

Disagreement and suspended judgement

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Can someone who suspends judgement about a certain proposition $\langle p \rangle$ be in a relational state of disagreement with someone who believes $\langle p \rangle$ as well as with someone who disbelieves $\langle p \rangle$? This paper argues for an affirmative answer. It develops an account of the notions of *suspended judgement* and *disagreement* that explains how and why the suspender is in a relational state of disagreement with both the believer and the disbeliever about the very same proposition $\langle p \rangle$. More specifically, the paper first provides a characterisation of the normative profile associated with the state of suspended judgement in terms of the set of normative commitments that it engenders in the context of inquiry. It then provides a characterisation of the notion of disagreement in terms of the incompatibility between the sets of normative commitments characteristic of the three states in question—belief, disbelief, and suspension.

KEYWORDS

agnosticism, disagreement, epistemic normativity, normative commitments, suspended judgement

1 | INTRODUCTION

Brigitte, Diana, and Sarah are three detectives independently working on a crime case. They are investigating whether Mike is the murderer. After some careful inquiry, our three detectives come to different verdicts: Brigitte, the believer, accepts that Mike is the murderer, and thus comes to believe that Mike is the murderer; Diana, the disbeliever, rejects that Mike is the murderer, and thus comes to disbelieve that Mike is the murderer; Sarah, the suspender, refrains both from accepting that Mike is the murder and from rejecting that Mike is the

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murderer, and thus comes to suspend judgement about whether Mike is the murderer.¹ Let's assume also that the three detectives are equally competent in their jobs and that they have reached their respective verdicts in an epistemically sound way.

The central question I am concerned with in this essay is the following: Do Brigitte, Diana, and Sarah disagree about whether Mike is the murderer? In particular, is Sarah in a *relational state* of disagreement with both Brigitte and Diana about whether Mike is the murderer?

At first glance, it feels quite natural to say that Sarah, Brigitte, and Diana do indeed disagree with one another. After all, if they were to engage in some rational confrontation, each of them would defend her own stance on whether Mike is the murderer not just as a genuine alternative to the views of the others but as the right one to have. None of them would in fact easily drop her stance on the matter without additional compelling reasons—that is, some additional epistemic considerations that go beyond the mere appreciation of the fact that they are having a rational confrontation. This aspect of the epistemic robustness of the three attitudes in question—belief, disbelief, and suspension—vis-à-vis rational confrontation is an indication that Sarah, Brigitte, and Diana have conflicting views on whether Mike is the murderer. This, in turn, seems to be a clear mark of disagreement.

There seem, however, to be two immediate concerns that make it difficult to explain how Sarah could disagree with Brigitte and Diana—or, at least, how she could disagree with them in a way analogous to that in which Brigitte and Diana disagree with each other. The first concern is that in suspending judgement about whether Mike is the murderer, Sarah seems to be withholding having a horse in the race, as it were, rather than betting on one specific horse. Let's call this concern the *no horse in the race challenge*. Seth Yalcin in his essay “Nonfactualism About Epistemic Modals” expresses the worry in a particularly vivid way:

If someone believes it's raining in Topeka right now, then you agree if you also think it's raining in Topeka right now, and you disagree if you think it's not raining in Topeka right now. If you neither agree nor disagree, you are agnostic on the matter. So understood, disagreement goes beyond mere failure of agreement. But what then is it to agree with the agnostic on this issue? The question feels ill-posed. (2011, 310)

And in a footnote he adds:

One might try saying that to agree with the agnostic is to just also be agnostic, but this line is not promising. For what then would it be to disagree with the agnostic? Is it to take a definite stand on the relevant proposition? But it is not plausible to say that, merely in virtue of my lack of a positive stand on myriad propositions, I thereby disagree with anyone and everyone who takes a stand on these propositions. Suppose I don't have a view about where you parked your car, and you do. I do not thereby disagree with you, in any interesting sense. (2011, 310, n. 15)

The key point highlighted by Yalcin is that disagreement goes beyond mere failure of agreement, and if the suspender is characterized merely in terms of *lack* of belief and disbelief about a particular proposition, then it's hard to make sense of the possibility of an interesting disagreement between the suspender and the (dis)believer. The natural thing to say if we take suspension to be mere lack of (dis)belief is, as Yalcin points out, that a suspender is someone who neither agrees

¹Sarah's state of suspended judgement may be characterized in terms of a particular kind of agnostic stance—what has been labelled “grounded agnosticism” (Ferrari and Incurvati 2021)—in that Sarah has endorsed the state of suspended judgement about whether Mike is the murderer as a result of some careful inquiry into the question: Is Mike the murderer? See Ferrari and Incurvati 2021 for a fairly comprehensive taxonomy of agnostic stances. See also Zinke 2021 for an account that is open to a variety of ways to suspend judgement.

nor disagrees with the (dis)believer. But this seems to clash with the intuition that the suspender may have her own position to defend against those of the believer and the disbeliever, as it is manifested in the different recommendations to the jury that the three detectives would make in relation to Mike's murder case: Brigitte would push for condemning Mike to prison; Diana would opt for exculpating Mike and thus freeing him; Sarah would instead try to convince the jury that the case is not yet settled and thus that Mike should remain in custody while a more thorough investigation is carried out.

To counter this first challenge something constructive about the nature of the attitude of suspended judgement must be said—something that makes suspended judgement a proper stance capable of somehow being in competition with both belief and disbelief. In other words, the main question to address in providing a characterisation of the attitude of suspended judgement is, as Sven Rosenkranz nicely puts it, “Whether by calling themselves ‘agnostics’ philosophers can, as Huxley suggests, present themselves as if they ‘too, had a tail, like the other foxes’” (2007, 14).² Thus, we need to find a way to characterise Sarah's stance so that she too will have a horse in the race. This is the focus of sections 2 and 3.

The second immediate concern is that according to a rather intuitive, and to a certain extent orthodox, understanding of disagreement and of the attitudes of belief and disbelief, we can explain the disagreement between Brigitte and Diana simply and plainly in terms of the incompatibility between the contents of the propositions they endorse. Brigitte endorses the proposition that Mike *is* the murderer, while Diana endorses the proposition that Mike *is not* the murderer.³ These two propositions cannot both be true. Clearly, this explanation does not work in the case of the (alleged) disagreement between Sarah and Brigitte (or Diana). There is no first-order proposition about whether Mike is the murderer, which Sarah endorses and which stands in a relation of semantic incompatibility with either the proposition that Mike is the murderer (endorsed by Brigitte) or the proposition that Mike is not the murderer (endorsed by Diana). In other words, the source of the conflict between the attitudes of Brigitte and Diana does not match the source of the conflict (if any) between the attitudes of Sarah and Brigitte (or Diana). In this sense of disagreement, Sarah neither disagrees with Brigitte nor disagrees with Diana. Let's call this second concern the *no common source challenge*.⁴ In order to resist this concern, some work has to be done on how to understand the notion of disagreement in relation to cognitive attitudes. This is done in section 4.

The overall aim of this essay is to develop a theoretically fruitful account of the notions of *suspended judgement* and *disagreement* that explains how and why Sarah is in a relation of disagreement with both Brigitte and Diana in a way that fully addresses the no horse in the race challenge as well as the no common source challenge.

Before proceeding, let me clarify two important issues. First, it is not among the purposes of this essay to provide a fully worked-out characterisation of the attitude of suspended judgement—in fact, I believe that there may be more than one way of characterising the notion of suspended judgement that turns out to be theoretically sound and adequate

²The quote comes from Huxley's 1989 essay “Agnosticism”: “So I took thought, and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of ‘agnostic.’ It came into my head as suggestively antithetic to the ‘gnostic’ of Church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant; and I took the earliest opportunity of parading it at our Society, to show that I, too, had a tail, like the other foxes.” Thomas Henry Huxley, *Collected Essays: Volume 5, Science and the Christian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 254.

³Assuming, controversially, for the time being that disbelieving <p> entails accepting <not-p>; this assumption is discussed in section 2.

⁴This is a well-known issue in relation to suspended judgement—see, for instance, Barnes 1990, 14–15; Gibbard 2003, chap. 4; and Rosenkranz 2007. Rosenkranz has labelled this issue *the alignment problem* (2007, 63). He characterizes basic agnosticism as follows: “[T]here is a genuine third stance which is identifiable by means of the assertion that we are neither in a position to know nor in a position to know ‘p’, and which is in opposition to both endorsement and denial” (63).

with respect to our pre-theoretical understanding of it. Thus, a fully worked-out account of the attitude of suspended judgement will, presumably, take the form of a pluralist view. To develop such a pluralistic picture requires an essay on its own.⁵ Second, it is not my intention to claim that the overall package offered here to explain how we can model the disagreement between the (dis-)believer and the suspender is the only way to achieve this goal. Rather, the project is more modest than that—it wants to offer a way of understanding the nature of the attitude of suspended judgement that, in conjunction with a characterisation of the relation of disagreement that may be independently motivated, allows us to satisfactorily account for the possibility of a disagreement between the suspender and the (dis-)believer. Put somewhat more ambitiously, the claim is that the package offered here is quite a competitive one in relation to the project of explaining how the suspender may disagree with the (dis-)believer in a way that fully meets the two aforementioned challenges. With these provisos in hand, let us move to a first characterisation of the attitudes of belief, disbelief, and suspended judgement.

2 | BELIEF, DISBELIEF, AND SUSPENDED JUDGEMENT

In order to start addressing the no horse in the race challenge, we need first to say something about what I take belief and disbelief to be in the context of this essay before then specifying what suspended judgement amounts to. Let me distinguish here between mental states and mental acts (see Chrisman 2016 for a more refined framework concerning mental categories). I take belief and disbelief to be mental states of a truth-directed kind: belief is that kind of state resulting from the mental acts of assenting to the truth of a propositional content $\langle p \rangle$ —for short, assenting to the truth of $\langle p \rangle$, which, given the equivalence schema, is (materially or cognitively, depending on the view) equivalent to assenting to $\langle p \rangle$. Disbelief, analogously, is understood as that kind of mental state resulting from the mental act of dissenting from the truth of $\langle p \rangle$ —and thus, dissenting from $\langle p \rangle$.⁶ In the same vein, it is also useful to distinguish between a mental state of suspended judgement and the mental act that paradigmatically leads to the state of suspended judgement: namely, the process of *refraining from both assenting to $\langle p \rangle$ and dissenting from $\langle p \rangle$* . Refraining from Φ -ing (where Φ -ing in this case is a mental act) is not simply failing to Φ . For present purposes, I need only to assume that refraining has the following features, understood as necessary (but not jointly sufficient) conditions. First, in order to refrain from Φ -ing, an agent must consider Φ -ing. Second, in refraining the agent is committed to not Φ -ing.⁷

In my proposal, suspended judgement is understood as the mental attitude of a *committed* neutrality towards both the truth and the falsity of a proposition (as suggested by the idea of refraining)—or towards the truth and falsity of each of the propositions considered by the subject that belong to the partition set determined by the question at the core of the subject's inquiry. It has a nature and a normative profile that cannot be accounted for by mere reference to the nature of belief and disbelief. In this respect, suspended judgement is conceived as a proper (*sui generis*) mental state with its distinctive normative profile. I take it that this

⁵I develop a pluralistic account of the notion of agnosticism in Ferrari and Incurvati 2021.

⁶I take this characterization of belief and disbelief to be compatible with a variety of analyses of mental states, in particular the functionalist account, which seems the most popular one. For the sake of simplicity, in what follows I stick with a traditional understanding of mental states as non-gradable. As far as I can tell, however, my proposal can be implemented within a degree-theoretic account of mental states. For some concerns about the strategy of conceiving of suspending as some kind of intermediate degree of credence, see Friedman 2013b.

⁷On the notion of refraining, see Smith 1986 and the references listed there. See also Incurvati and Schlöder 2017 for the idea that “refraining” is something beyond mere negligence.

way of conceiving of suspended judgement is broadly in line with Jane Friedman's account. According to Friedman:

Suspension requires some sort of decision about or commitment with respect to the truth of p ; it isn't a state that we are in in virtue of being opinionless, rather it is a state of opinion. It is in this sense that suspension is, or at least involves, a proper doxastic commitment about the truth of p on the part of the subject. The most natural way of understanding this commitment is as an attitude. What sort of attitude? A subject who suspends is effectively neutral or undecided about whether p is true. Her attitude then is one that represents or expresses or simply is her neutrality or indecision with respect to the relevant content. (2013b, 59)

The way in which I suggest we understand the idea of a committed neutrality is by maintaining that the suspender, who refrains from both assenting to the truth of $\langle p \rangle$ as well as dissenting from the truth of $\langle p \rangle$, is committed to not being committed to the truth of the proposition as well as to its falsity.⁸ This may be taken to suggest that suspended judgement is a kind of higher-order attitude.⁹ I take only the commitments associated with agnosticism to be higher-order, however; this does not entail that suspended judgement itself is a higher-order attitude. On the contrary, the picture I propose is one in which suspended judgement is of the same order as belief and disbelief.

Now even with this minimal characterization of suspended judgement as refraining from both assenting to $\langle p \rangle$ and dissenting from $\langle p \rangle$, thus engendering a commitment to not being committed to the truth of the proposition as well as its falsity, we have enough material to address the no horse in the race challenge. After all, Sarah has her own position on the matter of whether Mike is the murderer—a position that is expressed by a well-defined attitude with its own characteristic commitment (or set of commitments, as we will shortly see) and that is distinct from the positions of Brigitte and Diana on the matter. In this sense, thus, Sarah too has her own horse in the race to bet on—or, to use Huxley's expression, Sarah too has her own tail like the other foxes.

In the next section I elaborate on this notion of commitment in relation to a discussion of the normative profiles that are characteristic of the mental attitudes of belief, disbelief, and suspended judgement in terms of the distinctive set of normative commitments associated with the endorsement of these attitudes. Before doing so, let me briefly mention a proviso. I intend to remain neutral with respect to a commitment to the so-called Fregean orthodoxy.¹⁰ The account I develop is meant to be compatible with the orthodox view as well as with the unorthodox (or bilateralist) view that sees disbelief to be a distinctive mental state not definable in terms of belief and negation—that is, the view according to which to disbelieve $\langle p \rangle$ is not just to believe $\langle \text{not-}p \rangle$. Everything I say in this essay can be easily adapted to fit both the orthodox and the unorthodox understanding of belief and disbelief. Thus, nothing substantive for the feasibility of my project hinges on taking a stance on this debate.

⁸This is in line with Incurvati and Schlöder 2017, which argues that weakly rejecting p commits one to not being committed to p . Moreover, I'd like to make it clear that I'm not endorsing the following biconditional: S suspends judgement about $\langle p \rangle$ iff she is committed to not being committed to the truth of $\langle p \rangle$ as well as its falsity. I accept only the left-to-right direction. The same goes with respect to belief and disbelief and their respective commitments.

⁹See Friedman 2013a and 2013b for some arguments against the higher-order view of suspended judgement.

¹⁰According to the so-called Fregean orthodoxy, disbelieving $\langle p \rangle$ is just believing $\langle \text{not-}p \rangle$ (Frege 1952). See Incurvati and Schlöder 2017 and Smiley 1996 for a discussion of the advantages of bilateralism over the Fregean orthodoxy.

3 | THE NORMATIVE PROFILE OF MENTAL STATES AND NORMATIVE COMMITMENTS

In the picture I am about to sketch, mental states are partly individuated by their normative profiles. We can think of the normative profile of belief, disbelief, and suspended judgement as characterised, on the one hand, by correctness criteria concerning the mental acts giving rise to these states—what we might call *input normativity*—and, on the other hand, by the set of cognitive commitments that an inquirer is subject to in virtue of being in these states—what we might call *management normativity*.

As for the criteria of correctness, these might be of three broad kinds. First, of a weak epistemic kind—that is, some kind of epistemic warrant criterion such that, for example, a subject's belief that $\langle p \rangle$ is correct just in case she possesses warrant for $\langle p \rangle$. Second, correctness criteria may be of a strong epistemic kind—that is, a knowledge criterion such that, for example, the subject's belief that p is correct just in case she knows $\langle p \rangle$. Third, we can think of correctness criteria in alethic terms—that is, as a truth criterion according to which, for example, the subject's belief that p is correct just in case $\langle p \rangle$ is true. A comprehensive picture of the various criteria of correctness will most likely encompass and harmonise elements from all these categories (see Ferrari 2022 for a detailed account of epistemic and alethic normativity).

For the purposes of this essay, it will be largely immaterial what we take to be the right model for the input normativity of belief, disbelief, and suspended judgement. This is because any questions concerning what norms these three subjects have complied with (if any), and whether our three protagonists have achieved their respective mental states in full compliance with such norms, are inconsequential to the task of accounting for the thought that Sarah is in a relation of disagreement with both Brigitte and Diana. The issue whether the disagreement relation is instantiated between Sarah and Brigitte (and Diana) concerns whether the mental states they currently are in are somehow in conflict (in a way that will be explained shortly), regardless of how exactly they were formed. That said, for the sake of simplicity, I will nevertheless assume that Brigitte, Diana, and Sarah came to have their respective mental states in compliance with the weak epistemic norm—that is, by satisfying the correctness criterion of epistemic warrant. What I would like to focus on in what follows is a discussion of the other aspect of the normative profile of mental states: namely, a discussion of the set of commitments engendered by an endorsement of one of the mental states of belief, disbelief, and suspended judgement. This gives us the tools for explaining why and how Brigitte, Diana, and Sarah are in a relational state of disagreement about whether Mike is the murderer.

Before expanding on the idea of the normative commitments associated with belief, disbelief, and suspension, let me say something about what motivates the distinction between input normativity and management normativity.¹¹ I believe that the philosophical significance of this distinction is brought to the fore by two special kinds of disagreement on which there's ample debate: so-called peer disagreement and faultless disagreement.¹² What both kinds of disagreement highlight, though in different ways, is that there are interesting questions concerning management norms of the disputants' mental states in the context of disagreement, granting the equal evidential (and in the faultless disagreement case even alethic) appropriateness of the attitudes of the disputants. So here we have cases of disagreement that pose interesting normative questions even assuming that both parties are evidentially (or even alethically) on a par—questions such as: How should the disputants

¹¹Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting this important clarification.

¹²On the peer disagreement debate, see especially Christensen 2007; Elga 2007; Feldman 2006; Kelly 2005; and Lackey 2010. On the faultless disagreement debate, see especially Egan 2014; Kölbel 2003; MacFarlane 2014; Richard 2008; and Wright 2021.

manage their respective mental states concerning the subject matter of their disagreement in the light of the dispute? This is not the place to dig deeper into such intricate matters.¹³ But I believe that flagging the normative peculiarities of these kinds of disagreement helps us to get a first grip on what motivates the distinction between input normativity and management normativity.

Let me now dig deeper into the notion of normative commitment associated with the three mental states of belief, disbelief, and suspension.¹⁴ The core insight is that inquirers undertake a set of normative commitments as soon as they endorse one of the three aforementioned mental states with propositional content $\langle p \rangle$ via the corresponding mental acts of assenting to, dissenting from, or refraining from both assenting to and dissenting from $\langle p \rangle$. For a subject to undertake a commitment does not require that the subject, in endorsing a certain mental state, must explicitly claim to undertake the set of commitments characteristic of that state, nor that she must explicitly endorse them as a belief. The point of these commitments is that they are triggered as soon as the subject acquires one of the three mental states under consideration here. In other words, they are part and parcel of what it is to be in a certain mental state. In this sense, they do not require any extra cognitive work by the subject. What might be required, even though I would like to remain open-minded about it, is that the subject has a disposition to acknowledge each and every commitment belonging to the set of characteristics of the mental state she endorses.

Thus, in being in a belief state with content $\langle p \rangle$ obtained via an act of assenting to $\langle p \rangle$, a subject undertakes a set of normative commitments that can be framed as follows:

- (B1) A commitment to take $\langle p \rangle$ to be true.¹⁵
- (B2) A commitment to regard any mental state that excludes assenting to $\langle p \rangle$ as incorrect.¹⁶
- (B3) A commitment to holding on to assenting to $\langle p \rangle$ if no $\langle p \rangle$ -relevant information that defeats (by either undermining or overriding) the grounds for assenting to $\langle p \rangle$ is acquired.
- (B4) A commitment to be willing to defend the appropriateness of assenting to $\langle p \rangle$ by fending off objections and/or countervailing $\langle p \rangle$ -relevant information that defeats (by either undermining or overriding) the grounds for assenting to $\langle p \rangle$.
- (B5) A commitment to withdrawing the $\langle p \rangle$ belief if some $\langle p \rangle$ -relevant information that defeats (by either undermining or overriding) the grounds for assenting to $\langle p \rangle$ is acquired.¹⁷

This is the set—which I don't claim to be exhaustive—of normative commitments associated with a subject's belief state with content $\langle p \rangle$. This set of commitments is at the core of what regulates belief management. Let me briefly comment on each of these commitments. The thought behind (B1) is that given that a $\langle p \rangle$ belief is a mental state acquired through the mental process of assenting to the truth of $\langle p \rangle$, being in a state of $\langle p \rangle$ belief engenders a commitment to assent to

¹³I have written on these topics in Ferrari 2016, 2018, 2022; and Ferrari and Pedersen 2019.

¹⁴The idea of commitments in relation to belief has been discussed in Horgan and Timmons 2006.

¹⁵Some of these commitments are adapted from MacFarlane (2005), who, in turn, inherits them from Brandom (1983). For both of them, however, the commitments in questions concern the practice of assertion, and so are *assertoric commitments*. I take commitments in the present essay to concern the mental attitudes of belief, disbelief, and suspended judgement. In this sense we can think of them as *mental commitments*.

¹⁶The notion of incorrectness that occurs in (B2), (D2), and (S2) is epistemic in nature and can have a variable normative significance. See Ferrari 2018 and 2022 for a fully developed framework of how to model this normative variability.

¹⁷Commitments (B3), (B4), and (B5) are formulated in terms of the notion of (epistemic) grounds that is meant to capture a wide range of epistemic goods covering all of the following: evidential and non-evidential justification; propositional and doxastic justification; a priori and a posteriori justification; and first-order and higher-order justification.

<p> whenever the question whether <p> is true is brought into focus. (B2) expresses the thought that since being in a state of <p> belief cannot co-exist with either a state of <p> disbelief or a state of <p> suspension, any subject S who is in a state of <p> belief is committed to regard both a state of <p> disbelief and a state of <p> suspension as not the right kinds of state to be in. It is important to notice, though, that regarding an alternative mental state as incorrect does not go hand in hand with an attribution of blame to someone who has such a state. As far as (B2) is concerned, assessing an alternative mental state—for example, a state of <p> disbelief—as incorrect is fully compatible with the thought that Diana is blameless in being in the <p> disbelief state. A mere attribution of incorrectness to an alternative mental state does not automatically engender an attribution of blame to the person being in such a state.¹⁸ (B3) and (B4) express, to a different degree, the idea that mental states are epistemically robust. More precisely, (B3) wants to capture the thought that the mental state of belief is epistemically stable: if nothing has changed in subject S's epistemic situation with regard to the truth of <p>, then S is committed to continuing to assent to the truth of <p>. (B4) expresses the thought that belief is epistemically resilient: even when S is epistemically challenged with respect to her <p> belief, she shouldn't just give up the belief without careful scrutiny and critical assessment of any contrary evidence she is presented with. Last, (B5) expresses the thought that a subject in a <p> belief state should not be dogmatic about the truth of <p> but should be open to revise her <p> belief on the basis of (thus far undefeated) counterevidence.

Associated with the state of disbelief regarding content <p> obtained via an act of dissenting from <p> is a similar network of normative commitments, which can be made explicit as follows:

- (D1) A commitment to take <p> to be false.
- (D2) A commitment to regard any mental state that excludes dissenting from <p> as incorrect.
- (D3) A commitment to hold on to dissenting from <p> if no <p>-relevant information that defeats (by either undermining or overriding) the grounds for dissenting from <p> is acquired.
- (D4) A commitment to be willing to defend the appropriateness of dissenting from <p> by fending off objections and/or countervailing any <p>-relevant information that defeats (by either undermining or overriding) the grounds for dissenting from <p>.
- (D5) A commitment to withdrawing dissenting from <p> if some <p>-relevant information that defeats (by either undermining or overriding) the grounds for dissenting from <p> is acquired.

Mutatis mutandis, analogous considerations to those discussed in relation to (B1)–(B5) apply to (D1)–(D5).

Lastly, we can characterise the network of normative commitments associated with the state of suspension of judgement on <p> obtained via the act of refraining from both assenting to <p> and dissenting from <p> as follows:

- (S1) A commitment to not being committed to the truth of <p> as well as to the falsity of <p>.
- (S2) A commitment to regarding any mental state that excludes refraining from both assenting to <p> and dissenting from <p> as incorrect.
- (S3) A commitment to holding on to refraining from both assenting to <p> and dissenting from <p> if no <p>-relevant information that defeats (by either undermining or overriding) the grounds for refraining from both assenting to <p> and dissenting from <p> is acquired.
- (S4) A commitment to be willing to defend the appropriateness of refraining from both assenting to <p> and dissenting from <p> by fending off objections and/or countervailing any <p>-relevant information that defeats (by either undermining or overriding) the grounds for refraining from both assenting to <p> and dissenting from <p>.

¹⁸This is because the notion of (in)correctness in place in (B2) may have a rather minimal normative significance, as explained in Ferrari 2018.

(S5) A commitment to either assenting to <p> or dissenting from <p> if some <p>-relevant information that defeats (by either undermining or overriding) the grounds for refraining from both assenting to <p> and dissenting from <p> is acquired.

Again, similar remarks to those made in relation to (B1)–(B5) apply in the case of (S1)–(S5). (S1) entails a commitment to not being committed either to the truth of <p> or to the falsity of <p>. As mentioned earlier, this might make it seem as though I take suspension of judgement to be a kind of higher-order state, but I take only the commitments associated with suspension of judgement to be higher-order. And this does not force me to take the state itself to be higher-order. This set of commitments characterises, at least partly, the normative profile distinctive of the state of suspended judgement.¹⁹ These commitments are characteristic of a robust form of suspended judgement. There may be a variety of kinds of states of suspended judgement (or a variety of agnostic stances). In what follows I consider only a robust sense of suspension that can be thought of in terms of some kind of grounded agnosticism (Ferrari and Incurvati 2021). I believe we can characterize the normative profile associated with weaker notions of suspended judgement by dropping some of the commitments that are characteristic of the more robust form of suspended judgement. In this way, the framework sketched here is flexible enough to capture the differences in terms of the normative profiles associated with a variety of notions of suspended judgement (or agnostic stance).²⁰

The three sets of commitments associated with the three mental states under discussion here give us what I take to be the *core* commitments that are characteristic—that is, partly constitutive—of these states. There might be other commitments, but, again, my aim here is not comprehensiveness. I am aware that the account of the three mental states of belief, disbelief, and suspension that I've presented here is just a first sketch. Of course, much more needs to be said and done to flesh out the view in detail and assess its potential for a number of debates in epistemology and the philosophies of language and mind. This is a task I cannot hope to take on in this essay. Be that as it may, the bare-bones structure of the view I've just introduced is all I require in order to proceed with my proposal of how to account for the disagreement between a suspender and a (dis)believer. I now turn to this task.

4 | HOW TO ACCOUNT FOR THE DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN SARAH, BRIGITTE, AND DIANA

Now that we have this commitment-based model for understanding the normative implications of having one of the three mental states of belief, disbelief, and suspended judgement, let's tackle the *no common source challenge*. What this challenge seems to highlight is that an important condition of adequacy for an account of genuine disagreement is what might be called *the common source requirement*:

(CSR): In order for two or more subjects to be in a relation of disagreement there must be some thing they disagree about—that is, there must be a common locus of their disagreement that provides the source of the conflict/incompatibility between those involved in the disagreement.

¹⁹See Rosa 2019 for an insightful discussion of the logical (bridge) principles governing suspension of judgement within the context of deductive arguments. I take the formal model developed in Incurvati and Schlöder 2017 for weak rejection to be applicable also to the notion of suspended judgement developed in the present essay.

²⁰For instance, the normative profile associated with what Ferrari and Incurvati 2021 calls *ungrounded agnosticism* may have only the first commitment (S1), while the normative profile of increasingly stronger notions of *grounded agnosticism* may be characterized by adding some, or all, of the other normative commitments (S2–S5) discussed above. I hope to develop the details of this picture in future work.

I take this to be a rather intuitive requirement that matches our common practice of disagreement attribution: when we say that two (or more) subjects are in a relation of disagreement, we want to be able to say what they are disagreeing about (and, of course, we may want to remain rather open-minded concerning what an appropriate object of disagreement is). If such a common object is lacking, we wouldn't say that the two (or more) subjects are in disagreement (despite the fact that they may still be having a dispute, perhaps a merely verbal one).

Jonathan Barnes in *The Toils of Scepticism* sketches a promising strategy to satisfy (CSR). He suggests tackling the no common source challenge by referring to the conflict between the attitudes involved in the disagreement: acceptance of <p>, rejection of <p>, and suspension of judgement about whether <p>:

Let us say that someone “takes an attitude” to a question ?Q if, having considered the matter, he either accepts some proposition as the answer to ?Q or rejects some proposition as an answer to ?Q or suspends judgement over ?Q. Such attitudes may be said to conflict with one another in a variety of ways. Accepting P1 will conflict with accepting P2 when P1 and P2 are incompatible with one another. Rejecting P will conflict with accepting P. And suspending judgement over ?Q will conflict with any other attitude to ?Q. Then we may define disagreement simply enough, as follows:

(D2) X and Y disagree over some issue ?Q whenever X and Y hold conflicting attitudes to ?Q. (Barnes 1990, 15)

Let's bracket the fact that Barnes, in this passage, takes suspended judgement to be an attitude that a subject might have towards a question, while I take it to be an attitude towards propositions.²¹ The characterization of disagreement that Barnes seems to be appealing to is in line with what John MacFarlane has called *doxastic noncotenability* (2014, 122). What we have so far, however, is only the sketch of a proposal: we need an explanation of the nature of the conflict at the core of Barnes's characterisation of disagreement—what he labels “(D2)” in the quoted passage. This is exactly what the rest of this section aims to accomplish.

Once we understand the normative profiles of belief, disbelief, and suspended judgement in the way outlined in the previous section, we are a step closer to fully accounting for the thought that Sarah, Brigitte, and Diana genuinely disagree about whether Mike is the murderer, and in such a way as to satisfy (CSR). What is needed to complete the task is to provide a characterisation of disagreement that fits the bill.

As current debates on disagreement show, there is a variety of things that can equally merit the label “disagreement.” MacFarlane more than anybody else, at least in print, has made a strong case in favour of a pluralistic understanding of the phenomenon of disagreement (2014, chap. 6). More work has yet to be done to fully understand what the various phenomena that MacFarlane groups under the label “disagreement” have in common—and, thus, on the questions whether and in what sense his account amounts to a genuine form of pluralism encompassing both unity and plurality (Moruzzi forthcoming discusses this)—but it is not my intention here to oppose this pluralistic conception of disagreement. Since, however, in this essay I am interested exclusively in accounting for the kind of disagreement that may occur

²¹See Atkins 2017 for some argument in favour of understanding suspended judgment as a proposition-directed attitude. Although this is in contrast with some aspects of Friedman's proposal—especially with the idea that suspended judgement is a question-directed stance—but see Masny 2020 for some interesting criticism of this aspect of Friedman's model—it is fully compatible with the general aim of Friedman's discussion, namely, that of showing that suspended judgement is a distinctive first-order mental state.

between someone who believes (or disbelieves) $\langle p \rangle$ and someone who suspends judgement about $\langle p \rangle$, I'll focus only on the subset of attitudinal disagreement that MacFarlane calls "doxastic noncotenability," leaving a discussion of other kinds of disagreement for another occasion.²²

I take disagreement—understood as doxastic noncotenability—to be primarily a relation holding between mental states that signals the presence of some conflict—or better, some kind of (normative) incompatibility—between these states. More precisely, I characterise disagreement as follows:

(DIS): A and B disagree about whether $\langle p \rangle$ if, and only if, A's mental state with content $\langle p \rangle$ (for example, the state of $\langle p \rangle$ belief) is noncotenable with B's mental state with content $\langle p \rangle$ (for example, the state of $\langle p \rangle$ disbelief or the state of $\langle p \rangle$ suspension)—that is, A cannot endorse B's mental state towards $\langle p \rangle$ alongside her own state without thereby giving rise to a shortcoming in her doxastic system.

(DIS) is exactly what we need in order to fully account for the disagreement between Sarah, Brigitte, and Diana. The nature of the shortcoming at issue in (DIS) is normative. More precisely, the shortcoming is generated by the incompatibility between the sets of normative commitments that Sarah, Brigitte, and Diana are subject to in virtue of having the specific mental states they respectively have. The incompatibility amounts to the fact that once an agent endorses one of the three mental states of either belief, disbelief, or suspended judgement, and thus takes on the set of commitments characteristic of that state, she cannot, at the same time, also take on any other set of commitments characteristic of the other two mental states. The thought is that no single thinker would be able to fulfil alternative sets of normative commitments, in a way analogous (but just analogous!) to that in which a moral agent wouldn't be able to perform the different sets of actions morally recommended to her when facing a moral dilemma.²³

For instance, Sarah, in being in an attitude of suspended judgement about whether Mike is the murderer, is subject to the set of normative commitments characteristic of that state, namely, (S1)–(S5). In particular, Sarah, in refraining from both assenting to $\langle \text{Mike is the murderer} \rangle$ and dissenting from $\langle \text{Mike is the murderer} \rangle$ suspends judgement on $\langle \text{Mike is the murderer} \rangle$ and thus is committed to not being committed to the truth as well as the falsity of $\langle \text{Mike is the murderer} \rangle$. She is also committed to regarding as improper any mental state that excludes refraining from both assenting to $\langle \text{Mike is the murderer} \rangle$ and dissenting from $\langle \text{Mike is the murderer} \rangle$. Brigitte's mental state of belief is associated with a different set of normative commitments, namely, (B1)–(B5). In particular, her assenting to $\langle \text{Mike is the murderer} \rangle$ leads to the belief that Mike is the murderer, which engenders the commitment to take $\langle \text{Mike is the murderer} \rangle$ as true. Brigitte is also committed to regarding as improper any other state that excludes assenting to $\langle \text{Mike is the murderer} \rangle$. Lastly, Diana, in disbelieving that Mike is the murderer, is subject to a still different set of commitments, namely, (D1)–(D5). In particular, her dissenting from $\langle \text{Mike is the murderer} \rangle$ leads her to disbelieve that Mike is the murderer, which engenders a commitment to take $\langle \text{Mike is the murderer} \rangle$ to be false. Her disbelief also

²²There are good reasons, independent of the project of this essay, for opting for a doxastic noncotenability notion of disagreement—see MacFarlane 2014 for a discussion of the merits of this account. The most important merit, I think, is the fact that it can easily accommodate non-orthodox treatments of disbelief and thus account for the disagreement between the believer and the disbeliever without having to identify a $\langle p \rangle$ disbelief with a $\langle \text{not-}p \rangle$ belief.

²³This is just an analogy in the sense that I don't want to commit to any, potentially controversial, view concerning a parallelism between cognitive agency and moral agency.

engenders a commitment to regard as improper any mental state that excludes dissenting from <p>.

Clearly, Sarah cannot consistently (that is, without thereby giving rise to a normative shortcoming in her doxastic state) endorse the set of commitments engendered by Brigitte's mental state of belief or that engendered by Diana's mental state of disbelief together with the commitments engendered by Sarah's own mental state of suspended judgement. For instance, Sarah cannot do the following two things at the same time consistently with her commitment to not being committed to the truth as well as the falsity of <Mike is the murderer>: first, assent to <Mike is the murderer> and, second, dissent from <Mike is the murderer>. In other words, the three mental states endorsed respectively by Sarah, Brigitte, and Diana are mutually noncotenable and thus incompatible. The primary source of the incompatibility resides in the normative conflict between the sets of commitments characteristic of the three mental states of belief, disbelief, and suspended judgement that the three subjects have in relation to the very same propositional content—that is, the proposition that Mike is the murderer.²⁴ The disagreement between Sarah and both Brigitte and Diana as well as its ultimate source are thus explained.

5 | MOTIVATING MY ACCOUNT

Before concluding, let me briefly address some lines of scepticism towards my proposal. Doing so will also allow me to highlight some of the merits of my proposal. The main line of scepticism I'd like to discuss is aimed at casting doubt on the explanatory advantages of my account of the disagreement between a (dis)believer and a suspender.²⁵ Couldn't we explain such a disagreement simply by pointing out that while, for example, Brigitte's belief that Mike is the murderer involves assenting to the truth of <Mike is the murderer>, Sarah's suspension involves refraining from assenting to (and dissenting from) <Mike is the murderer>. Clearly, assenting to <p> and refraining from assenting to <p>, and thus belief and suspension, *cannot*, for conceptual reasons, be simultaneously co-instantiated in the same subject. This idea can be cashed out in terms of the following exclusion intuition:

Exclusion Intuition (EI): It is (conceptually) impossible for a thinker to simultaneously suspend judgement on <p> and (dis)believe <p>.

If EI is true, then we may have noncotenability, and thus disagreement, between the suspender and the (dis)believer without appealing to normative commitments.

Plausible as EI looks, I think one may reasonably resist it. It is indeed very hard to establish claims of conceptual impossibility, in general. Let me begin with a rather down-to-earth remark. It's quite an ordinary phenomenon that we, as ordinary thinkers, have beliefs whose contents jointly entail a contradiction. Although we do not explicitly believe a contradiction, we do end up having conflicting mental states about one and the same proposition. A philosophically sophisticated case in point is given by the famous Paderewski example from Saul Kripke's essay "A Puzzle About Belief" (1979). In this example, the same thinker, Peter, can be correctly described as both assenting to and refraining from assenting to the very same proposition, namely, that Paderewski

²⁴Of course, there could be additional sources of incompatibility. For instance, Brigitte and Diana may disagree about whether Mike is the murderer also in virtue of the fact that the contents of their respective attitudes are in a relation of logical incompatibility (either contrary or contradictory). Or their disagreement may involve higher-order epistemic propositions—that is, propositions concerning the evidential status of the subject matter under discussion (for instance, the proposition that the evidence available is sufficient for justifying that Mike is the murderer).

²⁵Many thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this.

had musical talent. Such a description of Peter's doxastic system certainly generates a puzzle. If, however, we take the example at face value, as in fact an attempt to truly describe what's going on in Peter's doxastic system, it does not amount to a conceptual impossibility. And, overall, accepting this conclusion does not seem less reasonable than accepting, for instance, Millianism about proper names. Now, one may redescribe this scenario by invoking the idea of a fragmentation (or compartmentalisation) of our doxastic systems (that is, the corpus of all our doxastic states). If you feel attracted to this idea of fragmented mental life, as it were, you shouldn't have any problem accepting the compossibility of belief, disbelief, and suspension over the same proposition: in one of his doxastic fragments Peter assents to <Paderewski had musical talent>, thus believing such a proposition, while in some other doxastic fragments Peter refrains from both assenting to and dissenting from <Paderewski had musical talent>, thus suspending judgement about such a proposition (see Egan 2008 for a favourable discussion of this fragmented model of the mind). This fact alone seems sufficient to reject EI in its full generality.

The objector may respond at this point by modifying EI, relativizing it to a single fragment, and adding some kind of introspective clause. Let's call this new principle EI*:

(EI*): It is (conceptually) impossible for a thinker, within the very same doxastic fragment, to simultaneously and consciously suspend judgement on <p> and (dis)believe <p>.

I suppose that ultimately the rationale behind EI* (and perhaps also behind EI) is the idea that it is conceptually impossible to end up being in a doxastic state (or fragment) from which we could derive that the thinker in question explicitly endorses contradictory mental states. This seems a conceptual impossibility. But is it? Graham Priest (2006 and 2010) more than anyone else has made quite a convincing point that if we endorse something in the ballpark of LP (the so-called *Logic of Paradox*), then there should be no worry in admitting that there are (surely very few) true contradictions—that is, sentences expressing true propositions of the form <p & not-p>. The Liar (L) and the Strengthened Liar (SL) are two prominent examples. After all, we have a proof of <L> and a proof of <not-L> and thus a proof of <L & not-L>. There's no obstacle for a thinker who endorses LP then to accept <L> as well as to accept <not-L>, and thus to accept contradictory propositions within the very same fragment, and consciously so.

There's more. The very rich literature on LP contains a discussion of two paradoxes targeting mental states within a dialethist context that seem particularly interesting for our purposes here. The first is the so-called assertibility paradox proposed in Littmann and Simmons 2004, the conclusion of which is, roughly, that, within LP, a dialetheia is both assertible and not assertible. This effectively demonstrates that with respect to a dialetheia <p>, a thinker who endorses LP would both accept <p> and not accept <p>, consciously and within the same fragment. The second paradox is the so-called deniability paradox discussed in Carrara and Murzi 2015, where we read that, using resources fully compatible with LP, a paradox of deniability can be construed whose conclusion is that the very same proposition (namely, the proposition that says of itself that it is rationally deniable) is both to be accepted and rejected, consciously and within the same fragment. This discussion seems to cast doubt on EI* and suggests that it is indeed possible, endorsing LP, in particular dialetheism, to consciously end up having conflicting mental states towards the same proposition and within the same doxastic fragment.²⁶

Priest opposes this conclusion, as he claims that it is “impossible jointly to accept and reject the same thing” (2006, 103). What these paradoxes show, argues Priest, is that an endorsement

²⁶Just to be very clear in order to avoid any misunderstanding: I'm not claiming that LP theorists do in fact commit to the possibility of simultaneous co-instantiation of inconsistent mental states or that they should do so. Moreover, I do not want to commit to LP. These are just examples I use in order to show how the conceptual impossibility claim at the core of both EI and EI* may be resisted.

of LP leads to rational dilemmas, that is, situations where we have conflicting normative requirements: one is obligated to do two distinct things, though it is impossible to do both. But it is not clear to me what the motivations are for a dialethist like Priest to go this way rather than admit the possibility of doxastic states in which an agent jointly accepts and rejects (or refrains from both accepting and rejecting) the same thing. After all, some dialethists seem to be quite happy to allow for the claim that some contradictions are true in the actual world in response to semantic paradoxes. If we accept even a modicum of realism, the truth of some contradictions entails the existence, in the actual world, of inconsistent facts—that is, those facts that make the contradictions true. Once we allow for the existence of inconsistent facts, it's hard to see what stops a moderate-realist dialethist from allowing for inconsistent doxastic systems (that is, doxastic systems in which an agent both assents to and refrains from assenting to the same proposition). Since this option is fully coherent within a dialethist framework, this would be enough to cast doubts on EI*.

Be that as it may, I suggest that instead of appealing to a claim of conceptual impossibility to account for the noncotenability of suspension with both belief and disbelief, we should ground the kind of conflict at the core of the noncotenability model of disagreement in normative terms—more specifically, in terms of a conflict between the normative commitments associated with the three attitudes.

There's a second line of scepticism about the explanatory advantage of taking on board my proposal that I'd like briefly to discuss. The objector would now agree that we should explain the conflict at the core of the noncotenability model of disagreement in normative terms. But he would ask: Why should we explain the conflict in terms of a clash in normative commitments (and thus in terms of what I've called management normativity) rather than in terms of a normative clash located at the level of what I've called input normativity? For instance, the objector may argue that suspension of judgement is warranted only if, let's say, the evidence for $\langle p \rangle$ and $\langle \text{not-}p \rangle$ is balanced, whereas belief is warranted only if the total evidence speaks in favour of $\langle p \rangle$. As the evidence cannot both be balanced and speak in favour of $\langle p \rangle$, suspension and belief are normatively noncotenable.²⁷ Thus, there is disagreement in terms of doxastic noncotenability between the suspender and the believer because evidence cannot both be balanced and speak in favour of $\langle p \rangle$.

I believe this proposal (let's call it the *evidentialist picture*—EP, for short) underdetermines cases of potential disagreement. In this respect it is more limited than the model presented here. In other words, there are cases that we would intuitively characterize as cases of genuine disagreement (in terms of noncotenability) and are so characterized by my proposal but not by EP.

I'll briefly discuss two kinds of cases that seem particularly problematic for EP. The first kind concerns a dispute about matters of basic taste that we would intuitively consider a genuine case of disagreement (as evidenced by the extensive literature on the issue).²⁸ Julie and Jill are sharing a sushi plate at a Japanese restaurant. They are both sampling the sashimi on the shared plate. Let's assume that all the sashimi comes from the very same piece of salmon. Let's also assume that there's nothing fancy going on in Julie and Jill's gustatory apparatus (which is working perfectly fine on this occasion). Julie in tasting the sashimi has a pleasant gustatory experience and forms the belief that the sashimi is delicious. Jill in tasting the sashimi has a displeasing experience and thus comes to disbelieve that the sashimi is delicious (or, using suspension instead of disbelief, we

²⁷A situation of balanced evidence is only one among various situations where suspension would be appropriate. Suspension may be appropriate also in cases where the evidence does favour, say, $\langle p \rangle$ over $\langle \text{not-}p \rangle$ but, because of the high stakes involved, the agent ends up suspending judgement about $\langle p \rangle$. Alternatively, the subject could have just started her inquiry into whether $\langle p \rangle$ and hasn't gathered enough evidence to settle on either $\langle p \rangle$ or $\langle \text{not-}p \rangle$ —a case of ungrounded agnosticism in the sense of Ferrari and Incurvati 2021.

²⁸See footnote 12 above for some references.

could imagine that she has a somewhat mixed experience about the sashimi and thus refrains from both assenting to and dissenting from <the sashimi is delicious>. Intuitively, we want to say that Julie and Jill disagree about whether the sashimi is delicious. But we also want to say that neither Julie nor Jill is misjudging the evidence. In other words, we want to say that both Jill and Julie's respective mental states are epistemically (and, perhaps more controversially, also alethically) in good standing. Since there are no normative conflicts when it comes to epistemic input norms, the evidentialist picture wouldn't classify the dispute between Julie and Jill as a case of disagreement. The picture I suggest, on the other hand, would to the contrary classify the dispute between Jill and Julie as a genuine case of disagreement. Julie, who believes that the sashimi is delicious, is in a mental state that engenders a set of commitments that are in conflict with those generated by Jill's mental state of disbelief (or suspension).

The second kind of case I'd like to mention in addressing the objector's scepticism is one that involves a dispute concerning borderline cases of paradigmatically vague expression. Let's suppose that Julie and Jill are in dispute over whether a certain surface S is red. Let's suppose that S's colour is a borderline case of redness. And let's also suppose that Julie and Jill are equally attentive, that they fully master colour concepts, and that there's nothing wrong with their faculties of perception. Julie looks at S and comes to believe that S is red, while Jill, who also looks at S, suspends judgement about whether S is red. Now it seems intuitive that Julie and Jill disagree about whether S is red (for the purpose of assessing the evidentialist picture under scrutiny, you may take Jill to disbelieve that S is red, if you think that doing so gives a more robust intuition of disagreement). The evidentialist picture does not, however, seem to classify the dispute between Jill and Julie as a case of disagreement. Let me elaborate on why that is so. On many plausible pictures of vagueness there's no amount of evidence that can be appealed to in order to settle the question whether a certain surface displaying a borderline case of redness is really red or not. In this respect, the available evidence does not settle the matter as to believing, disbelieving, or suspending judgement. One may, for instance, endorse a permissivist take on borderline cases and think that in such cases we are prepared to epistemically permit and tolerate opposed judgements (Wright 2001). Or one may think that borderline cases give rise to areas of normative silence in which no mental state is the right or the wrong one to endorse with respect to <p>, when <p> involves a borderline case (Williams 2012). In either model there is no normative conflict when it comes to epistemic input norms governing (dis)belief and suspension. Thus, again, EP would not classify the dispute between Julie and Jill as a case of disagreement. The picture I suggest would, to the contrary, classify such a dispute as indeed a case of disagreement. Julie, who believes that S is red, is in a mental state that engenders a set of commitments that are in conflict with those generated by Jill's mental state of suspension.

6 | CONCLUSION

The overall aim of this essay has been to provide an account of the notions of *suspended judgement* and *disagreement* that is able to explain how and why someone who is in a state of suspended judgement about <p> is in a relation of disagreement with someone who is in a state of belief about <p> as well as with someone who is in a state of disbelief about <p>, and in a way that fully satisfies (CSR).

The account aims to explain the disagreement between the (dis)believer and the agnostic at the level of the *noncotenability* between the normative profiles of their respective mental states. The basic thought is that if we conceive of the mental states of belief, disbelief, and suspension as partly constituted by a set of normative commitments that an agent is subject to in virtue of possessing one of these mental states, we can explain not only why these three mental states are distinct—and in a way that is broadly in agreement with Friedman's account of suspended

judgement (2013a and 2017)—but also how and why agents endorsing these three different mental states towards $\langle p \rangle$ mutually disagree.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ideas in this essay have been presented at various workshops and seminars, including *Meta-theories of Disagreement*, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy, in Budapest; *Logic, Epistemology and Metaphysics Forum* at the Institute of Philosophy, University of London; *Dynamics of Disagreement*, University of Cologne; Fourth Cologne-Leuven Epistemology Workshop, University of Leuven; Cogito Research Centre in Philosophy Seminar, University of Bologna; and LanCog Research Seminar, University of Lisbon. I'd like to thank the audiences at these workshops and seminars for constructive feedback. Special thanks for written comments and extensive conversations on earlier versions of this essay to Elke Brendel, Massimiliano Carrara, Matti Eklund, Jane Friedman, Thomas Grundmann, Ákos Gyarmathy, Péter Hartl, Luca Incurvati, Anne Meylan, Sebastiano Moruzzi, Moritz Müller, Nikolaj Pedersen, Giulia Pravato, Sven Rosenkranz, Elisabetta Sassarini, Erik Stei, Florian Steinberger, Giorgio Volpe, and Crispin Wright. Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

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How to cite this article: Ferrari, Filippo. 2022. "Disagreement and Suspended Judgement." *Metaphilosophy* 00 (0): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/meta.12555>.