

What do we do when we suspend judgment?

Anne Meylan
University of Zurich

*"I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself, sincerely and without holding back, to demolishing my opinions."
Descartes, First Meditation.*

Main purpose: defend the following agential account of suspension of judgement:

The Resistive Account:

To suspend judgment is to refrain from judging as true what one would have judged as true if one had not refrained from it.

Different types of supportive arguments

A. The Resistive Account matches the ordinary understanding of what it is to suspend X. Part I.

B. The Resistive Account fares better than other alternative accounts. Part II.

C. The Resistive Account solves a number of normative issues. Part III.

Preliminaries

The orthodox view: belief, disbelief and suspension of judgement are the three basic doxastic states.

Breaks with it: suspension of judgement is an action and not a state.

A clarificatory remark: states vs. events and states vs. actions.

A plausible worry: it is uncontroversial that "suspension of judgement" has an active meaning and occasionally denotes an action. But what has always been of interest to the epistemologists is the state that is denoted by the result meaning of the expression.

Replies: Knowing what is the resulting state of an action boils down to know what are the success conditions of this action.

You cannot get to know the success conditions of an action without being acquainted with the nature of this action. E.g. the action of climbing the Everest is

not successful as long as you have not reached the summit.

+ I also have something to say about the resulting state of the action consisting in suspending judgement. I simply do not think we should start with this.

Part I: The ordinary understanding of what it is to suspend something

In which circumstances do we appropriately say that S has suspended Z or that Z has been suspended (by X)? For instance that the students have suspended the protest or that the trial has been suspended.

Things that we suspend are things that would have continued if we had not suspended them.

E.g. time suspends its flight.

Back to the doxastic field

Once you take seriously, the ordinary notion of what it is to suspend X and draw the corresponding conclusion, in the doxastic field —that is for suspension of judgment —, you end up with the Resistive Account.

Fits well that with the fact we sometimes speak of "withholding judgement". To withhold expresses some resistance that lies at the core of suspension of judgement according to me. When we suspend judgment, we resist an inclination to judge something true.

In which circumstances is it true that a subject S would have judged that p, had she not suspended judgement about p?

Judgements vs. beliefs

Judging is the act of occurrently considering p as true.

To believe that p is to be in a certain state of mind (non-occurrent entity) consisting in taking p to be

true.

See Cassam 2010; McHugh 2013; Shah and Velleman 2005.

In which circumstances are we inclined to judge that p, that is, perform the action of occurrently considering p as true?

Neutral-Starting-Point: S is in the state of neither believing that p, nor believing that not-p. Because she wants to settle the question whether p, she deliberates about p. This, if all goes well, results in a judgment (and possibly creates a corresponding belief).

Non-Neutral-Starting-Point: S is in the state of believing that p, for some reasons, she is made conscious of this belief. This, most often, results in an endorsement of the content of her belief that p. That is, this, most often, results in S judging that p is true.

When one believes that p one is (most often) disposed to judge that p is true. See Cassam 2010; McHugh 2013; Proust 2013.

Theoretically, there are two kinds of circumstances in which subjects are susceptible to suspend judgement about p since there are two kinds of circumstances in which they are inclined to judge that p.

Neutral-Starting-Point: S deliberates about p and suspends judgement about the result of her deliberation.

Hard to understand: why would we suspend judgement even before holding some presumptions in favor of p or not-p.

Non-Neutral-Starting-Point: S is in the state of believing that p, for some reasons, she is made conscious of her belief. But she resists the inclination to judge that p is true.

More usual and easy to grasp in an example. These are also Descartes' circumstances.

Worry: Is it really possible to believe that p without judging that p?

Yes. When I sleep, I certainly do not lose the belief that $2+2=4$ but I do not judge this to be true.

This leaves room for mental agency. Beliefs are not under our control but judgements are. See Cassam 2010; McHugh 2013.

Part II: The alternatives

i. Agnosticism

To suspend judgement is to be in the state of

agnosticism with regard to p, that is, in the state of neither believing that p, nor believing that not-p.

Suspend judgement is something more than this. A stone neither believes p nor not-p and does not suspend judgment either.

Quick note: In my view, agnosticism is the state in which you end up being when you successfully suspend your judgement about whether p.

That is, there is, nevertheless, a tight connection between suspension of judgement and agnosticism but one that has been ignored until now.

ii. *Suspending judgement is to be in an inquiring state of mind Friedman 2013, 2017.*

I do deny that we are in an inquiring state of mind when we suspend judgement.

But being in an inquiring state of mind regarding the question whether p is not sufficient to suspend judgement about p. I am in an inquiring state of mind when I deliberate about whether I bought enough chocolate cake for my birthday party but I do not suspend judgment about it. I do not refrain from anything. Simply I do not know yet whether p is true or not.

The common "mistake" of many alternatives account. A tentative diagnosis.

Suspension is not required to make up your mind about something. Perhaps only to change your mind about it.

Part III: *how does the Resistive Account help with some normative issues*

Why suspend judgement? Friedman's answer: one ought to suspend judgment about p when suspension of judgement about p might improve our cognitive standing, is susceptible to result in the acquisition of knowledge or understanding, etc.

The balance of evidence does not play any role. The fact that there are as many evidence supporting p as evidence supporting not-p does not require suspension of judgement about p. (but maybe agnosticism)

Reasons to suspend are "zetetic reasons" (Friedman forthcoming). They are reasons that belong to the same kind as the reasons we have to proceed to an inquiry.

Advantage 1: The Resistive Account fits well with Schroeder's proposal (2012) that the reasons to

suspend are related to costs of errors. If suspension is a mental action, reasons related to costs of errors apply naturally to it.

See Lord 2020, for the view that reasons to suspend are practical.

Advantage 2:

“There is nothing that stands to action as suspension of judgment stands to belief. This is one of the most striking disanalogies between action and belief.” Berker 2018, 429.

The disanalogy vanishes. In the field of doxastic attitudes: either you believe that p or you believe that not-p. In the field of actions: either you perform action or you perform non-A. And in both field, you can also refrain.

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