**Is Suspension of Judgment a Question-Directed Attitude? No, not Really**

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It’s standard practice in epistemology to describe cases and then ask – for some given person and proposition p – whether the person is justifiedin believing p, in disbelieving p or – as we usually say – or in suspending judgment. Consider a standard lottery example. You have a ticket in fair lottery of 10,000 tickets and no more relevant information. Are you justified in believing your ticket will lose? in believing it won’t lose? in suspending judgment on the matter? In setting things up this way, we presuppose that the person has three options: to believe the proposition, disbelieve it, or to suspend judgment on it.

We have a decent idea of what it is to believe a proposition.[[1]](#footnote-1) And we can take disbelief in a proposition to be belief in its negation. But what about suspending judgment? Sextus Empiricus, the ancient skeptic, tells us we should suspend judgment on all matters, or at least all theoretical ones. What is it he is telling us to do? You might think the answer is straightforward: *neither believe nor disbelieve.* However, inanimate objects like coffee cups have no beliefs at all, but of course such things aren’t suspending judgment. So, suspension isn’t simply the absence of belief. Without a decent idea of what suspension is, we don’t have a good idea of what this “third option” is in addition to belief and disbelief.

An account of suspension would also enable us to understand its important role in the curation of our beliefs. By suspending appropriately, we can improve the chances that we end up with accurate and knowledgeable beliefs rather than false and ignorant ones. Consider the following real-life case.[[2]](#footnote-2) A photo of busses in an Austin parking appears in a tweet with the statement “Anti-Trump protestors in Austin are not as organic as they seem. Here are the busses they came in on. #fakeprotests #trump2016 #austin.” Twitterati leaped to conclusions: the Austin protestors were bussed in, no doubt paid. But in the interest of having accurate and knowledgeable beliefs about the matter, the thing to do was to suspend judgment on why the busses were there. Suspending judgment and then doing the right sort of extra checking would have led one to conclude that the busses were there for a conference unrelated to any protest. Suspending inappropriately, of course, tends to make things worse: keeping us from knowledge.

In what follows, I’ll discuss several approaches to suspension. As we’ll see, the issue of whether and in what sense(s) suspension is **question-directed** is important to developing an adequate account. I will argue that suspension isn’t question-directed in the way that curiosity, wondering, and inquiry are. The most promising approach, in my view, takes suspension to be an **agential** matter; it involves the will. As we’ll see, this view makes sense of a lot of familiar facts about suspension, and it makes sense of its role in curating beliefs. It also raises intriguing questions about how it comes up for epistemic assessment.

**1. Doxastic accounts of suspension**

In trying to understand suspension, it is natural to reach for the more familiar notions of belief, disbelief, and degrees of confidence (“credences” in the lingo), as well as judgment. Like belief, credences are propositional attitudes: in having a credence of .4 *that it will rain tomorrow* one has .4 confidence in this proposition. Insofar as judgment is an event or act, rather than a continuing mental state, it may not count as an *attitude,* but it too is propositional: one judges that such and such is the case*.* Even if suspension isn’t simply the absence of belief/judgment, we might hope to explain it in terms of such *propositional doxastic phenomena* – or ‘doxastic phenomena’ for short.

Let’s say that a **doxasticaccount of suspension** is an account that explains suspension entirely in terms of the presence (or absence) of certain doxastic phenomena. *Positive* doxastic accounts explain it as consisting in the presence of the right doxastic phenomena; *negative* accounts as consisting in their absence*;* and *mixed* accounts consisting in some combination of the two.

As appealing as they may be from the perspective of theoretical unity, doxastic accounts are problematic. I’ve noted that simple negative doxastic views fail. But one might suggest an improved negative view: suspension is a matter of lacking belief on a matter *while meeting the preconditions for belief.[[3]](#footnote-3)* (Here’s a comparison: we might define being odd as not being even but restrict our definition to apply only to positive integers.) One precondition for believing p is understanding p. Since my coffee cup doesn’t understand anything, it doesn’t meet this precondition, and so the amended negative view doesn’t apply to it. But even with this sort of restriction, the absence view runs into problems, as Freidman has shown (2013a, 170). A few minutes ago, you understood the proposition that it snowed in Chicago on December 22, 1974; you presumably you had no belief on the matter, but you were not suspending judgment on it.

Negative doxasticists might hope to avoid this problem by recasting their account in terms of judgment rather than belief.[[4]](#footnote-4) Suspending judgment, they might say, consists in not judging when you meet the preconditions for judging. Perhaps it’s a precondition of judging, unlike belief, that you are or were immediately beforehand considering the matter. Considering goes beyond understanding in requiring that one be thinkingabout the matter. This revised negative account would get the 1974 Chicago snow example right. But it, too, has problems. Consider cases of what Friedman (2013a, 170) calls “mid-wondering.” Suppose I start thinking about a question for the first time. Suddenly I faint, which terminates my considering the proposition, precluding the possibility that I arrive at a judgment on the matter. Intuitively, I didn’t suspend judgment; I didn’t *get far enough* to suspend. Compare this with a case in which I consider it, conclude I just don’t have good evidence, and decide to return to the matter after gathering some more evidence, waiting to make up my mind on the matter. I do suspend in that case.

It is difficult to see a way forward for negative doxastic accounts. Suspension of judgment requires absence of judgment and (arguably) absence of belief, and these are points to keep track of as we proceed, but absence is not enough, nor is absence + meeting of preconditions for the relevant beliefs and judgments.

Turning to positive doxastic accounts, let’s start with the **belief view**, which takes suspending judgment to consist in having a certain belief. The needed belief presumably will concern the inadequate quality of one’s epistemic situation on the matter, e.g., that one’s evidence is weak; that one has no better grounds to believe than to disbelieve. The trouble is that a person could hold such beliefs without suspending. I might believe that I lack good evidence either way on God’s existence or believe I have no better grounds to believe than to disbelieve while *also* judging that God exists and so not suspending judgment on the matter. This might be irrational, but it doesn’t seem impossible (far from it). So, such beliefs are insufficient for suspending judgment. They also seem unnecessary. When a juror obeys the judge’s instructions to “suspend judgment on the defendant’s guilt or innocence until all the evidence has been presented,” it’s hard to see why the juror must believe any such proposition about the quality of her epistemic position about the matter.

Another doxastic view is the **credence view**. On this view, to suspending judgment on whether p consists in having an intermediate credence for p (and for not-p), one too low for belief but too high for disbelief. One problem for this view is that a person could suspend credence as well as judgment. Someone could have no credence on p, at least no precise credence, but still suspend judgment. A neophyte just encountering a well-developed field might be in exactly this position when he encounters some matter of debate in the field. He has no clue. It would be silly, he thinks, for him to come to have precise credence about such matters given his state of ignorance. He suspends both judgment and credence.[[5]](#footnote-5) Doubts arise also about whether having an intermediate credence is sufficient for suspension. Consider mid-wondering cases again. Suppose I take up some question. As I wonder, I might have an intermediate credence about the answer. If I were forced to bet on p, I would bet in line with this credence. Let’s add that, as I’m trying to arrive at a firmer opinion on the matter, I faint, disrupting my attempt. Again, it seems I do *not* suspend judgment.

There are other considerations against the credence view. I’ll list just one more. All of us presumably have a credences for a great many propositions in our heads. Many of these will be far removed from our thought or action at a given time and even removed from anything we care about or any intellectual plans or projects we might have. Perhaps you might have a stored .4 credence that your neighbor’s middle name was Alfred. You aren’t investigating the matter, and you really couldn’t care less: this is just a credence that sticks in your mind for no good reason (mental “clutter”). Is this enough for suspending judgment on whether your neighbor’s middle name is Alfred? Plausibly, no. If it were enough, all of us would be suspending judgment all the time on vastly many more matters than it seems we are. [[6]](#footnote-6)

Mixed doxastic accounts run into problems as well, ones inherited from the problems of negative and positive accounts. Consider this account: you suspend judgment on p iff you lack belief on whether p *because* you believe your epistemic position is inadequate.[[7]](#footnote-7) The juror suspends but does not meet this condition, and the mid-wonderer may well meet the condition despite not suspending.

**2. A possible diagnosis: doxastic accounts ignore the question-directedness of suspension**

Such a short discussion as the preceding doesn’t prove that doxastic views fail. But the points raised provide reason to doubt their prospects. The doxastic approach seems to be taking us in the wrong direction. Perhaps the mistake is that these views try to fit suspension into the mold of doxastic phenomena. Unlike belief and credence, suspension isn’t a propositional attitude. Unlike judgment, it is not a propositional event or act. We don’t suspend judgment *that it rained,* whereas we do believe, judge and have credences/degrees of confidence *that it rained*. We suspend judgment on *whether* it rained, *where* it rained, *when* it rained, etc. – on questions. Perhaps the doxasticist’s mistake, and that of much of the tradition in analytic epistemology, is not to realize that suspension is a *question-directed attitude.* Reorienting our theorizing around this insight might free us from the problems we’ve seen for the doxastic approach.

There are several things one might have in mind in asking our target question, “is suspension is a question-directed attitude?” I will consider two below. The goal here is to find an interpretation of the target question which doxasticists must answer negatively but which – initially at least – seems like it should receive an affirmative answer. This would support the putative diagnosis that doxasticists go wrong in neglecting the question-directedness of suspension.

**3. Clarifying the target question, “is suspension a question-directed attitude?”**

Perhaps the most natural way to read this question is as asking about the *objects* of suspension:

* Does suspension take questions as its objects?

If this is how we clarify our target question, it is relatively easy[[8]](#footnote-8) to answer: *yes*. As noted in section 2, what one suspends on are questions; when one suspends judgment on X, X is a question – a question of whether, why, who, when, of how, etc.

Unfortunately, even many doxasticists can answer the question affirmatively. A doxasticist might agree that we suspend on questions but claim that suspending on questionsis *explainable* in terms of doxastic phenomena. The thought here is that an account of suspension could explain it in terms of doxastic phenomena without identifyingsuspension with any such phenomena*.* Explanation doesn’t require identity between what’s explained (the explanandum) and what explains (the explanans). Plausibly, there are many relations one can bear to questions which are explainable in terms of doxastic phenomena. Consider *being opinionated about.* Trump bears this relation to the question “Who was the greatest president?” when he believes he was the greatest president. A person’s *being opinionated about* a question is explainable in terms of the person’s believing propositions that are candidate answers to the question. Or consider *knowing* as a relation one can bear to questions – what is often called *knowing-wh*. You bear this relation to questions, but your doing so is explainable in terms of your knowing proposition(s) that are the true answers to the questions.

Let me be clear. There is nothing wrong with the *objects* interpretation of question-directedness. Suspension is question-directed in this sense. But we are trying to find an interpretation of question-directedness which reveals why doxastic views fail and points us to a more promising nondoxastic view. The *objects* interpretation will not serve this purpose.

A second interpretation appeals to a notion of *inquisitiveness*:

* Is suspending judgment an inquisitive attitude?

The notion of ‘inquisitiveness’ is meant to capture what curiosity, wondering, and attitudes distinctive of inquirers have in common. One who is inquisitive on a question is in some way positively disposed toward the possibility of answering it or at least toward improving one’s epistemic position on it. Doxasticists, including belief theorists, will have to answer this question negatively. One can have or lack the relevant beliefs and credences without being positively disposed toward the possibility of epistemic improvement on the question. This interpretation gives us what we were looking for. If suspension is question-directed in this way, we could see why doxastic accounts fail and where we would need to look for a better account. We next turn to the prospects of inquisitive accounts of suspension.

**4. Inquisitive accounts**

On an **inquisitive account,** suspending judgment is explained in terms of having an appropriate inquisitive attitude. Some of the objections raised in section 1 concern people who aren’t at all positively disposed toward epistemic improvement, e.g., the stored mental clutter of credences about your neighbor’s middle name. Perhaps the reason such credences don’t suffice for suspending judgment is that they don’t guarantee that one is curious, wonders, or is in a state of inquiring into the matter. In any case, it’s clear that we host inquisitive attitudes very often when we suspend.

Consider first the inquisitive view Friedman defends in earlier work, according to which suspending judgment consists in having the “inquiring attitude,” i.e., the attitude toward a question that makes one an inquirer into it (Friedman 2017). The account avoids many of the pitfalls of doxasticist accounts. Not every unopinionated person counts as suspending (because they’re not necessarily inquiring). Merely having a middling credence isn’t enough for suspending (because it’s not enough for inquiring). And of course, inquiry is a vital aspect of our epistemic lives, crucial to curating our beliefs.

Nevertheless, I think this **inquiry account** won’t give us an adequate theory. I’ll approach this by arguing that having an inquiring attitude is neither necessary nor sufficient for suspension. What I hope will emerge is a more promising candidate for suspension.

Consider sufficiency first. Suppose you’ve been thinking hard about an issue. Having worked through all the evidence, you weigh it up and then arrive at a belief. Consider moments just before you arrive at the belief. You’re trying to make up your mind. You are “almost there,” but not there yet. If you’re trying to make up your mind, trying to reach a judgment, it seems you are not *suspending* judgment, despite inquiring. For an example, consider the baseball umpire trying to reach a judgment about whether the pitch just thrown was a strike or pall. Intuitively, he is not suspending judgment. But he is certainly inquiring. These “almost there” cases are of a kind with Friedman’s case of mid-wondering. So, the inquiring attitude seems insufficient for suspension. It also seems unnecessary. You might suspend judgment while also suspending inquiry and so lack the inquiring attitude. For instance, you might think that in your current epistemic situation further inquiry will only lead you around in circles on the issue at hand – perhaps your current evidence is just too complicated and messy. Consistent with this, you might think there’s a chance that better evidence will come out next year and so plan to take up the issue again then. You’d be suspending judgment without inquiring.

The inquiry view is just one inquisitive view, and one that appeals to a relatively demanding inquisitive attitude. Inquiry arguably implies wondering or curiosity, for instance, though those attitudes don’t imply it. Inquiry implies a kind of *aiming* at answering a question whereas *wondering* and *curiosity* imply only a positive disposition toward answer, compatible with merely *wishing* you could answer the question. Thus, you could, without irrationality, wonder whether p while knowing – even knowing for certain – that there is no way for you to ever improve your epistemic position on whether p, let alone to know whether p; but you can’t rationally inquire whether p while knowing this. Are prospects better for inquisitive views built around these weaker inquisitive attitudes?

An inquisitive view that explains suspension in terms of wondering or curiosity will still have troubles with sufficiency (e.g., the umpire case). But one might hope it will do better with necessity. Suspending inquiry might make sense if you think inquiry is leading you around in circles, but how is it a problem to wonder or be curious when your evidence is complicated and messy? Well, it might be hard to resist making a judgment, in light of your current evidence, and you might think you really need to resist because, tempting though it is to make a judgment, your evidence is quite meager; but in a few days, you’ll be given a report with decisive evidence. Suppose it matters that you get things right. Perhaps the judgment is about whether someone is to be fired from a job. You might suspend judgment till the new evidence comes in while also resolving not to take up the question at all in the meantime – not even *wondering* about it. Here you might of course still be curious. But one wonders if even curiosity isn’t required for suspending. Suppose I’m suspending my judgment till I get better evidence next week. Suppose I’m concerned that I’ll give in to temptation to judge based on my current rather meager evidence. I don’t want to do that. Lastly, suppose I could make myself incurious about the matter. If I do so – knowing that when the evidence does come in, I’ll be curious once again – does this mean I’m not suspending judgment? I don’t think so. Perhaps becoming incurious can be, in certain cases, an effective way to hold off from making a judgment until the right time. Is there an inquisitive attitude a suspender must have? I’m skeptical.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Against my argument that inquisitive attitudes aren’t sufficient for inquiry, an objector might reply that the subjects in my examples *are* suspending judgment. The umpire, for instance, is suspending judgment in trying to reach a judgment, so it might be claimed. But it’s useful to consider analogous cases that arise in the realm of practical decision. I focus on suspending decision in the sense of suspending making a decision rather than in the sense of suspending a decision you’ve already made. Suppose Chidi (of *The Good Place*) is trying to reach a decision about which coffee drink to order. He is really trying to decide – he’s not postponing – but he just isn’t quite there yet. A moment later, a thought pops into his head that enables him to choose the cappuccino. It is odd to think of him, right before the decision, as *suspending* decision, just as it’s odd to think of the umpire suspending judgment. Compare Eleanor. Ordering a coffee drink for Michael, Eleanor is asked which drink the barista should make. Michael usually prefers black coffee. But Eleanor hesitates and decides to ask Michael before ordering for him. Eleanor says, “hang on a moment” and consults Michael. This seems like a case of suspending decision. But Eleanor here is precisely trying *not* to make the decision right away – she’s delaying it till she hears from Michael. This is analogous to standard cases of suspending judgment: I have some evidence anti-Trump protestors were bussed in, but I “hang on a moment” while I’ll check the reputable news sources before making up my mind.

Such a brief discussion doesn’t show inquisitive views must fail. But I think there is something puzzling about them in general. In suspending judgment, it seems one temporarily closes off the possibility of judgment. But merely having an inquisitive attitude doesn’t seem sufficient to close off this possibility. Yes, I might be curious while temporarily closing off the possibility of judgment, but I also might also be curious while *plunging ahead* toward making a judgment. Suspension is judgment-allergic in a way that inquisitive states are not. We need to incorporate this judgment-allergic character into our account.

**5. Agential views**

Why do doxastic views fail, if not because they neglect the inquisitive nature of suspension? I’m going to make a case for a different sort of account of suspension, one that gives a key role to agency. The views I’ll sympathetically discuss are close cousins of negative doxastic accounts of suspension – but they avoid the coffee cup problem as well as the mid-wondering problem.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Consider suspending decision again. This is what happens when Eleanor doublechecks with Michael before ordering him his usual coffee drink. It is also what happens when you suspend decision on some important matter until you can research it more carefully – e.g., signing a lease for a new apartment, undergoing an experimental treatment, starting one’s own business. What is going on in these cases isn’t merely the non-occurrence of the decision, although that is part of it. I suggest that suspending decision is something like *refraining from* making a decision, or *postponing decision*. And if this is true for suspending decision in the practical case, there is some reason to think it is true as well for suspending judgment, which is a kind of theoretical “decision.” Perhaps to suspend judgment is to refrain from or postponejudgment on the matter. Such a view has an attractive unity to it: it takes a general notion of suspension and applies it to judgment to arrive at a notion of suspending judgment.

These notions of refraining and postponing are agentialnotions. When you refrain from deciding, that’s something you “do”. Postponing*,* too,seems agential, even in its stativeform (you can be in the state of postponing something). Your will is implicated. The same, I suggest, is true of suspending judgment. In this respect, suspension is unlike belief, for believing something plausibly doesn’t require – and so doesn’t essentially involve – the will.[[11]](#footnote-11)

I will sketch several agential views with some commentary on each.

*5.1. The intentional omission view:*

On this view, suspending judgment on a question consists in intentionally not judging on the question and so is equivalent to refraining or abstaining from judgment on the matter.

Let me warn against one misinterpretation. In general, an omission at a later time t2 can be intentional in virtue of one’s action at t1. But an action at t1 taken to bring it about that one doesn’t judge at t2 is not sufficient for suspending at t2. Wanting not to judge a question later today, I take a pill which prevents me from doing it. Later I’m not judging the question, sure enough, but I’m also not suspending judgment – it’s the pill doing the work. The intentional omission account, properly understood, is consistent with this. For me to suspend judgment *at time t* on the view in question is for me *at t* to be intentionally not judging *at t.* In the pill case, this condition isn’t met.

On the intentional omission view, suspension is not inquisitive. One can intentionally omit judgment without being in an inquisitive state, i.e., without being curious, wondering whether, etc., and converse holds as well (if you’re trying to make up your mind, for instance). The view is also non-doxastic, even if it is close to a negative doxastic view, for there is an important difference between merely not doing something and intentionally omitting it.

5.2. *The intentional omission view – process variant:*

A variant of the intentional omission view gives a key role to the process of judgingor deliberating. On this view, to suspend judgment is to not to judge on a question because one intentionally omits the process of judging/deliberating on the question. One might find inspiration for this view in one of Sextus Empiricus’s famous remarks:

“Suspension of judgment is a standstill of the intellect, owing to which we neither reject nor posit anything” (I.iv, 5)

Sextus doesn’t identify suspension with neither rejecting nor positing but with something *because of which* one does neither of these – namely a “standstill of the intellect.” But what is it for the intellect to be at a standstill? If you’re trying to make up your mind, your intellect plausibly isn’t not at a standstill in the intended sense. One attractive suggestion is to understand “standstill” as intentionally omitting (theoretical) deliberation *–* the intellectual activity aimed at positing and rejecting.[[12]](#footnote-12) In fact, we sometimes use the term ‘judgment’ for deliberation. You can be in the process of judging which tree is the tallest as you examine trees at various distances from you. (Question: what are you doing and why is it taking so long? Answer: “I’m judging which of those trees is tallest.”) Given the notion of a processof judgment, the process variant explains suspension of judgment in terms of intentional omission/cessation of this process owing to which one does not make a judgment on the question. Like the original intentional omission view, the process variant implies that suspension is neither inquisitive nor doxastic.

One appealing feature of the process variant is that it would enable us to see straightforwardly how suspension is something that one can do by choice. You can intentionally omit deliberation – you can intentionally not start it or intentionally cease doing it. Often, when we suspend, it seems we halt the relevant inquiry or deliberation. We might think about who the killer is in a detective show, and then, feeling we’re getting nowhere, quit the deliberation, thereby not reaching a judgment.

However, it’s not clear that this is only way we can suspend judgment. Suppose I have deliberated at length about a math problem, and I am strongly drawn to a certain answer; but I remember the sorts of mistakes I tend to make in problems like these and I worry that perhaps I’m making one of those mistakes now; I suspend judgment until I talk to my more mathematically capable colleague about the problem. Although I don’t go through further deliberation, it’s not clear I intentionally omit deliberation – further deliberation wasn’t really an issue; I’ve deliberated as much as I can on the matter. The issue is whether to go with the answer I’m tempted to give – to acquiesce to what seems correct – or hold off and go to my friend.

There are other problem cases. Suppose you ask me the year Hubert Humphrey first ran for elected office. I think about it for a few minutes. In thinking about it, I’m hoping to jog my memory. If I get nowhere after a while, I might give up and just look it up on Wikipedia. In giving up my memory search, I might well be suspending judgment. But I’m suspending judgment by terminating a *non-deliberative* process – of trying to recall. These points might make us incline to the simpler intentional omissions view over the process variant.

5.3. *A future-directed view*

On the intentional omission view, all that is required for suspending judgment is intentional omission of judgment. However, we might think that suspension requires that one omit with certain sorts of aims. On the future-directed view, the aim must concern the future in a certain way.[[13]](#footnote-13)

On the version I find most plausible, suspending judgment is postponingjudgment. One simple way to postpone X-ing is by omitting X-ing with an aim to X later. For instance, at 10am I might postpone my walk till 11am. But one can also postpone X-ing by omitting X-ing with an aim to X when but not until certain conditions are met (which one doesn’t think are yet met). I might postpone traveling abroad until the pandemic is in decline. In the case of suspending judgment, often one will omit judgment with an aim to judge when but not until one meets a certain epistemic condition, e.g., until one has sufficient evidence, or is positioned to know. Often but not always. The juror may omit judgment aiming to judge only after all the evidence is presented, as instructed by the judge.

Plausibly, if you postpone X-ing, you intentionally omit X-ing, but the converse is not true. There are many things we intentionally omit but don’t postpone. Think of a smoker trying to quit; the smoker may intentionally omit to smoke on a certain occasion but (hopefully) won’t be postponing smoking. So, the future-directed view is not equivalent to the intentional omission view, and the same holds for the process variant.

A key motivation for the future-directed view is that considerations comparing one’s current epistemic situation unfavorably to one’s future epistemic situation seem like potential reasons to suspend judgment. Consider “the FBI report will be released on the oil spill tomorrow.” This seems like a relevant consideration to bear in mind as you consider whether to suspend judgment on the cause of the oil spill or instead to go ahead and try to make up your mind at the present time. Or consider the fact that you’ll be more alert in the morning. This can seem highly relevant to whether you should suspend judgment till the next morning about some important matter – e.g., which life insurance policy your employer offers is best for your family – as opposed to trying to make up your mind in your current compromised state*.* Such comparisons between one’s epistemic situation in the future vs the present seem in the first instance to be reasons to postponejudgment till the relevant future time.[[14]](#footnote-14) To respond adequately to a reason such as *clearer and better evidence is coming in tomorrow* seems to require moving into a state that, other things equal, keeps you from making a judgment on the matter till tomorrow, a state *aimed* at not making a judgment till tomorrow. Intentional omission of judgment isn’t enough. Nor is intentional omission that luckily lasts till tomorrow. What is needed is *postponing* till tomorrow. It is this that will direct us to more accurate, knowledgeable beliefs, helping us to curate our beliefs.

Future-directed accounts also make good sense of the state of suspended judgment. Suppose at noon you suspend judgment about the cause of a recent oil spill till tomorrow when you hear the FBI report. Your suspending at noon has an act-like character. It is something that happens at a particular date and time. But because of it you move into a continuing state of suspended judgment, a state the function of which is to remain with one till tomorrow when one hears the FBI report, and one which disposes one not to make a judgment on the matter till then.[[15]](#footnote-15) Postponing judgment is a state with this function.[[16]](#footnote-16)

5.4. Two epistemological ramifications of agential views

Suppose one of these agential views is correct. We know that suspending judgment comes up for epistemic assessment: we can talk about when one should suspend, when we’re justified in suspending, etc., where these normative notions seem to have a clear epistemic flavor rather than a prudential or moral one. But how can something essentially agential be epistemically assessable?[[17]](#footnote-17)

Here I will only gesture at what I think of as the most promising general direction to look for an answer. Broadly speaking, the suggestion is to think of this sort of epistemic assessment as taking a means-end form, where the ends are epistemic. There are various ways to develop the point. One appeals to epistemic decision theory. We would ask about the “expected epistemic value” of suspending judgment as compared with that of going ahead with judgment? (How likely would it be we’d arrive at knowledge on the issue in question if we suspend judgment vs. if we went ahead and tried to make up our minds now?) Alternatively, we could appeal to a theory of reasons: one epistemically ought to suspend when one has stronger epistemic reason to suspend judgment than to do any of the alternatives. These reasons will concern how best to achieve knowledge or accuracy on the relevant matter. Because an end enters in, it seems that these epistemic reasons will have force only for those who embrace the end. Note the contrast between epistemic reasons to suspend vs. epistemic reasons to believe that p: an epistemic reason to believe p is evidence for p; no end or value enters in. This suggests that epistemic reasons to believe are quite different in kind from epistemic reasons to suspend.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Agential conceptions of suspension might also push us to rethink how we set up normative questions in epistemology. As I noted at the outset, we usually propose a triad of “options”: are you justified in *believing* p, *disbelieving* p or *suspending judgment on* (whether) p? If agential accounts of suspension are correct, we can often stick with this set-up, but not always. If we consider people who lack interest in whether p, who don’t care to form an opinion, etc., we should allow for *other* possibilities than these three. If a person’s evidence supports neither p or not-p very well, they aren’t justified in believing p, nor in disbelieving p, but due to their interests/goals, they may not be justified in suspending either. Is there anything they are justified in doing? Yes. They may well be justified in having an intermediary credence. I suggest using the term ‘agnostic’ for this state. Agnosticism, like belief but unlike suspension, is not agential. It does not essentially involve the will. Perhaps we epistemologists should stop using ‘suspending judgment’ as a grab-bag term to cover any way of being “in-between” or “uncommitted.” Suspension is a specific way of being in-between, one that involves the exercise of agency. In some cases, the differences between these different ways of being in-between will not matter to the theories being compared, but in others they will.[[19]](#footnote-19)

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1. Here is a quick run-down. Belief is a propositional attitude – when you believe, you believe *that p*. A belief that p is correct if and only if p is true. Unlike *guessing,* when you believe that p, you are disposed to rely on p in your reasoning, in your planning, and as a basis for emotion. For instance, if you believe the only way to pass the class is to do well on the final, and you aim to pass the class, you can reason like so: “I need to pass; the only way to pass is to do well on the final, so I need to do well on the final.” If you believe that your favorite political candidate lost the election, you will feel disappointed in a way you won’t if you merely guess she lost. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/business/media/how-fake-news-spreads.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a discussion of “privative suspension” see Zinke (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Judgment may imply belief, but the converse fails. Even if believing requires being *disposed to judge,* one need not *judge* at every time at which it is true that one believes. So, there can be times at which one believes but does not judge. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Matters are more complicated for imprecise credences, but I suspect similar reasoning applies there as well. See McGrath (2021a) for discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. So far, the credence view is only a view about suspending matters that can be expressed in terms of “whether such and such”? But we can suspend on other matters. As Friedman observes in her contribution, we can suspend on what the earth’s core is made of. What should the credence view say about such suspensions? Must it say that to suspend on what the earth’s core is made of one must have an intermediate credence on every proposition of the form <the earth’s core is made of x>? Or an intermediary credence on every candidate “complete exhaustive answer” of the form <the earth’s core is made of and only of x, y, …>? On such accounts, suspending on what the earth’s core is made of would require grasping all those propositions, which, as Friedman notes, we don’t grasp. The credence theorist will need some other account. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Raleigh (2021). Raleigh points out one key advantage for his account. It can make sense of how evidence can render suspension justified. It can do so because explains suspension in terms of belief, which is a paradigm of a state rendered justified by evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The reader should consult Friedman’s contribution as well as her (2013b). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In her contribution, Friedman rightly notes that certain ways of making oneself incurious have the effect that one no longer suspends. Is this happening in the above example? The example might be fleshed out further as follows. Suppose, as before, I start out curious who will be fired. I find myself tempted to make judgments that I worry aren’t justified. I then resolve not to investigate the question, not to explore it, not to follow up on leads, etc. till the official announcement is made. I even resolve not to *want* to know who will be fired prior to the announcement. Suppose I make good on all these resolutions. In such a case, I think it’s at least plausible that I suspend without being curious. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I am not alone in my sympathy for agential views. Other agentialists include Sosa (2015, 2019), Crawford (forthcoming), Masny (2020) and Wagner (2022). Willard-Kyle (manuscript) gives an account of the epistemic value of ignorance that appeals to future-related considerations. For a fuller development of my own views, see McGrath (2021a, 2021b). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Interestingly, it seems one can in some cases suspend judgment for broadly practical reasons. For instance, you might be able to suspend because you were asked to do so (e.g., by the judge, by a friend) and want to comply, or perhaps even because you will be monetarily rewarded for doing so. It might not be epistemically admirable to suspend for such reasons, but they seem to be reasons *for which* one can suspend and do so in full awareness without incoherence. The same is plausibly not true of belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In their edition of *The Outlines,* Annas and Barnes include the following note*:* “εποχη,‘suspension of judgment’, comes from επεχειη ‘to hold back’, ‘to check’ (used of e.g., holding your breath, suspending payment).” (2000, 49n197). However, I do not offer this as an interpretation of Sextus’s text. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The future-directed view is only one account of what the relevant aim might be. There are others. Of special note is Sosa (2015, 2019). Sosa argues that all intentional omissions of judgment are suspensions, but that only a certain subclass of such suspensions are “gnoseologically” assessable, i.e., assessable in a way distinctive of the theory of knowledge. To put it roughly, for Sosa, this special class consists of suspensions in which one omits judgment on whether p in an aim to judge that p iff one is positioned to know that p, and similarly for not-p. Notice that ‘when’ and ‘until’ do not appear here. For Sosa, the gneosologically relevant aim is present directed. I lack space to compare this view with the future-directed view. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See McGrath (2021a) for further discussion of future-comparative reasons to suspend. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. As Friedman (2013b) notes, being in the state of suspension doesn’t require having made mental actions earlier. Just so, delaying or postponing now doesn’t strictly require that one previously performed an act of delay or postponement. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The agential accounts discussed rely on a notion of *judging* on a question. It’s straightforward enough to grasp what’s involved in judging on a *whether*-question: you judge on whether p iff you either judge that p or judge that not-p. But what’s involved in judging on a question like *which invitees will come to my party?* I might suspend on this question, while judging that my best friend, who I invited, certainly is coming. So, judging that my best friend is coming isn’t enough to judge on the question. One way to go, to address this issue, is to appeal to exhaustive candidate answers: to judge Q is to judge a proposition that is an exhaustive candidate answer. For instance, if I judge that the only invitees coming are A, B, and C, then I’ve judged on the question. On this approach, it is plausible to think that we can suspend judgment on some questions by suspending on others: if I suspend judgment on whether Kara, who I know I invited, is coming, this is a way of suspending judgment on which invitees are coming.

    These issues need further attention. Similar issues arise for the theory of inquiry. Inquiry can (appropriately) continue into which invitees are coming to my party even if I know that my best friend is coming (and am not inquiring into that matter). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Notably, a parallel question arises for inquisitive accounts. How can something essentially goal-directed (like inquiry) be epistemically assessable? [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Some philosophers suggest that the fact that we would need to broaden our conception of epistemic assessment in ways like this is a good reason to reject agential views (cf. Raleigh (2021) and Lord (2020)). But regardless of whether suspension consists in intentional omission of judgment or delaying judgment, those are genuine phenomena that seem to come up for epistemic assessment. So, it is not as if we avoid having to explain how agential phenomena in general could come up for epistemic assessment. See McGrath (2021b) for further discussion of this and related issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. In her contribution, Friedman suggests that the accounts I propose locate suspension at moments “when we feel our investigation is at epistemic dead end. We just cannot figure out what the answer to some question is and so we throw up our hands, giving up, at least for now.” I do think we can suspend when we’re in a “throwing-up our hands” sort of dead end, and I worry that an account centered around inquiry or inquisitive attitudes won’t allow for this. But Friedman’s point in this passage is that my account has the opposite problem: it threatens to make suspension appropriate only at such dead ends. I agree to this much: it's epistemically appropriate to suspend when belief-formation at the timeis likely enough to lead one astray. Perhaps this is a kind of dead end of sorts. But holding off from belief-formation at a moment is consistent with continuing inquiry, for instance, by reviewing the evidence, applying new reasonings, or seeking more evidence. Consider the well-worn widget machine problem: if it takes 5 machines 5 minutes to make 5 widgets, how long will it take 100 machines to make 100 widgets? One feels a pull to answer *100 minutes.* If one can hold off and reason it out more slowly (and not throw up one’s hands), one has a better chance of getting the right answer. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)