**Reasonable Agnosticism**

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**3 Constraints** on a theory of Suspending Judgement:

1. Suspending whether p is an attitude that can be rendered more or less epistemically justified/rational, at least to some extent, according to one’s evidence.
2. Assuming it is even possible, it would bound to be an irrational combination of attitudes for a single subject to simultaneously both believe that p and suspend judgement whether p.
3. Suspending whether p is different from simply *having no opinion* whether p.

“Think about the theistic agnostic: she is not trying to merely dodge some beliefs; she is in some state that captures **her** **take or opinion** about whether God exists, **about the truth of matter**.” (Friedman, 2013a, 173, bold type added)

“The agnostic about the existence of God is not someone who lacks an opinion about whether God exists, but someone who has an opinion on the matter: a (roughly) neutral one.” (ibid. 178)

**4 Possible Theories** of Suspending Judgement

* **(NO-BEL)** NON-BELIEF VIEW: Suspending whether p consists in neither believing that p nor disbelieving that p. [Possible extra conditions: (i) the subject has considered the proposition p, (ii) the subject actively/deliberately refrains from believing/disbelieving that p, (iii) the subject’s lack of belief/disbelief is for ‘epistemic’ reasons.]
* **(CR)** CREDENCE VIEW: Suspending whether p consists in having some ‘middling’ level of credence (degrees of belief) that p, which falls short of outright belief in either p or in not-p. See e.g. Hajek (1998), Christensen (2009).
* **(BEL)** BELIEF VIEW: Suspending whether p consists in having some kind of belief – e.g. about whether one ought to believe p, about whether one is in a position to know whether p. See e.g. Crawford (2004), Bergmann (2005), Rosenkranz (2007)
* **(SG)** SUI GENERIS VIEW: Suspending whether p consists in having a ‘sui generis’ mental attitude concerning p that does not essentially involve either full or partial belief. See e.g. Friedman (2013a, forthcoming), Sturgeon (forthcoming)

NO-BEL and CR face severe difficulties – see Friedman (2013 for arguments against NO-BEL. See Friedman 2013b, Sturgeon forthcoming, Decker (2012) for problems with CR.

I want to argue against SG and in favour of a version of (BEL):

* **(BEL-E)** EVIDENTIAL-BELIEF VIEW: Suspending whether p constitutively requires having a belief or opinion that the available evidence does not clearly indicate either the truth or the falsity of p, *so far as one can currently tell*.

Actually, I think that any view of suspension should also accept the following constraint:

* DOXASTIC NEUTRALITY: Suspending whether p also requires that the subject is in a *neutral doxastic state* with respect to p – i.e. she neither believes that p nor disbelieves that p.

However, as this is potentially controversial, I won’t assume Doxastic Neutrality in what follows.

**BELIEF vs. SUSPENSION – COMPARE & CONTRAST:**

It is clear enough that one can form a belief that p despite having no opinion whatsoever about one’s evidence for p. And unless you are a fairly extreme internalist, it seems one could form a belief that p *as a* *rational response* to one’s evidence, without having any explicit further belief *about* that evidence. So then you might think we should favour an account of suspending judgement that treats it along the same lines as belief in these respects – which might seem to count against (BEL-E).

But why should we accept that it is a theoretical desideratum for belief and suspension to be treated the same way concerning whether having a view about one’s evidence is a constitutive requirement?

On anyone’s story there are 2 varieties of neutrality as to whether p (unlike positively accepting that p) – the genuinely agnostic opinionated kind and the mere non-opinionated kind– and these 2 varieties *need to be distinguished* somehow. So: that (BEL-E) treats suspension and belief differently is *motivated* by a difference between the two attitudes that all parties accept and need to account for.

Moreover: there is some reason to think that suspension is a *more sophisticated*, intellectually demanding attitude than belief – we are happy to ascribe belief to young children and animals, but it sounds strange to describe them as agnostic.

**AGAINST (SG), FOR (BEL-E):**

If suspending whether p does *not* essentially involve any belief (full or partial) then it is not committed to the truth or falsity of anything – i.e. it is an alethically uncommitted state. In this respect suspending whether p would be like hoping that p, imagining that p etc.

But then why should one’s *evidence* have any immediate bearing on the rational/justificatory status of such an alethically uncommitted state? Evidence *just is* something which indicates what is/is not the case. Other uncommitted propositional attitudes do not have a rational/justificatory status that is connected to the subject’s evidence in this way. Hoping, desiring, imagining etc are not immediately rendered more/less rational/justified simply according to one’s evidence. In contrast, believing, judging, guessing are all attitudes that take a stance on the world being some way – and so it is readily intelligible why *evidence,* bearing on what is the case, will also bear on the rational/justificatory status of these alethically committed attitudes. On the (SG) view then it is left entirely mysterious and unexplained *why* suspending judgement is rendered more/less rational/justified by one’s evidence.

We can regiment this into an (over-simple) argument as follows:

(1) Sp is an attitude that is rendered more/less epistemically rational/justified according to one’s evidence. [Constraint (I) above.]

(2) IF (SG) is the correct account of Sp, THEN Sp is an alethically uncommitted attitude.

(3) IF an attitude is alethically uncommitted, THEN it is not rendered more/less epistemically rational/justified according to one’s evidence.

(4) SO: (SG) is not the correct account of Sp.

Counter-example to premise (3): alethically uncommitted states that have a content that is *about* an attitude that *is* alethically committed. E.g. intending not to believe that p. This state is not itself alethically committed yet it looks like it can be rendered *epistemically* rational according to one’s evidence.

However, this would be a case of derivative or parasitic rationality/irrationality. Intentions are not in general evaluable as epistemically rational/irrational. This specific intention inherits a ‘second-hand’ epistemic rationality/irrationality in virtue of being a means to the end of having an attitude that is the real locus of epistemic rationality/irrationality.

I think it would be implausible to hold that Sp is an attitude that has merely inherited/derivative rationality – moreover this is not how (SG) theorists are thinking of the state. An improved argument then is:

(1\*) Sp is an attitude that is *non-derivatively* rendered more/less epistemically rational/justified according to one’s evidence.

(2\*) IF (SG) is the correct account of Sp, THEN Sp is an alethically uncommitted attitude.

(3\*) IF an attitude is alethically uncommitted, THEN it is not *non-derivatively* rendered more/less epistemically rational/justified according to one’s evidence.

(4\*) SO: (SG) is not the correct account of Sp.

The same sorts of issues arise for (SG) with meeting constraint II. E.g. Why should Bp and Sp be an irrational combination if Sp is alethically uncommitted?

In contrast, I think (BEL-E) *can* meet the constraints as according to (BEL-E), the state of suspending judgement *does* still essentially involve some kind of alethic commitment: a belief *about one’s evidence* whether p – viz. that it is inconclusive.

It easily explains constraint (II) – Bp & B(my evidence whether p in inconclusive) would clearly be an irrational combination of attitudes.

It can also clearly satisfy constraint (III): how/why Sp differs from mere non-opinionated neutrality – Sp involves taking a stance about the state of one’s evidence.

With constraint (I), (BEL-E) yields a very simple explanation for how Sp can be justified by one’s TOTAL evidence – that is *including* any higher-order evidence about one’s (1st-order) evidence whether p.

However, suppose we allow an ‘externalist’ conception of evidence, on which a subject can possess evidence that rationally bears on her doxastic attitudes, *even though* she has no reflective/cognitive access to it – i.e. even though she has misleading (higher-order) evidence of her own evidence. Now many interesting, tricky issues arise – which I cannot discuss today. [I think the issues here are difficult and tricky for *everyone* not just the BEL-E theory…]

CONCLUSION: Agnostics are believers!