or to evaluate the evidence more closely, and doing so may well have comported better with our own values. The sort of voluntary control involved doesn’t require that the resulting beliefs were formed at will. See also Smith (2015).

Talk of “being agnostic” may connote that one could in some sense “go either way.” Of course, one might be too uncertain to have a belief on whether p despite being so confident in p that one could not “go for” not-p.

See Friedman (2013b) for an argument that suspension is not reducible to having a standard credence in a certain range.

Consider the much-discussed imaginary case of throwing dart with a point-sized tip at the real line. Even if one must assign probability 0 to the dart’s hitting any particular real number r, it is at least intuitive that once one sees where the dart hits (say in the interval (.5, 1), one can (rationally) become more confident that it didn’t hit at 8. This seems possible if one could see its barrel and shaft (though not of course its point-sized tip).

Although I make no claims on these matters in this paper, see my XX for a proposal about the relations between belief, confidence and reasons.

Two points here. First, I use the locution ‘reason for you to q’ to mean reason you have to q. Thus, I have in mind reasons possessed by the subject, where possession requires meeting an epistemic condition, plausibly justification or knowledge. Second, I say ‘can be a reason for you’ rather than ‘is a reason for you’. This is for two reasons. First,
the reason must be possessed. Second, even if it is possessed, whether it is a reason for you to suspend judgment depends on features of you, such as whether you do or should value knowing or having a true belief on the matter. 27 In conversation, I have encountered argument that future-comparative factors are not reasons to suspend judgment. Pick your favorite version of Schroeder’s case. Either the subject S’s current evidence is good enough for justified belief that p or it isn’t. Suppose it is. Then S ought to believe that p. But if S ought to believe that p, then S doesn’t have a reason to suspend judgment about whether p. Suppose, on the other hand, S’s evidence isn’t good enough for justified belief that p. Then it seems that that fact is the real reason for S to suspend judgment, not any future-comparative fact. Either way, the future comparative fact is not serving as a reason. I reject several steps of this argument. First, even if S’s evidence is good enough for justified belief, it doesn’t follow that S lacks reasons to suspend judgment. As explained in endnote 5, I use ‘justified’ to pick out a permissive notion, not an “ought.” Cases like the Schroeder case can be spelled out so that they are plausible examples of being justified in believing that p despite it not being the case that one ought to believe that p. (S’s evidence is good enough, but it’s a close call, and S may lack a good appreciation of the force of the evidence.) In such a case, future-comparative facts, at least when S cares or has reason to care about the question, can plausibly be good reasons for S to put off judgment on the question. Second, suppose S’s evidence isn’t good enough for justified belief that p. If S doesn’t know this (or isn’t justified in believing it), we might doubt that it is a reason that S has to be agnostic (see the previous endnote). But even supposing S knows it, the mere fact that the evidence isn’t good enough isn’t a reason to suspend judgment, in for a subject who cares about whether p (or even about knowing whether p); it isn’t a reason to put off judgment, something which requires an aim to judge later or under certain conditions. (I develop this sort of point later in section 3.)

Might the freshman or the juror have a mushy state of confidence? This is of course possible, but I don’t see why it must be the case. If you put a question out of your mind, I don’t see why you must move into a state of confidence concerning it. There may be no comparative confidence facts that need grounding. 28 A second possible sort of case of suspension of judgment without agnosticism, which I will not attempt to explore further here, is one in which a subject has a state of confidence that is strong enough for belief but still lacks belief. Such a subject would not believe but not be agnostic either. Whether such a case is possible depends on how the details of what it takes for a state of confidence to be strong enough for belief. Thanks to NN for discussion.

Rosenkranz (2007, 61) distinguishes agnosticism from suspension of judgment. He is interested in agnosticism as a position – a claim that one can put forth about a subject matter. He distinguishes two forms of agnosticism, both of which are claims about lack of knowability. I reject the identification of what I call “agnosticism” with belief in such claims. A person might believe that neither p nor not-p is knowable while also failing to be in an intermediate state of confidence on the question whether p. This combination might be irrational but it is not impossible. 29

Cf. Rosa (forthcoming)

Thanks to NN for discussion on refraining from and suspending inquiry. 30


Compare Friedman (2013a) on mid-wondering cases. I agree that cases in which one is in the midst of wondering whether p are not cases of suspension of judgment (2013a, 170). (Friedman is now committed to giving a different verdict, given her recent equation of suspension of judgment and the inquiring attitude, at least in cases of mid-wondering that are also cases of inquiry.)

Remarking on a case from Robert Moore (1979, 408), Clarke (2014, 16) draws on a similar intuition in his claim that Ulysses does not refrain from jumping in the water when he hears the Sirens’ song. Since he is trying to jump in he is not refraining from doing it.

An anonymous referee asks about a more occurrent notion of inquiry: mentally asking a question. One can mentally ask a question without caring to know the answer, for instance, if a friend verbally asks it of you and waits for your answer (as in the don’t care cases considered above). Even this notion of inquiry comes apart from refraining from judgment, though. The three examples above of inquiry without refraining are all cases in which one is mentally asking the question but not refraining from judgment. Conversely, there are also cases of refraining from judgment but not mentally asking the question. Certainly, a half-hour after receiving the instruction from the judge, a juror might continue to refrain from judgment about the defendant’s guilt. But the juror is not at that time mentally asking whether the defendant is guilty. Could someone who is just then coming to refrain from judgment
on a question not be asking the question? I think so. The juror may not ask the question of guilt at all, upon hearing the judge’s instructions, the juror may immediately put the question out of mind without asking it.

37 Conee and Feldman (2018, 74) argue that if one doesn’t care about whether p, one might suspend judgment but not inquire. However, I think suspending judgment, because of its aim concerning judgment normally involves caring about knowing whether p (though see the following endnote). Matters are different for agnosticism. It is not at all abnormal to be agnostic about whether p despite not caring to know whether p.

38 Normally but not always. One could suspend judgment without caring about knowing whether p at all, without being curious, etc. if an authority told you to do so or if someone is going to reward you for doing so.

39 I am not alone in distinguishing various ways to be neutral on questions. Friedman (2013b) distinguishes suspension from having a standard credence in a certain range. After writing this paper, I learned of Lord’s (forthcoming), which contains a valuable discussion of different ways of being neutral on questions and of which ways are within the reach of epistemic rationality.

40 Compare agnosticism. The fact I’m offered a reward to have an intermediate state of confidence on a question doesn’t seem like the sort of thing that can be my basis for moving into or being in such a state, not in a fully conscious and direct way, as it can for suspending, and intuitively I would be irrational to adopt an intermediate state of confidence on such a basis.

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