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Epistemic Norms for Waiting (and Suspension)

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Abstract: Although belief formation is sometimes automatic, there are occasions in which we have the power to put it off, to *wait* on belief-formation. Waiting in this sense seems assessable by epistemic norms. This paper explores what form such norms might take: the nature and their content. A key question is how these norms relate to epistemic norms on belief-formation: could we have cases in which one ought to believe that p but also ought to wait on forming a belief on whether p? Plausibly not. But if not, how can we explain this impossibility? I suggest that the best resolution is to view the traditional core norms on belief as themselves conditional in a certain sense, one that I think has independent plausibility. The results of this investigation may also tell us something about epistemic norms on suspension, on the assumption, which I defend elsewhere, that suspension is waiting.

We often have little say in whether or when we form a belief on a matter. Normally, upon hearing your doorbell ring, you’re going to believe straightaway that there’s someone at the door, like it or not. But we are not always so powerless. This paper concerns one way we can exercise a degree of power: by putting off, postponing, or *waiting* to form a belief on the matter.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Waiting is normatively assessable. Consider the famous bat-and-ball problem, discussed by Kahneman (2011) and others: “a bat and a ball cost $1.10. The bat costs one dollar more than the ball. How much does the ball cost?” The answer of 10c may jump out at you, as you try to figure it out for the first time. But if you know that working through the problem slowly would increase your chances of getting the right answer, and you want to solve it, it seems you ought to wait to form a belief about the answer. The same goes for cases in which you hear about a breaking political scandal or the latest gossip. In other situations, waiting seems at best pointless and perhaps even something you ought not do. Once you’ve worked out the bat-and-ball example carefully and checked your answer, arguably you ought not wait. Perhaps the same goes for many US senators hoping to avoid making up their minds on climate change.

Across these and many other cases, it is natural to use deontic language: you “ought” to wait; you “should” wait; you’re “ok” or “justified” to do so, etc. Moreover, the relevant sort of assessment seems to have an epistemic flavor. It thus appears that waiting comes up for assessment under epistemicnorms. This paper attempts to describe the content and source of epistemic norms for waiting. How these norms count as epistemic, and in particular how they relate to paradigm epistemic norms on doxastic attitudes, will be part of the project as well.

The title mentions suspension parenthetically. In my view, suspending *is* waiting; it is putting off belief-formation.[[2]](#footnote-2) Orthodoxy takes suspension to fall under epistemic norms, just as belief does. If the orthodoxy is right, then if suspension is waiting, then waiting, too, must fall under epistemic norms. Although I don’t rely on this view of suspension in what follows, the results of the present inquiry bear on questions about the nature of and norms for suspension, questions to which I return in the final section.

1. Preliminaries

A caveat to begin with. Some of the views I endorse in this section are controversial. It may well turn out that I could relax some of them without undermining the overall thrust of the positions I recommend later in the paper. But staying neutral on these issues—e.g., what waiting is, what belief is, how to understand normative force—would complicate the ensuing discussion in distracting ways. I therefore forge ahead.

1.1 Clarification of psychological notions used: waiting and belief

*Waiting.* Waiting toϕ isn’t the same as merely not ϕ-ing. There are many things I’m not doing right now but which I’m not waiting to do (e.g., jumping in front of a moving car). Nor is waiting toϕ the same as omitting to ϕ, where we can understand the latter as attributively *not ϕ-ing*, i.e., not ϕ-ing in such a way that your not ϕ-ing is down to you, something you are responsible for. Omission is not enough for waiting: you don’t wait to take your planned walk if you get distracted and as a result (attributively) do not take it.[[3]](#footnote-3) What makes the difference between mere omission and waiting, plausibly, are certain sorts of aims or endeavors. Roughly, you wait to ϕ iff you omit ϕ-ing because you endeavor to ϕ but not until certain conditions C are met, which you don’t yet take to be met. The conditions C could be purely temporal: until noon, until tomorrow, etc. But they need not be. C might be: *your friend shows up at your office ready for a walk.* Similarly, you wait to form a belief on whether p iff you omit belief-formation on whether p because you endeavor to form a belief on whether p but not until, e.g., you’ve heard both sides of the story, taken time to think through the issue more carefully, or are more alert and less preoccupied with other issues than you are presently, etc.

*Belief.* Here I employ a notion of belief on which believing that p is having your mind made up that p. This identity fits poorly with some views in the literature, e.g., the view of belief as weak (cf. Hawthorne et al. 2016). You can think it likely that the library is closed Sundays (and so have a “weak belief”) without having your mind made up on the matter. You might be googling its hours, asking friends about it, and worrying whether you’ll be able to check out a book you want to read. You might in fact be intuitively describable as “waiting to make up your mind” and yet have a weak belief. I take having your mind made up that p to consist in a kind of cognitive state—call it outright belief—that bears a special relationship to knowledge. Here I assume this relationship involves at least the following: when one believes that p, one is disposed to treat p as if it is something one knows. To treat p as if it is something one knows is to rely on p in reasoning or as a basis for emotional reactions in ways that are non-defective if but only if one knows p. None of this is to say that one can’t permissibly form or hold a belief unless one knows. Rather, a belief that isn’t knowledge is defective. A defective belief can still be one a person is permitted to have, and I think one that one ought to have. Compare the option of blocking neither shaft in a Parfit-style Miners case. You ought to do it in your situation even though it is defective.[[4]](#footnote-4) It is not best objectively. Similarly, a belief one ought to have could still be false, and if it is, it is defective.

Given these clarifications of waiting and of belief, I hope it is clear that waiting is agential in ways that belief and its formation are not.[[5]](#footnote-5) I mention two ways. First, you can in some cases wait for reasons that are purely practical (and so non-epistemic), while being fully conscious of what you are doing, all without any incoherence. For instance, you as juror might wait to make up your mind about the guilt or innocence of the defendant until all the evidence is presented because you were told to do so by the judge. Or you might wait to form an opinion about a piece of gossip about a friend because you think loyalty requires you to do so. You might even wait because you’ll be paid to do so: suppose a question is asked, and you’ll be rewarded with $1,000 if you wait to form a view about it for three hours; you refuse to think about the question until three hours later, then return to it and answer it, reaping the reward. You can’t always do such things—not when the evidence is overwhelming for a particular answer. But sometimes you can. And when you do such things self-consciously you needn’t be incoherent. By contrast, self-consciously forming or having a belief for purely practical reasons, if possible at all, does seem incoherent.[[6]](#footnote-6) Second, waiting requires that the person have a certain endeavor—the endeavor to ϕ but not until C—whereas forming or having a doxastic attitude does not. None of this is true of belief or belief-formation.[[7]](#footnote-7) Other doxastic attitudes such as credences pattern with belief in these ways, and so I think we should deny that waiting is a doxastic attitude at all. I return to these matters in section 3.

1.2 Norms and Normative Force

There are norms on conversation, on driving, moral norms, prudential norms, and so on. Some seem to have a certain kind of force on us that others do not*.* The concept of “normative force” is a notoriously difficult one, and I lack space to consider alternative accounts of it. Following Kiesewetter (2017) and others, I will understand it in terms of reasons. Let’s distinguish two sorts of things we might have in mind by “having a reason to ϕ.” We might have in mind considerations that support your ϕ-ing *relative to* certain aims or goals you have. Call these instrumental reasons. So, if I aim to annoy my neighbor, and I know the best way to do this is to play my French horn early Saturday morning, then I have an instrumental reason to play it then. But we might want to say that I don’t have any real reason to do this, because I have no real reason to aim to annoy him. This language of “real reasons” reaches for a notion of a reason that isn’t relativized, a reason *simpliciter*. I will understand normative force as follows. A norm to the effect that one ought or is required to ϕ has normative force iff its applying[[8]](#footnote-8) to you guarantees that you have a (pro tanto) reason to ϕ, either an instrumental reason or a reason simpliciter. The same should hold for norms concerning being justified in ϕ-ing, even though justification is a permissive concept.[[9]](#footnote-9) I’ll call norms whose application guarantees having a reason *simpliciter* “strongly normative” and those guaranteeing having only an instrumental reason “weakly normative.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Finally, the term ‘having’ is important: it implies a kind of possession. If the building you’re in is burning down and you have no evidence of this, you don’t *have* any reason to leave. There may *be* a reason for you to leave, but you don’t *have* it. Having a reason, I take it, is roughly a matter of the reason’s being accessible to you on the basis of your evidence, broadly construed.

1.3 Desiderata

What should we want in an account of epistemic norms on waiting? First, the proposed norms should capture and make sense of our intuitive judgments, like those mentioned in the introduction, about when people ought, ought not, etc., to wait. Second, the norms should be normative (as described in 1.2). They should not merely sit alongside honor codes as rules for evaluating phenomena by reference to a standard, but should be backed by reasons in the broad sense discussed previously. Third, the norms should be ones that deserve the label ‘epistemic’. Thus, one needs to say how norms for phenomena other than the having or forming of doxastic attitudes can be epistemic. Fourth, and related to the third, there are plausible links between the epistemic deontic status of forming a belief that p and that of waiting on belief-formation wrt p.[[11]](#footnote-11) The proposed norms on waiting should at a minimum not prevent us from accommodating these links and ideally when taken together with epistemic norms on forming or having doxastic attitudes should help us make good sense of them. The main links that will occupy our attention are these:

The Links:

O-link: If you epistemically ought to form a belief that p, then it’s not the case that you epistemically ought to wait to form a belief on whether p.

R-P-link: If you are epistemically required to form a belief that p, then it’s not the case that you are epistemically permitted to wait to form a belief on whether p.

P-R-link: If you are epistemically permitted to form a belief that p, then it’s not the case that you are epistemically required to wait to form a belief on whether p.[[12]](#footnote-12)

O-link denies the possibility of a sort of *dilemma* within the set of all epistemic norms: the total set can’t tell you to do two incompatible things, namely to form a belief that p and wait with respect to p. The other links deny a sort of *incoherence* among epistemic norms: one epistemic norm can’t permit (require) you to form a belief while another one requires (permits) you to do something incompatible with forming a belief, viz. wait.

1.4 A Taxonomy of Approaches

Finally, going forward it is useful to work with a taxonomy. I distinguish heteronomous, autonomous, and mixedapproaches to norms on waiting. On a **heteronomous** approach, the content of the proposed norms on waiting is specified in terms of the verdicts of a more basic set of norms and without appeal to other potential normative sources than that of those more basic norms. The rationale for this approach is that norms for waiting, so specified, inherit their normativity exclusively from that of the base norms; the base does all the normative work. By contrast, on an **autonomous** approach, the content of the proposed norms is specified without appealing to verdicts of a set of base norms. Appeal is made instead to normative sources such asepistemic reasons to wait, epistemic values facilitated by waiting, and the like. Finally, on a **mixed** approach, the content of the proposed norms is specified both in terms of the verdicts of base epistemic norms *and* by appeal to normative sources concerning waiting in particular.

I will argue that the autonomous approach is the most promising of the three. But the autonomous norms I recommend run into difficulties in accommodating the Links. I discuss several ways one might hope to cope with these troubles. My main suggestion requires rethinking paradigm epistemic norms on doxastic attitudes.

2. The heteronomous approach

The paradigm epistemic norms are norms that return verdicts about which doxastic attitudes we ought, ought not, etc., to have for a proposition p, depending only on what our total evidence is, whether and how strongly it supports p or not-p (including whether the support reaches a relevant threshold) and perhaps also on how direct the support is.[[13]](#footnote-13) These norms on *having* doxastic attitudes determine further paradigm epistemic norms on *forming* doxastic attitudes. These norms apply to one who lacks the relevant attitude. If one lacks attitude D wrt p, then one ought to form attitude D wrt p iff one ought to have attitude D wrt p (and similarly for other deontic statuses). On the heteronomous approach, it is natural to take these norms on forming doxastic attitudes to comprise the base norms and appeal to their verdicts in specifying norms on waiting. The resulting norms on waiting—call them “heteronomous norms”—have two advantages. They seem to deserve the label ‘epistemic’ insofar as they appeal to no normative resources beyond that of paradigm epistemic norms; and they are tailormade to accommodate the Links.

Consider the following proposal:

Simple heteronomous norms (“simple H-norms”):

If you don’t yet have a belief on whether p, then:

you ought to wait wrt p iff: (i) you ought not form a belief that p, and (ii) you ought not form a disbelief that p, and

you ought not wait wrt p iff: (i) you ought to form a belief that p, or (ii) you ought to form a disbelief that p.

*Mutatis mutandis* for *requirement* and *permission.[[14]](#footnote-14)*

(I suppress occurrences of ‘epistemically’ in front of modals.)

These norms deserve the label ‘epistemic’, and they allow us to derive the Links.[[15]](#footnote-15) But they fare poorly on our other two desiderata. They imply that we ought to wait far more often than is plausible. Suppose you have scant evidence either way on p, so that you ought not form a belief or disbelief that p. Suppose you don’t care and have no reason to care about whether p. The question whether p may not even have occurred to you—e.g., if p is some proposition about Canadian high school hockey scores circa 1975. It seems fine for you to continue on as you are, neither believing nor disbelieving but also notwaiting. You don’t thereby do something you ought not do. Nor do the norms seem to have normative force. In the situation just mentioned, it doesn’t seem that you have a reason to wait as opposed to a reason merely not to believe or disbelieve.

One can’t avoid these problems by adding “and you consider whether p” to the antecedent of simple H-norms. Suppose I consider the proposition about 1975 Canadian hockey scores—only because I hear a bit of loud sports-talk radio as I’m waiting in the doctor’s office—and I have no good evidence either way. Here again, I don’t care about it at all and have no reason to care. Perhaps, because I consider the matter, I can’t *merely* lack belief—if I lack belief, I will do so attributively, i.e., omit from forming a belief either way. Even if all this is right, suppose I “move on” without waiting. It doesn’t seem I’ve done anything I epistemically ought not have done, nor that I’ve gone against reasons I have to wait. [[16]](#footnote-16)

These counterexamples seem to arise because of facts about my aims or goals. Could one head them off by adding to the antecedent of the simple H-norms that you either have or ought to have an aim of the sort waiting requires—an aim to form a belief but only under certain conditions? No. A person’s aim in waiting could be completely unrelated to anything broadly epistemic like knowing or believing on the basis of strong evidence, and if so, the facilitation of that goal will be irrelevant to whether one *epistemically* ought to wait. A cult follower might aim to form a belief on some matter but not until the leader gives them the okay. If there is to be any hope of avoiding these counterexamples, the aims must connect up to broadly epistemic ends, and waiting must in some way facilitate them.

In this vein, consider norms of this form: if you have certain epistemic goals G and don’t yet have a belief on whether p, then you ought to wait iff (i) you ought not form a belief or disbelief that p, and (ii) waiting would facilitate G. Notice, though, that this norm draws on a potential normative source in addition to the base norms, viz. considerations about how waiting would facilitate the relevant epistemic goals. It is a *mixed* norm, not a heteronomous one.

The moral I draw is this. Heteronomous norms cannot distinguish when we ought to wait from when we ought merely not form a belief either way. To distinguish these, we need to appeal to a further normative source applicable to waiting, one concerned with epistemic aims or goals.

3. The autonomous approach

On the autonomous approach, norms for waiting are specified without drawing on the verdicts of any set of base norms. The previous section showed how attractive it is to give a role to aims, goals, and the like. There are different ways one might try to do this. One might propose a kind of *epistemic decision theory*, which would assess waiting and its competitors by reference to expected epistemic value or goal-achievement. Alternatively, one might propose a *balance-of-reasons account*, which would assess waiting and its competitors by reference to reasons bearing on the attainment of epistemic goals. Given that I have glossed normativity in terms of reasons, it’s easiest to use the latter.

According to the standard version of the balance account, you are permitted to ϕ iff you have at least as much reason to ϕ as to do any of the competitors, and you ought to ϕ iff you have more reason to ϕ than to do any of the competitors. Since I use ‘permitted’ in a strong way, as sufficing for justification, I will also require that you have some reason to ϕ if you are permitted to ϕ. It’s a drawback of going the standard way that we lose the intuitive difference between *ought* and *required*, a difference that is accommodated if we give a key role to reasons *against*.[[17]](#footnote-17) Here, despite this loss, I will stick with the standard version for the sake of simplicity. I treat “ought” and “required” as equivalent, though where this difference matters, I discuss it in the notes.

Here are the proposed norms:

Balance norms:

If you don’t yet have a belief on whether p, then

you ought/are required to wait (wrt p) iff you have more epistemic reason for waiting than for any of its competitors; and you ought/required not to wait iff you have more epistemic reason for one of the competitors than for waiting,

and

you are permitted to wait (wrt p) iff you have some epistemic reason to wait and you have at least as much epistemic reason for waiting wrt p as for any of its competitors; and you are permitted not to wait iff you either have no epistemic reason to wait or you have at least as much epistemic reason for some competitor as you do for waiting.

To flesh out these norms, I’ll say something about the class of *competitors* as well as the *epistemic reasons* for these competitors.

At the most general level, one can either wait or not wait. But there are different ways to wait as well as different ways not to wait. I’ll mainly leave aside ways to wait—e.g., wait until I check source S or until I do activity A—and speak of an option of simply waiting. As for ways not to wait, one sort involves doing something *positive* regarding belief-formation. Here we run into a fundamental choice: should we take the positive competitors to be the formation of doxastic attitudes, e.g., belief and disbelief, or should we instead take them to be robustly agential, as waiting itself is, and so not to include the formation of doxastic attitudes? Call these the “doxastic” and the “agential” views of competitors.[[18]](#footnote-18)

There are two main problems with the doxastic view. One is that epistemic reasons for belief that p are a different sort of thing than epistemic reasons to wait wrt p. The former consist of evidence for p. The latter, to preview a bit, are considerations concerning the facilitation of epistemic values*.* Such considerations need not themselves be evidence for p or for not-p. Consider: *if I wait, I will very likely be in a position to know whether p tomorrow.* How does this reason to wait weigh up against evidential reasons to believe p? It is not clear. The agential view, as we’ll see, allows us to see reasons for positive competitors to waiting as falling into the general same kind as reasons to wait. The second problem is that the doxastic view doesn’t allow us to make sense of a certain class of reasons not to wait. Suppose you know that if you thought about a certain question and tried to answer it, you would know the right answer in short order. You might know this while also not knowing the answer yet, nor yet having good reason to believe one or another answer. In a case like this, if it would be very valuable to know the answer right away, it seems you ought to take a positiveoption toward belief-formation, but which option? At this point, it’s not true that you ought believe any particular answer. For instance: what’s your relation to a grandchild of your first cousin’s mother? Given the nature of the question, you know you can get it right if you think about it. Or consider: who in your fifth-grade class had a last name starting with ‘K’? Again, you might know—or have good reason to think—that you will come to know the answer after thinking about it for a moment. On the doxastic view, there is nothing positive you should or even may do, because you are not permitted to *believe* any particular candidate answer. To fix this, we need to invoke something like *try to answer the question without delay*, which is agential.

Turn, then, to the agential view. I will use the locution “go ahead with belief formation on whether p” or for short “going ahead.”I intend this to be quite inclusive. You go ahead if you actively try to make up your mind, but you also go ahead if you passively allow your mind to become made up. In passive cases, you omit blocking the belief-fixing power of your belief-forming processes. A prime way this can happen, to use the metaphor of the two systems from dual process theory, is that, although you *could* have prevented System 1 from fixing your belief by use of System 2, you didn’t do so. You could have prevented yourself from forming a belief by “stopping and thinking” but you didn’t. As I use the term, one can “go ahead” with belief-formation even if one ends up not forming a belief. I can try to make up my mind on a question but fail to do so (I might end up with a middling credence), and similarly I can allow the relevant belief-fixing processes to proceed even if they fail to fix belief on that particular occasion.

Will the agential view suffer the same sort of problem? That is, will there be cases in which we need to invoke a *doxastic* positive competitor? Plausibly, no. It isn’t clear why going ahead won’t suffice in all cases as the positive competitor. Evidence for p and for not-p will play a role insofar as it can feed into reasons to go ahead. (More on this below.)

What of negative competitors? We want to allow that people are often fine not to wait and not to go ahead, even fine not to *refrain* from belief-formation. I will simply employ a grab-bag category of *neither waiting nor going ahead.* In some cases, one might want to identify refraining as a competitor on its own, but I forgo this complication in my sketch.

Turning to reasons,the main class of epistemic reasons concerns the attainment of epistemic goals by taking a particular competitor option. Here we need to ask *which* epistemic goals. One issue is the *scale* of epistemic goals. Some goals are *generalized*, such as *having as many true beliefs as possible* or *having as few false beliefs as possible*, or *as much knowledge* or *as little ignorance* as possible. Others are particularized, such as *knowing whether it will rain tomorrow in Sydney.* One could assess waiting in terms of norms built around generalized epistemic values. Another issue is the *content* of the goals. Is it the attainment of true belief? knowledge? something else?

Our familiar ordinary deontic claims about waiting, e.g., “you should wait till you read the report” or “you have enough evidence; you don’t need to wait,” we don’t seem to have in mind generalized values. We don’t tend to ask whether waiting to make up your mind on whether p will down the line lead to a lot more or less knowledge on other unrelated issues than the alternatives. We seem to treat the relevant values as particularized. You should wait till you read the report because by doing so, you’ll more likely be better off epistemically with respect to the particular proposition in question p than if you go ahead.

If the value is particularized, what is its content? I rely on a certain set of ideas in approaching this question. The first is that belief closes inquiry. That is: when you are inquiring into whether p and come to believe that p, you thereby close inquiry. (We could add if we wanted: *if you are rational.*) The idea of belief closing inquiry is already implicit in the notion of belief that p as having one’s mind made up that p. The second, from section 1.1, is that belief amounts to treating what’s believed as knowledge. Putting these together we get the idea that treating p as known thereby closes inquiry into whether p. Next step: plausibly, the explanation for why treating p as known closes inquiry into whether p is that inquiry aims at forming a knowledgeable belief. Final step: following Ernest Sosa (2021), if one aims to form a knowledgeable belief, then this aim plausibly commits one to a derivative aim of forming a belief when but not until it would be knowledge. Very often when we wait, this is our primary epistemic aim. You might wait till you read a certain article or until you hear the other side of the story, all in service of an aim to wait on belief-formation till you are positioned to know. Similarly, going ahead, as a kind of allowing or pursuing of belief-formation, is very often also done for epistemic ends, the primary one being the very same as the aim one has in waiting—to form a belief when but not until it would be knowledge.

And if one does have this aim, we can speak of instrumental reasons for waiting with respect to its attainment. Thus, it’s plausible to take the particularized value with respect to which we epistemically assess waiting to be that of forming a belief on the matter when but not until it would be knowledge.[[19]](#footnote-19)

This is how I will understand the reasons relevant to whether one epistemically should wait—they are instrumental relative to the aim of forming a belief when and only when one is positioned to know. Understanding epistemic reasons for waiting in this way hopefully goes some distance toward securing the epistemic character of the balance norms as well as their normativity. They are epistemic in that they assess waiting and going ahead by reference to a value that is not only epistemic in content but a value that one is committed to aiming at if one inquires into whether p. As for normativity, even if there is no objective value in attaining the aim in question, which presumably there isn’t in cases in which one’s aim concerns knowledge of some trivial matter, there is aim-relative value; correspondingly, the balance norms may not imply reasons tout court, but they will imply aim-relative or instrumental reasons. These have normative force for those who have the aim.

Two further issues need discussion here. The first concerns time. As Friedman (2020) points out, often when we inquire we want to know within a certain time-frame—*in the next hour, by this evening,* etc. We’re not always so specific, e.g., in inquiries that are motivated by curiosity as opposed to practical urgency (such as inquiring into the origin of World War I).Now the question is whether we should allow time-specificity to play a role in our balance norms. I think we should. Very often our aims in inquiry are time-specific. We want to find the answer to a question *by such and such time.* And this aim will commit one to an aim to form a belief at any time up to t but not until it would be knowledge. This, too, qualifies as a relevant value figuring in the balance norms.

The second concerns the weight placed on sub-aims. Suppose I am planning a date for a dissertation reading group to meet. The reading group has eight members, myself, Professor X, and six graduate students all of whom are advisees of Professor X. I aim to find a time and date on which everyone in the group can meet in the next two weeks. However, in my planning, I might place more weight on certain sub-aims than others. For instance, I might place more weight on finding a time when Professor X can meet and comparatively less to finding a time when I myself can meet. Similarly, even if I aim to believe when and not until I would know, I might place more weight on the sub-aim of believing when I would know, or more weight on not believing when I wouldn’t know. This is a familiar Jamesian thought—there are two distinguishable subgoals of the overall knowledge goal. We should want epistemic reasons for waiting vs. going ahead to depend on these weightings of these two subgoals. So, for instance, if one weights the sub-aim of forming a belief when one would know highly in comparison to the sub-aim of not forming a belief when one wouldn’t know, then even a small chance of being positioned to know if one went ahead could be a good reason to go ahead.

One final note about the epistemic reasons involved: the reasons need to be *had* by the subject. The mere fact that doing something would achieve a goal you have isn’t enough for you to *have* an instrumental reason to do it. The reason must be accessible to the subject; it must itself be supported by the subject’s evidence. Facts about the world that are not supported by the subject’s evidence won’t meet this condition. (This will matter in section 3.1.)

What I have said about the balance norms is only a first stab at a theory.[[20]](#footnote-20) But I want to consider an in-principle objection to the whole program. The objection is that the norms sketched are too restricted in their reach. It’s true that one kind of US senator, according to the balance norms, ought not wait to make up his mind on whether there is human-caused global warming, since he is aware that the evidence is extremely good and he seeks to know the truth on the matter in a timely fashion; he doesn’t make up his mind merely because of the intrusion of a more powerful non-epistemic aim, e.g., to stay in the good graces of his donors. But consider another sort of US senator. This fellow knows about the scientific consensus and regards it as strong evidence, and he does aim to make up his mind, but he (conveniently) weights not forming a belief that isn’t knowledge much higher than he does forming a belief if it would be knowledge on this issue. On the balance norms, his waiting seems permissible, and maybe even what he ought to do. And this would be an epistemic ought. But surely we don’t want to agree to any of this, so the objection goes.

What can we say to this sort of US senator? We can say to him: *you morally ought to place a higher value on not missing out on this knowledge any longer than necessary, no less high than on the value of forming a belief only when you are positioned to know*. And we can add: *if you did place a suitable value on this end, you would have most epistemic reason to go ahead with belief formation.* In fact, the balance norms do key moral work here. They underlie the transmission of moral *oughts* from the end to the means*,* as follows. Consider two facts: (i) the senator morally ought to highly value not missing out on the knowledge any longer than necessary, and (ii), if the senator did value this highly, then it would be the case that he epistemically ought to go ahead with belief-formation now. (i) and (ii) together make it the case that the senator morally ought to go ahead with belief-formation now.

3.1. Challenges for the autonomous approach

The autonomous norms just described—the balance norms—have attractive features. They enable us to distinguish cases in which one ought to wait from cases in which one merely ought not form beliefs either way. They also meet the normativitydesideratum; their applying guarantees possession of at least an instrumental reason to wait/go ahead/do neither. And given that they evaluate waiting with respect to a value closely related to the aim of inquiry, they are plausibly epistemic. (I return to the “epistemic” desideratum below, however.)

But we must ask: do they allow us to accommodate and explain the Links? (Again, I omit occurrences of ‘epistemically’):

O-link: If you ought to form a belief that p, then it’s not the case that you ought to wait to form a belief on whether p.

R-P/P-R links: If you are required (permitted) to form a belief that p, then it’s not the case that you are permitted (required) to wait to form a belief on whether p.

Consider O-link. Let’s assume, with the tradition, that when you ought to form a belief that p, this is because your evidence meets some threshold of support for p. There is then an argument by dilemma that O-link fails if the balance norms for waiting are correct. (What goes for O-link also goes for the other Links.) It is this. Assume the balance norms hold. Either the threshold of evidential support is *absolutely conclusive evidence* or it isn’t. Either way, O-link fails. Let’s consider each horn.

First, suppose the threshold is less than absolutely conclusive support. Then there will be situations in which both the following are true: (i) you more strongly value forming a belief only if you would know that you value not missing out on knowledge when in a position to gain it; (ii) you ought to form a belief that p but know that if you wait you will be more likely to know than if you go ahead. For vividness, suppose you know that if you wait you’ll hear an answer to the question whether p from an oracle with an extensive and perfect track record of accuracy on p-like issues. You *really* don’t want to believe without knowing. So, by the balance norms you ought to wait even though in fact your support for p is above the threshold.

Second, suppose the threshold is absolutely conclusive evidence. Even still, having such evidence isn’t luminous: you could have it without being in a position to know you have it. What’s more, you could have it, not be in a position to know you have it,know you would easily be in such a position if you waited.[[21]](#footnote-21) Suppose all this is in fact that case. And suppose again that although you want to know, you really don’t want to believe without knowing. In fact, your evidence makes it 100 percent likely that p. But your evidence might not make it 100 percent likely that you’ll know whether p if you go ahead. Knowing about the oracle and its infallibility, you have more reason to wait than go ahead, despite the fact that your evidence gives you 100 percent support for p. By the balance norms, you ought to form a belief that p but you also ought to wait.

If sound, the argument shows that the balance norms can’t accommodate the Links in full generality. It seems plausible—though I won’t try to demonstrate it here—that a similar dilemma will arise for other versions of autonomous norms, such as decision-theoretic norms or versions of the balance-of-reasons view that distinguish *ought* from *requirement*.

3.2. Some (attempts at) answers to this problem

I develop my preferred answer in section 4, but it is worthwhile discussing other attempts. We are looking for a way to preserve O-link and the other Links without sacrificing intuitions to the effect that one at least is permitted to wait in these “further-evidence” cases. I discuss two attempts, one that appeals to an “encroachment” effect, and one that turns to the *mixed norms* approach to norms for waiting.

To claim an encroachment effect is to claim that considerations about further available evidence, when known, can drive up the standards for whether you ought to form a belief in such a way that the Links are preserved. How might this work? I’ll explore what I think is the best strategy, one based on the principle that *if you ought to believe that p, then p meets the epistemic conditions needed to serve as a reason you have.*[[22]](#footnote-22) Here is an illustration of the principle. Suppose you ought to believe that your dog has worms. According to the principle, *your dog has worms* meets the epistemic conditions needed to serve as a reason you have. If it meets those epistemic conditions, then it does serve as a reason you have to do things appropriately connected to *your dog has worms.* So, it serves as a reason you have to do things like take your dog to the vet and to believe things like *your* *dog is unwell.*

One defense of this principle begins with the claim that the same principle is very plausible for knowledge: if you know that p, p meets the epistemic conditions to serve as a reason you have.[[23]](#footnote-23) From this claim, one could then argue for the target principle with the help of an assumption that the difference between knowledge and *ought to believe* can’t make a difference to whether p meets the epistemic conditions it must meet to serve as a reason you have.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that this principle is correct. To accommodate O-link, we need the additional claim that if you have p as a reason, then you have a decisive reason not to wait wrt p and so shouldn’t wait wrt p. Suppose this claim, too, is true. Then we can accommodate O-link as follows. Suppose you ought to believe p. Then you have p as a decisive reason not to wait and so ought not wait, and thus it’s not the case that you ought to wait.

The encroachment effect enters in as follows. What happens when you know of easily available evidence which would give you a desired stronger epistemic position on whether p? We want to preserve the intuition that it’s at least okay to wait in such a situation if you very much want to avoid belief without knowledge. So suppose when you learn of the further evidence, you are okay to wait. Thus, it can’t be that you have p as a reason. And if that’s true, then by the ought-to-believe-reasons principle, it can’t be that you ought to believe p. Thus, the knowledge of the further availability evidence drives up the standards for whether you ought to believe in such a way to preserve O-link, and the same goes for the other Links.

That’s the way to preserve O-link through encroachment. I am not at all sure that this argument fails. But I see two reasons to hesitate about relying on this argument. One is simply that the ought-to-believe-reasons principle is controversial. The knowledge-reasons principle itself is controversial, but the controversy is compounded if knowledge is swapped out for *ought to believe.* If I ought to believe p but don’t, do I have p as a reason, or am I only such that I am in a position to have it as a reason? The second problem is with the claim that if you ought to believe that p, then you have a decisive reason not to wait on whether p. Let’s grant that if you ought to believe that p, then you have p as a reason. But p by itself doesn’t seem to be a decisive reason not to wait on whether p. From p, conjoined with the premise that if you formed a belief on whether p you’d believe p, we can at best get: *I’d form a true belief on whether p if I went ahead wrt p.* One can’t conclude from this that if you went ahead wrt p you would *know.* But it’s the latter we need. There may be a way to argue that if you have p as available as a reason, then you have a decisive reason not to wait on whether p, but it isn’t clear to me how to do it.

The other proposed solution appeals to the *mixed approach.* Consider this proposed norm: if you lack a belief on the matter, you ought to wait iff: (i) you ought neither form a belief nor a disbelief and (ii) waiting wins out over the agential competitors with respect to the balance of epistemic reasons (the balance described in the balance norms). Here I can be brief. This sort of view just papers over the problem posed by cases in which one knows further and better evidence is coming in. If the balance of epistemic reasons does favor waiting over the competitors, why isn’t it true that one ought to wait? The defender of mixed norms will refer to (i). But how does the fact that one ought neither form a belief nor a disbelief spoil this conclusion? Two very different normative sources seem to be involved, and we need (and are not given) an explanation of how they relate. The Links come out true (in effect, they are built in to the norms), but we gain no understanding of why they are true.

I want to suggest a different answer to the challenge: that we rethink norms on doxastic attitudes.

4. A two-stage solution

Consider a case of ordinary practical decision making. It’s annual enrollment time at your job and you need to decide which health insurance to sign up for, plan A or plan B. You still have a few days before the enrollment period ends, and you have the time to compare the options further. Based on the information you have absorbed so far from the packets provided you, plan A seems clearly better. But the packets contain further relevant information. Suppose it really matters to you to get the best plan you can. Now consider: ought you to choose plan A now? This seems wrong. The most we can say is that you ought to choose A now *on the* *condition that you make your decision now.* But it’s also relevant whether you ought to make your decision now, as opposed to waiting till you’ve read the material in the packets more fully. If it really matters that you get the right health insurance plan and if you know there likely is more decision-relevant information in the packets, it seems you ought to wait to make your decision till after you read the material.

We can vary the case by toggling on or off whether you ought to make a decision now and/or whether you ought to now decide to take A on the condition that you then make a decision. These toggles require making changes to assumptions about your current information about the two plans as well as your probabilities for getting substantially better information and how much rides on the decision. But let’s suppose we can carry out all this. This gives us the table of four possible combinations below.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Ought you decide to pick plan A now? Y or N?* | You ought to decide to pick plan A now *on the condition* that you make a decision now) | It’s not the case that you ought to decide now to pick plan A *on the condition* that you make a decision now) |
| You ought to make a decision now | Y | N |
| It’s not the case that you ought to make a decision now) | N (this is the original case) | N |

Only in one of the four combinations does it seem the verdict “you ought now to decide to pick A” will be correct.

These reflections suggest the following norms for deciding now to take option Oi (out of O1, … , On).[[24]](#footnote-24)

Two-stage norms—practical decisions

You ought to decide to take option Oi (out of O1, … , On) at t iff: (i) you ought to make your decision at t, and (ii) you ought to decide to take Oi at t conditional on making a decision at t.

For negative norms, the natural way to go is:You ought not decide to take option Oi (out of O1, … , On) at t iff: either (i) you ought not to make your decision at t, or (ii) you ought not to decide to take Oi at t, conditional on making a decision at t.

(Mutatis mutandis for the norms for permission and requirement.) The two-stage norms draw on two more basic sorts of norms. One sort concerns *when to make a decision—*now, wait till later, not at all. The other sort concerns *what option to pick given that you make a decision.* The verdicts of these determines whether one ought to make a particular decision at the time.

Given these two-stage norms, we can now accommodate counterparts of the Links (with times explicit):

O-link for decisions: If you ought to decide to take Oi (out of O1, … , On) at t, then it’s not the case that you ought to wait at t to make your decision.

R/P-links for decisions: If you are required (permitted) to decide to take Oi (out of O1, … , On) at t, then it’s not the case that you are permitted (required) to wait at t to make your decision.

Take O-link. Suppose, for reductio, that you ought to decide to take Oi at t, but you ought to wait at t. Barring dilemmas on norms for waiting/going ahead, then it’s not the case that you ought to make your decision at t. Plugging this in the two-stage norms, we can then conclude that it’s not the case that you ought to decide to take Oi at t, contradicting our reductio assumption. The reasoning is similar for the R/P-links for decisions.

I recommend a similar approach for the epistemic case. There seem to be different phenomena to assess in the epistemic case, just as in the practical case. We can assess whether and when to (try to) form a belief—whether to go ahead now, wait till later, or neither. And we can assess what doxastic attitude to take conditional on going ahead with belief-formation. In cases in which you have excellent evidence but know that significantly better evidence is coming in soon, and you very much want to know, we might feel some tension when asked whether you ought right then to form a belief that p. On the one hand, *conditional* on going ahead, it seems forming a belief that p is fine, indeed something you ought to do if the evidence is good enough. On the other hand, if you care enough about knowing, and waiting would enable you to form a belief in light of significantly better evidence improving your shot at knowing, it seems you ought not go ahead. All things considered, taking into account both norms, since it’s false that you ought to go ahead, it’s also false that you ought to form a belief that p at the time.

For the epistemic case, then, I suggest:

Two-stage norms—epistemic case

You ought to form a belief that p at t iff: (i) you ought to go ahead with belief-formation on whether p at t, and (ii) you ought, conditional on going ahead at t, to form a belief that p at t.

You ought not to form a belief that p at t iff: either (i) you ought not to go ahead with belief-formation on whether p at t, or (ii) you ought not, conditional on going ahead at t, form a belief that p at t.

Mutatis mutandis for permission and requirement.[[25]](#footnote-25)

These norms enable us to derive the Links as in the practical case.[[26]](#footnote-26) And they illuminate why they are true. They are true because the deontic status of forming a belief at a time depends on that of waiting vs. going ahead at that time, as the two-stage norms dictate. These norms also allow us to locate a role for a core set of epistemic norms that look only at evidential factors—evidence for/against p, how strong this evidence is, how direct—and not to the availability of further evidence or how good it would be to believe the truth or know. These are the epistemic norms we know and love, and love to argue about. It’s their precise articulation which reliabilists, phenomenal conservatives, virtue epistemologists, evidentialists, etc., argue over.[[27]](#footnote-27)

There is an important precedent for taking the core epistemic norms to deliver verdicts that are conditional in some way. The precedent I have in mind comes from responses to certain arguments that we never have positive epistemic duties to have particular beliefs. Mark Nelson (2010), for instance, has argued as follows. To use his example, suppose you have excellent visual evidence that there is a bird in your vicinity, but you’re hailing a taxi and don’t form the belief. Intuitively, you’ve done nothing epistemically wrong. Nelson concludes from examples like these that we never have epistemic duties to form particular beliefs. He grants that if you are interested in whether there is a bird nearby, or if you morally or prudentially ought to consider the matter, then you might have a duty to believe it’s a bird (if the evidence is good enough), but he thinks this duty is not purely epistemic; it is derived from non-epistemic sources. However, some philosophers have asked, what if I do consider whether it’s a bird? Mere consideration isn’t enough, I think. But what if indeed I do try to figure this out, and generally, what if I go ahead? In that case, I think it seems plausible that I have an *epistemic* duty to believe, regardless of moral or prudential interests.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Next, I want to look into the sort of conditionality involved in the verdicts of the core epistemic norms. This question is not only interesting in its own right, but answering it will help us see how the two stages—the core norms and the norms for waiting—jointly determine whether one epistemically ought to now form a belief that p.

Consider the statement:

It ought to be that q, conditional on p.

It’s common to distinguish narrow and wide scope interpretations, where ‘⊃’ is a material conditional:

Narrow scope: p ⊃ ought q

Wide scope: Ought (p ⊃ q)

Consider how we should understand the verdicts of the core epistemic norms. For instance, how should we understand “you ought to believe p at t, conditional on going ahead with belief-formation with respect to p at t”? Here are two choices:

Narrow scope (NS): You go ahead with belief-formation on whether p at t ⊃ you ought to form a belief that p at t

Wide scope (WS): You ought (to be such that): you go ahead with belief-formation on whether p at t ⊃ you form a belief that p at t

NS condones bootstrapping. Suppose you ought not go ahead wrt p but you nevertheless do so. NS will then give the result that you ought to form a belief that p. But if you ought not be going ahead wrt p, it seems false that you ought to form the belief that p.

WS avoids *that* problem. But it misrepresents the sort of conditionality involved. A statement that you conditionally ought to ϕ given that p asserts something about what you ought to do *on the supposition that p* (Weirich 2013)*.* It can’t be determined as true merely because of facts about the deontic status of p. To use a standard example, it’s true that you ought to kill gently given that you kill. This isn’t true simply in virtue of the fact that you ought not kill. But representing the statement along the lines of WS, then plausibly it istrue simply in virtue of that fact: you ought to be such that you don’t kill, and so you ought to be such that either you don’t kill or you kill gently.

What is the right account of the truth-conditions of a conditional ought statement? Start with an unconditional ought statement. A standard way to model the truth-conditions for such statements is as follows: Oq is true in a world w iff q is true in all the best of the w-accessible worlds.[[29]](#footnote-29) These truth-conditions look at all the w-accessible worlds. In any normal case, then, it won’t be true that you ought to kill. We should model truth-conditions for conditional ought statements in such a way that they ignore what transpires in not-p-worlds, and so don’t look at how good any p-worlds are in comparison to any not-p-worlds (van Fraassen 1972, 412). They must look only at p-worlds, in particular at the w-accessible p-worlds. Rather than trying to take the monadic O operator and append it to a conditional, an option is to appeal to a dyadic O operator. A standard approach is to take “O(q/p)” to be true in w, roughly, iff the best of the w-accessible p-worlds are q-worlds.[[30]](#footnote-30) It will then come out true, as desired, that you ought to kill gently given that you kill.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Applied to the epistemic case, the idea would be this. The core epistemic norms state that if and only if you have sufficiently strong (and direct) evidence for p, then the “best” worlds in which you go ahead wrt p are the ones in which you form a belief that p. If your evidence is strong enough for p, then you ought to form a belief that p conditional on going ahead wrt p. But this is compatible with its also being the case that you ought not form a belief that p. The suggested truth-conditions for O(form a belief that p/go ahead wrt p) make room for this possibility insofar as it may be that the best of the accessible worlds in which you go ahead wrt p are ones in which you form a belief that p even if it’s false that the best of the accessible worlds *tout court* are ones in which you form a belief that p.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Finally, I can now return to the worry about whether the instrumental norms and reasons targeting a person’s specific epistemic values count as genuinely epistemic. They seem a very different sort of beast than evidential reasons to believe. Shouldn’t we prefer a non-hybrid view of epistemic norms and reasons? With the two-stage norms in place, we can give a better answer to this worry. The verdicts of the two-stage norms give plausible results about whether one epistemically ought to form a belief—unconditionally. Given that the instrumental reasons and the norms on waiting help determine the verdicts of the two-stage norms, they earn the label ‘epistemic’. [[33]](#footnote-33)

5. Objections

I close by discussing two objections to my proposal that we supplement the balance norms with two-stage norms for forming particular beliefs. The first holds that the correctness of the two-stage norms, where the deontic statements involved is modeled as described in section 4, is hostage to a questionable inference rule in deontic logic. The second is that the account has unorthodox and implausible consequences about epistemic reasons.

5.1. Deontic Detachment

Deontic logicians distinguish factual from deontic detachment (FD from DD):

FD: DD:

O(q/p) O(q/p)

p Op

So, Oq So, Oq

There is an ongoing debate about whether a logical system that attempts to capture intuitively logically valid inferences in ordinary language should validate one, both, or neither of these rules. Counterexamples have been offered to both.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Against FD, consider again gentle murders. Given that I will murder, I ought to murder gently. Now suppose I will murder. It does not follow that I ought to murder gently. I ought not murder at all. To conclude I ought to murder gently is bootstrapping. In terms of the gloss on truth-conditions for conditional oughts broached above, we can see why FD would fail. Even if q is true in the best accessible p-worlds, it doesn’t follow that q is true in the best accessible worlds *simpliciter*. All the accessible p-worlds might be quite bad, much worse than many of the accessible not-p-worlds. Worlds in which I will murder are quite bad, worse than a great many worlds in which I don’t murder.

As for DD, the truth-conditions for ‘O(q/p)’ and ‘Op’ glossed above validate it. But this might be thought to be a *problem* with those truth-conditions, because DD has apparent counterexamples as well. Consider a famous example from Chisholm (1963). On the condition that Jones goes to the aid of his neighbors, he ought to tell them he is coming. And he ought to go to the aid of his neighbors. But suppose Jones knows he won’t go to the aid of his neighbors. Then it doesn’t seem that Jones ought to tell them he’s coming. If he does tell them he’s coming, isn’t he adding to his wrongdoing, as Castañeda (1989) suggests?

Let’s look at why my account seems wedded to DD, at least given the way I have suggested modeling the truth-conditions of ought statements. Consider again:

If you lack a belief on whether p as of t, you ought to form a belief that p at t iff: (i) you ought to go ahead wrt p at t, and (ii) you ought, conditional on going ahead wrt p at t, to form a belief that p at t.

The objector might then say that the only plausibly account of why the right-to-left direction holds necessarily is that the following reasoning is valid:

One ought to form a belief that p at t, conditional on going ahead wrt p at t.

One ought to go ahead wrt p at t.

So, one ought to form a belief that p at t.

And given the model I use for truth-conditions for these statements, this reasoning relies on the validity of DD, a questionable rule. (The same points can be made for a version of DD for permissions.)

One way to respond to this general “hostage to fortune” worry is to double down and defend the truth-conditions given above. For instance, one can plead shifts of context. For instance, one might say that in a context in which *Jones won’t go help his neighbors* starts to be taking as established, we may move over to treating it as fixed fact, and this in turn will affect which worlds count as accessible when we go on to ask whether Jones ought to tell them he’s coming. The set of accessible worlds in this new context may well include only ones in which Jones won’t go help his neighbors. If this transpires, then the best of the remaining accessible worlds won’t include any in which Jones tells them he’s coming.

But my preferred response is different. The worries about deontic detachment derive from the possibility that other duties and permissions might come into play if one won’t—or perhaps *knows* one won’t—do the thing one ought to do. In Chisholm’s case, it seems the following narrow scope ought-claim is true:

Jones won’t go to the aid of his neighbors ⊃ Jones ought not tell them he’s coming.

This is equivalent to “either Jones will go to the aid of his neighbors or he ought not tell them he’s coming.” Since this holds, we can conclude (without bootstrapping) from the fact that Jones won’t go to their aid that he ought not tell them he’s coming—even though he ought to go to their aid and ought to tell them he’s coming conditional on doing so.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The saving grace for my account is that there are no other epistemic oughts, requirements, or permissions that can come into play in the epistemic cases when one won’t do what one ought to do. Consider a situation in which you ought to go ahead wrt p and in which you ought to form a belief that p conditionally on doing so. Let’s add that you won’tgo ahead. There seem to be no further epistemic deontic facts that will tempt us to conclude that you ought not form a belief that p. In fact, in such a case it *still* seems you ought to form a belief that p, precisely because you ought to go ahead and you ought, upon going ahead, to form a belief that p.[[36]](#footnote-36)

5.2 Reasons

Let’s call those reasons that can help determine what one epistemically ought/ought not to believe *epistemic reasons for or against belief*. It’s widely accepted that all such reasons are evidential. As we’ve seen, considerations concerning “further evidence”—e.g., considerations about the likelihood of reaching the truth if one waited vs. if one went ahead with belief-formation—aren’t purely evidential; they aren’t evidence for or against the target proposition. According to tradition, they would therefore not count as epistemic reasons for or against belief. One might worry that my account will have to depart from tradition on this score.

Consider reasons *for* first. Considerations about further evidence are relevant to whether one *epistemically ought to go ahead wrt p,* which, in turn, given my two-stage norms, is relevant to whether one *epistemically ought to form a belief that p.* Doesn’t this mean that I’m committed to saying that considerations of further evidence are reasons to form a belief that p? No. The reasoning here relies on the schema:

(1) R is a reason to ϕ and R helps determine that one oughtto ϕ,

(2) The fact that one ought to ϕ together with the fact that one ought to ψ conditionally on ϕ-ing determines that one ought to ψ

So,

(3) R is a reason to ψ

Here is a counterexample based on an example discussed in Nair and Horty (2018). The fact that the law requires you to register for the draft is a reason that makes it the case that you ought to do so. The fact that (let’s suppose) you are a pacifist makes it the case that you ought, conditionally on registering for the draft, to request noncombat service. These two oughts together determine that you ought to request noncombat service. But the fact that the law requires registering for the draft is not itself a reason to request noncombat service.

Similarly, facts about further evidence—in particular, the comparative excellence of one’s current evidence on whether p in relation to other evidence one might acquire—can be reasons to go ahead with belief-formation on whether p and can help make it the case one ought to do so. The fact that one ought to go ahead, together with the fact that one ought to form a belief that p conditionally on going ahead, will determine that one ought to form a belief that p. But the “further evidence” consideration is not itself a reason to form a belief that p at that time. It is a reason telling us to “go ahead” but it doesn’t tell us *what* to think on whether p.

What about reasons against? Suppose considerations about further evidence make it the case that I ought not go ahead wrt p. From the two-stage norms, it follows that I ought *not* form a belief that p at the time in question. So, I have a reason R not to ϕ, which makes it the case that I ought not ϕ, where the latter byitselfdetermines that I ought not ψ. One might think this guarantees that R is also a reason not to ψ. This is a kind of transmission principle for reasons against.

This argument is stronger than the previous one. But consider the following case:

Benito ought not adopt a child. This is because he has a strong reason not to do so, namely he cannot afford the expense that comes with raising a child. Since he ought not adopt a child, he ought not adopt a male child. But is the expense also a reason for him not to adopt a male child?

If you’re like me, you hesitate to answer *yes*. At best, I would do so only with the qualification that the expense is a reason for him not to adopt a male child *only because* it is a reason for him not to adopt any child. Many other cases fit this pattern: suppose I promise to God not to marry anyone; my promise is a reason not to marry at all; is it a reason not to marry Pedro, not to marry Guilia, etc.? I am unsure how a theory of reasons ought to come down on these matters. Should it claim these are *derived* reasons against? Should it deny that they are reasons against at all?[[37]](#footnote-37)

Suppose that we accept the above transmission principle for reasons against. How implausible is it to admit that further-evidence considerations can be reasons against forming beliefs? Once we see that they qualify as reasons not to form a belief that p *only because* they are reasons not to go ahead with belief-formation on whether p, I think the implausibility diminishes. Put it this way: it is plausible that (i) considerations about better available evidence can be reasons not to go ahead with belief-formation;and it is plausible that (ii) if you ought not go ahead, you ought not form a belief that p; and so, if we *do* accept the thesis about reason-transmission above, this leaves us with the conclusion that further-evidence considerations can count as derived reasons not to believe p. This may be a surprising but acceptable consequence. Accepting it seems more plausible than giving up (i) or (ii).

I have not discussed whether the two-stage norms are normative, i.e., whether their application guarantees having reasons to wait (or not to wait).[[38]](#footnote-38) Whether they are or not depends on hard questions about the transmission of reasons. Consider the two-stage norm for whether one ought to form a belief that p. Suppose this norm applies to you. So, you ought to go ahead wrt p and ought to form a belief that p conditional on going ahead. Now, if the reasons that determine these two “oughts” together comprise or generate a further reason to form a belief that p, then this norm will be normative.

Interestingly, if the two-stage norms are normative, there will be epistemic reasons to form particular beliefs, where those reasons are not purely evidential; these reasons presumably will be *complexes* of purely evidential reasons to form a belief conditional on going ahead and instrumental reasons for going ahead. I grant that acknowledging such reasons would be a departure from the orthodoxy on epistemic reasons, but it is not as radical as it sounds. After all, a component of these reasons is precisely good evidence for p. And, of course, I uphold orthodoxy at the level of the core epistemic norms on forming and having beliefs.[[39]](#footnote-39),[[40]](#footnote-40)

6. Concluding Thoughts

I finish by considering the implications of what I have argued here for the epistemology of suspension. There are reasons for identifying suspension with waiting on belief-formation. Like waiting, known facts about further available evidence and the general likelihood of getting it right or knowing later vs. at the moment seem to make a difference to its assessment. We are familiar with remarks such “you really should suspend judgment until you hear her side of the story,” and, “I’m quite tired, and so I think I’m going to have to suspend (reserve) judgment on the matter until tomorrow morning, when I’ll be more alert and have more time to think about it.” Like waiting, suspension seems to be robustly agential in ways that doxastic attitudes are not. However, one potential stumbling block for this identification is a concern about how to make sense of epistemic norms on waiting; suspension, surely, must be subject to epistemic norms, but how can waiting be? I hope to have lessened if not completely alleviated such concerns in this paper. Waiting comes under instrumental epistemic norms.

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1. One of the lessons of Daniel Kahneman’s *Thinking Fast and Slow* is that through the use of the slow and deliberative thinking of System 2, we are capable of avoiding some errors of the fast and instinctive thinking of System 1. System 2 is “lazy” but not powerless; it can override System 1. Even if there is no strict division in the mind between two systems (see Evans and Stanovich 2013), the point remains: in a variety of situations, we can arrive at more accurate, more justified, and generally beliefs with better epistemic credentials, if we “stop and think” rather than proceeding with what seems right at first blush—if we wait. In doing so, we exert a kind of control over our beliefs (cf. Weatherson 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See McGrath 2021 and Crawford (manuscript). Although judgment is plausibly distinct from belief, suspending judgment is a prime way of suspending belief. For an attractive account of how judgment relates to belief, see Jenkins 2018. [AU: There is no Perkins 2018 in the references.] [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Omitting to ϕ is better described as *refraining* from ϕ-ing than *waiting* to ϕ. However, plausibly, refraining is not mere omission but *intentional* omission. See Clarke 2014 (ch. 3) and McGrath 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I don’t deny that the verb ‘believe’ is often used in ordinary English to attribute weak belief. Perhaps ‘convinced’ better captures the sort of settled state I have in mind. Still, there are ordinary uses of ‘believe’ that seem to ascribe something stronger than weak belief, as Williamson (forthcoming) points out—as when we talk of “believing that Jesus can save you” or when we contrast “believing that it’s likely that p” with “believing that p.” Talk of believing *people* in what they say suggests a stronger state as well. If you’re expressing doubts after I tell you that p, telling me it’s likely that p but that you’re not sure and that you’ll need to check further, I might quite properly tell you, “you don’t believe me.” It would seem wrong to describe such a case like so: “you believe that p but you don’t believe me when I tell you that p.” For helpful accounts of “strong belief” in the sense I have in mind, see Owens 2000 (ch. 3 and 142–45) and Fantl and McGrath 2009 (ch. 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In a weak sense, a phenomenon is agential if it bears certain relations to reasons, e.g., it can be done for, is supported by, is answerable to reasons. Belief and credences are agential in this sense, as is waiting. The two features I mention in the text draw on a stronger, more will-based notion of agency—the reasons involved are practical and the will is implicated (via endeavor). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Consider: “p but I believe p only because I’ll be paid $1000 if I believe it.” See Adler 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The question of the agential status of *judgment*, which is a way one can form a belief, is a matter of some debate, but note that it clearly lacks one of the two properties I mention (insofar as it can’t be done self-consciously without incoherence for purely practical reasons). Whether it has the other is disputed. (See McHugh 2011 and Sosa 2015 [ch. 3] for a positive answer, O’Shaughnessy 1980 [ch. 1] for a negative answer; see also Toribio 2011 and Hieronymi 2009.) In McGrath (manuscript), I highlight some worries about the conception of judgment as constitutively requiring the judge to aim to judge/affirm truly. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I use ‘apply’ as follows: a norm of the form *in condition C, you ought to ϕ iff you are F* applies to you iff you are in C and are F. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Permission in this strong sense is not the dual of requirement. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In the conclusion, I consider a way in which a norm could have normative implications without having normative force as defined here. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I use ‘wrt’ to abbreviate ‘with respect to’. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Several notes here. First, similar links hold for disbelief that p, i.e., for belief in the negation. Second, if ‘epistemically ought’ is equivalent to ‘epistemically required’, then R-P-link implies O-link. Third, I focus on questions of the whether-p variety for simplicity, but there will be similar links for forming beliefs that answer other sorts of questions. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I use ‘evidence’ and ‘support’ in broad ways that I hope both internalists and externalists can accept. Perhaps these notions can be explained in terms of a general notion of *strength of epistemic position wrt a proposition.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The norms for when one is *required* to/not to wait follow the pattern of *ought*. In the case of permission, we may need an assumption that if you are permitted by the epistemic norms on belief not to believe p and permitted by them not to believe not-p then you are also permitted by them not to hold either belief. But this is a plausible assumption. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The derivations depend on two assumptions: (1) that the base norms for forming beliefs do not apply unless one lacks a belief and (2) that the base epistemic norms do not allow for dilemmas or incoherence. Here is the derivation of O-link. Suppose, for reductio, you ought to form a belief that p but also ought to wait wrt p. Given that you ought to form a belief, by (1) you don’t already have one, and so the simple H-norms apply. By the simple H-norms, you ought not form a belief that p. This gives us a dilemma within the base norms, which is ruled out by assumption (1). The derivation of the R-P and P-R links run similarly, using (1) and (2) in similar ways. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. It’s important here that one can fail to wait on whether p despite failing to either believe or disbelieve p and considering whether p. I think this is true of suspension as well, although I cannot argue that point here. See McGrath 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For Snedegar (2021), one is *permitted* to ϕ iff one’s reasons for ϕ-ing outweigh one’s reasons against ϕ-ing. One is *required* to ϕ iff ϕ-ing is the only permitted act out of the competitors. One *ought* to ϕ iff one is permitted to ϕ and the difference in weight between reasons for and against ϕ-ing is greater than it is for other competitors. It can happen, then, that one ought to ϕ while other competitors are permissible, so that one is not required to ϕ. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For an endorsement of the doxastic view, at least for competitors of suspension/withholding, see Lord 2020 and Schroeder 2012b. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Here is one place in which my assumptions about belief make a difference to how we proceed. If we understood belief not in terms of treating as known but only in terms of treating as true, the relevant value in terms of which to understand reasons to wait would presumably be to form a belief when but not until one is in a position to form a true belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. One issue concerns the explanation of a certain sort of reason against waiting. Suppose you know there is no way for you to ever be better epistemically positioned wrt p than you currently are and that in fact that your epistemic position will remain exactly what it is wrt p regardless of whether you wait or not. Knowing this seems to give you a decisive epistemic reason against waiting. But is this reason reducible to having some reason *for* some option? One thought here is to take reasons against as basic and move to a more sophisticated balance view like Snedegar’s (2021). [AU: There is a Snedegar 2018 and 2021 in the references but no 2020; please advise.] [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. What if the directness of the evidence matters to whether one ought to form a belief? I don’t think this makes a difference to the argument: even the condition of *possessing direct conclusive evidence* isn’t luminous. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For defense of similar principles, see Fantl and McGrath 2009 (ch. 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Cf. Hawthorne and Stanley 2008 and Fantl and McGrath 2009 (ch. 3). [AU: There is no Hawthorne and Stanley 2008 in the references.] [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The idea of employing two-stage norms like these is not original with me. I take the term ‘two-stage’ from Schroeder (2012a), who considers norms like those above (as well as the epistemic two-stage norms to come) as a way to save a certain account of the right vs. wrong kind of reasons distinction. Bratman (1987) and Holton (2013) endorse a “two-tier model” in their work on norms for acting on an intention (and in Holton’s case on retaining a belief). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. These norms could be expanded in certain ways. For instance, what if a person can’t help but go ahead? If *you ought to* ϕ implies your having the ability to do otherwise, then the norms above will not allow for the possibility that a person who cannot help but go ahead ought to form a particular belief. However, one might suggest that if you can’t help but go ahead and your evidence is strong enough for p, you ought to form a belief that p (as opposed to a disbelief that p or an agnostic attitude regarding p). To accommodate this suggestion, we could add to (i) in the first norm above the clause “or you can’t help but go ahead.” Next, what if a person can’t go ahead wrt p? Perhaps the person will believe there’s someone at the door regardless of what they do; they can’t even “allow” belief-formation to proceed. Then again plausibly it can’t be that they ought to go ahead. In such a case, if your evidence for p is good enough, ought you form a particular belief at the time? The above norms do not allow for such a conclusion. If one wanted to accommodate this possibility one could add to (i) the clause “or you cannot help but form a belief on whether p.” [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Consider O-link. Suppose, for reductio, you ought to form a belief that p (at t) but also that you ought to wait (at t). We can conclude from the two-stage norms (barring dilemmas) that it’s not the case that you ought to go ahead at t. Plugging this into the two-stage norms, it follows that it’s not the case that you ought to form a belief that p at t, giving us a contradiction. If, because of concerns noted in the previous note, one added disjuncts to clause (i) in the first norm above so that it becomes “you ought to go ahead at t *or* can’t help but go ahead at t *or* can’t help but form a belief on whether p at t,” the reasoning for O-link proceeds similarly, the only difference being that one would reason from *you ought to wait at t* to *it’s not the case* that the disjunctive condition obtains*.* From the latter, one could conclude that you ought not form a belief that p at t. The derivation of the other Links is similar. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In this paper, I focus on the core epistemic norms concerning forming doxastic attitudes. But norms concerning the maintenance of doxastic attitudes are included here as well. Do norms for maintenance also determine only conditional verdicts? If so, what is the condition? One thought (cf. Holton 2013) is that they are conditioned on *reconsideration:* one ought to retain a belief conditionalon reconsidering whether p. I hope to address this issue in future work. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See, for instance, Kiesewetter 2017, as well as Feldman 2000 and Steglich-Petersen 2011. To be clear, Nelson’s is not the only argument against positive doxastic duties to believe particular propositions. The “conditonality” response developed here does nothing, for instance, to address Kvanvig’s (2017) argument, which is based on considerations familiar from Quine and Duhem. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For discussion, see Feldman 1986 and Zimmerman 1996. Despite being standard, this account is known to have some peculiar consequences, including its validation of the principle of inheritance: Op, p entails q, so, Oq. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Cf. Van Fraassen 1972, Lewis 1974, Feldman 1986. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. These truth-conditions do not provide an *analysis* of ought statements or conditional ought statements. If that was the goal, we would need an account of “best” in terms independent of “ought.” Rather, they provide truth-conditions that allow us to represent logical relations. See Zimmerman 1996 (ch. 2) on the use of ‘best’ and ‘better’ in giving truth-conditions for ought-statements. See also Kratzer 2012 on “ordering sources.” [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Endorsing the two-stage norms does not require using the model I have discussed for capturing truth-conditions for conditional and unconditional ought statements. For instance, there may turn out to be non-monotonic logics on which the deontic operator in conditional ought statements is represented as taking narrow scope but which do not also allow bootstrapping inferences. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. If the core epistemic norms are conditional, we have the beginnings of an answer to a puzzle raised by Friedman (2020) concerning the apparent incoherence among epistemic norms for attitudes and for inquiry. Core epistemic norms on doxastic attitudes do not permit what epistemic norms for inquiry forbid. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. For overviews, see McNamara 2019, Carmo and Jones 2002, and Zimmerman 1996. The discussion below draws from familiar examples in that literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. By contrast, Zimmerman 1996 (ch. 4) preserves DD and appeals to subsidiary obligations that come into play if primary obligations are not fulfilled. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. An even more concessive response is to weaken the two-stage norms. One might propose that in any case in which one ought to form a belief that p one ought to do so in part because one ought to go ahead wrt p and one ought to form a belief that p conditional on going ahead wrt p. Grounds needn’t entail what they ground, and so accepting these weaker norms wouldn’t commit one to DD or FD. Such a response would still make it possible to accommodate and explain O-link. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. In the vicinity is the issue of whether reasons are essentially contrastive, whether they must favor an option over others. On Snedegar’s (2018) view of reasons, for instance, if I’ll violate my vow not to marry by taking any marriage option (e.g., marrying Pedro, Guilia, etc.), then the vow can’t give me a reason against these options. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. To be clear, even if the two-stage norms are not normative, they will nonetheless resemble normative normsin that they have the following property: noncompliance with them will guarantee going against some reasons you have. Perhaps the account of normative norms should be expanded to include norms with this feature. Or perhaps we could call such norms *weakly normative.* However we think of it, noncompliance with such norms at the very least has normative implications. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. My position on the function of epistemic reasons is similar in some ways to that of Maguire and Woods (2020). Like them, I take epistemic reasons for belief, at least the core ones, to be autonomous, but to combine with reasons for attaining epistemic ends to determine what if anything one ought to believe. I lack space to justify siding with me over them but only list the main differences between our views. First, I take the core epistemic reasons to be conditional—they are reasons to have or form a particular doxastic attitude *conditional on going ahead*; Maguire and Woods take epistemic reasons to be unconditional. Second, unlike them, I take core epistemic reasons to have authoritative normative force. If you go ahead with belief formation and believe against the evidence, you have done something you ought not have done—something you *just plain ought not* have done, to use their favored understanding of authoritative normativity. They deny this holds in general. This leads to the third difference. I think that the only (unconditional) reasons for belief are those that arise from the interaction of evidence bearing on whether p (which determines the verdicts of the core epistemic norms) and epistemic reasons to wait/go ahead wrt p, while they think there are pure practical reasons for belief, ones that arise independently of any evidence bearing on p. In their view, if you offer me $10,000 to believe p, your offer is a reason to believe p. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Finally, I want to mention another option that some traditionalists about epistemic reasons may prefer. They will agree with me, I hope, that it is plausible that you ought not—in *some* sense—form a belief that p at a time when you know that waiting promises a better shot at attaining your goal of knowing than going ahead with belief-formation at the time, and when you very much want not to form a belief till you would know and have the power to wait. Earlier I noted that some critics might object that there is no good sense in which one *epistemically* ought to engage in agential activities like waiting or going ahead—at best one practically ought to do these things relative to epistemic values. A traditionalist about epistemic reasons might wish to agree with these critics. If they do agree, they will conclude that the two-stage norms I have defended are notepistemic norms. Still, they can accept these norms shorn of the label ‘epistemic’. They might instead call them “practical-cum-epistemic” norms on forming particular beliefs. If they do all this, they have nothing to fear from considerations of further evidence, or any other nonevidential reasons bearing on waiting. They could then claim that all epistemic reasons for or against belief are evidential, though conditional; in the case of reasons for or against forming particular beliefs, these would be conditional on *going ahead with belief-formation.* All this said, I think the epistemic character of the norms on waiting is secured from their role in determining what one ought or is permitted to believe unconditionally, as I explained at the end of section 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)