

Canadian Philosophical Association 2018 Prize Winning Paper

# Constitutive Reasons and the Suspension of Judgement

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*ABSTRACT:* This paper identifies a puzzle that emerges when recent work on the suspension of judgement is integrated with evidentialist solutions to the wrong kind of reasons problem: it looks like there is no such thing as a reason to suspend judgement. Two possible responses to this puzzle are considered: one recharacterizes the suspension of judgement as a mental action, and the other recharacterizes it as a second-order attitude. It is argued that these responses sidestep the puzzle only with unacceptable compromise to the view of suspension of judgement.

*RÉSUMÉ :* Cet article relève une impasse qui apparaît quand les travaux récents sur la suspension du jugement sont intégrés aux solutions évidentialistes au problème de la «mauvaise sorte de raison» : il semble qu'il n'existe aucune raison pour suspendre le jugement. Deux réponses possibles à cette impasse sont considérées ici : l'une redéfinit la suspension du jugement comme une action mentale, l'autre la redéfinit comme une attitude de second ordre. L'article fait valoir que ces réponses n'évitent l'impasse qu'en compromettant de manière inacceptable la notion de suspension du jugement.

**Keywords:** epistemology, evidentialism, doxastic attitudes, suspension of judgement, reasons

## I. Introduction

There are at least two things that might happen when you consider a proposition: you might come to believe that the proposition is true, or you might come to believe that it is false. It is usually these two options that epistemologists have in

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mind when we ask questions about reasoning and rationality. However, despite how little attention it has received, most would agree that there is a third option as well: you might take a neutral stance toward a proposition by suspending judgement on the question at hand. Jane Friedman has begun to fill the lacuna of work on the suspension of judgement, arguing that suspension<sup>1</sup> is a doxastic attitude in its own right. This stands in opposition to views that would characterize the suspension of judgement as a mere lack of belief or disbelief.

If Friedman is right that suspension is a doxastic attitude, then we should expect it to bear certain similarities to the other doxastic attitudes. One similarity we might expect is that our theories about the right kind of reasons for doxastic attitudes will be applicable to suspension as well. This paper identifies a puzzling result of applying Pamela Hieronymi's evidentialist framework, developed to understand reasons for belief, to the case of suspended judgement: it makes it look as though there is no such thing as a reason to suspend judgement.

## II. The Suspension of Judgement

Friedman characterizes the suspension of judgement as a committedly neutral attitude toward a question. Though it is appropriate to say that one is neutral on questions about which one merely lacks beliefs or disbeliefs, to suspend judgement is to do more than merely fail to form one of those attitudes. According to Friedman,<sup>2</sup> suspension stands beside belief and disbelief as a third doxastic attitude in its own right. A compelling reason to accept an attitudinal account like Friedman's is that the state of merely having not made a judgement about a proposition can be found in more situations than those we typically mean to identify when we talk about suspending judgement. For example, anything incapable of considering questions and making judgements is in this state (e.g., rocks, your left shoe, and airplanes), and so is anyone who, in fact, does consider a question but fails to make a judgement for reasons only accidentally connected to these considerations—for example, someone who fails to form a belief about the answer to a question she is considering simply because she gets distracted before doing so. These apparently infelicitous attributions of suspended judgement are ruled out by an attitudinal account of suspension like Friedman's, which characterizes suspension not as a lack of belief and disbelief, but instead as an attitude of committed neutrality.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I will occasionally use 'suspension' as shorthand for 'suspension of judgement' in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Friedman, "Why Suspend Judging?"

<sup>3</sup> I take this point to be analogous to one made by Hieronymi about the difference between belief and other truth-oriented cognitive states. According to Hieronymi (2006), what distinguishes belief from other states like merely hypothesizing is the *commitment* to some proposition as true. In the same way, suspension can be differentiated from mere lack of judgement by its commitment to neutrality on a question. The sense of 'commitment' intended here means just that one has settled a question for oneself.

Failing to form the attitudes of belief or disbelief won't do; to suspend judgement is to form a different doxastic attitude, one constituted by committed neutrality on a question.

Though differentiating between suspension and the mere lack of other doxastic attitudes helps us to attribute the suspension of judgement only to individuals who really do seem to be suspending judgement, it comes at a cost. If this distinction between suspension and mere lack of judgement is to be drawn, then something must be said about why one would ever suspend judgement instead of simply not judging. Consider this relatively straightforward example in which a neutral stance is the rational one<sup>4</sup>: if one's evidence to believe a proposition  $p$  and one's evidence to not believe  $p$  are of equal weight, one is prohibited both from believing  $p$  and from disbelieving  $p$ .<sup>5</sup> One must remain neutral on the question at hand, but this is not the end of the story if we admit that there are two ways to remain neutral. Should one simply not form any beliefs about the proposition, or should one also adopt this attitude of suspended judgement? Why become *committedly* neutral on a question?

### III. Doxastic Attitudes

If Friedman is right and suspension is a doxastic attitude, then it should be possible to address this question by drawing upon a distinction that has been made about reasons for other doxastic attitudes. Hieronymi writes that doxastic attitudes are a kind of commitment-constituted attitude.<sup>6</sup> A commitment-constituted attitude is just an attitude that one forms by settling a question for oneself. To settle a question for oneself is to become committed to the truth of the content of one's answer to this question. Just which kind of commitment-constituted attitude one ends up

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<sup>4</sup> This case of balanced evidence is what I will refer to and have in mind throughout this paper. Though there are interesting questions to be asked about whether it is rational to suspend judgement in other cases (for example, cases in which one's evidence for and against  $p$  is not equal but is still inconclusive, cases in which one is bombarded with too much evidence at once or finds one's evidence confusing, and cases in which practical stakes may raise one's evidential standards), these normative questions are beyond the scope of this paper. For present purposes, it will suffice to focus on the simple case, as even it poses a problem for the evidentialist.

<sup>5</sup> Though this is a relatively straightforward example, it is not uncontentious. For a more permissive account of weighing reasons, and one according to which practical reasons for belief can sometimes settle ties of this kind, see Reisner, "Weighing Pragmatic and Evidential Reasons for Belief." The question of whether epistemic and practical reasons can be balanced to produce rational all-things-considered verdicts is not one that I will address here. The goal of this paper is only to establish whether someone who already accepts evidentialism can say anything about reasons for the suspension of judgement, so a broadly evidentialist approach to rationality will be presupposed throughout.

<sup>6</sup> Hieronymi, "The Wrong Kind of Reason."

with depends on the particular question one settles. Settling a question like ‘whether to  $\varphi$ ’ results in forming an intention to  $\varphi$ , and settling a question like ‘whether  $p$ ’ results in forming a doxastic attitude. Settling positively the question ‘whether it is raining’ results in forming the belief that it is raining, and settling negatively the question ‘whether I brought my umbrella’ results in disbelieving that you brought your umbrella.

Quite a lot can be learned about the reasons one could possibly have for a doxastic state when this relationship between commitment-constituted attitudes and questions is recognized. As Hieronymi argues, if a reason is to contribute to the settling of a question, then it will have to be taken to *bear* on that question. Though the fact that I own a green pen is a consideration, it is not a consideration that I take to bear on every question. For example, I do not take that consideration to bear on the question ‘whether it is raining.’ Since I do not take it to bear on that question, it cannot serve as a reason for me to form a commitment-constituted attitude about that question. I do take the consideration ‘the ground is getting wet’ to bear on that question, and so this consideration could be a reason for me to settle that question and therein form a belief.

Something broader than this can also be said about the right reasons for beliefs. They must be reasons of the right *kind*. If a reason is to bear on the question, the settling of which results in a doxastic attitude, then it must be taken to bear on the truth of the content of the answer and not merely speak in favour of adopting the attitude. Take, for example, the consideration ‘it would make me happy to believe that I am six feet tall.’ This consideration does somehow speak in favour of adopting the belief that I am six feet tall (and so there is a sense in which it is a reason to adopt the attitude), but I do not take it to bear on the question of whether I actually am six feet tall. If I were to find this consideration convincing, what I would end up with would not be the belief that I am six feet tall; I would instead end up with the belief that it would make me happy to believe as much. Since I do not take it to bear on the question, the settling of which would result in the target belief, it could not possibly be a reason for me to form that belief. That is just to say that it could not contribute to settling the question, as reasons are supposed to do.

Hieronymi calls reasons that are taken to bear on the right question ‘constitutive reasons,’ and considerations which speak in favour of an attitude but which are not taken to bear on the right question ‘extrinsic reasons’ for the attitude.<sup>7</sup> Extrinsic reasons cannot themselves convince one to adopt a commitment-constituted attitude. Instead, they are reasons for second-order beliefs about an attitude; beliefs that the attitude in question would be good to have, for example. The primary insight that I would like to glean from Hieronymi’s work is that if a consideration is to serve as a reason to suspend judgement, and suspension is a doxastic attitude and therefore a

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<sup>7</sup> Hieronymi, “Controlling Attitudes.”

commitment-constituted attitude, then this consideration must be a *constitutive* reason for the suspension of judgement, not an extrinsic reason. That is to say, it must be taken to bear on the question upon which one suspends judgement.

#### IV. The Puzzle

If we adopt this framework for reasons from Hieronymi and the suspension of judgement is a doxastic state like belief, then we should expect reasons to suspend judgement to be such that finding them convincing results in becoming committedly neutral on a question. They must be taken to bear on the right question, and not lead instead to the formation of only a second-order belief about the benefit of suspending judgement. This is where things become difficult for the attitudinal account of suspension. The reasons by which one becomes convinced to take a neutral stance on a question just are the various reasons taken to count in favour of believing and disbelieving one or another answer to a question. One simply considers one's constitutive reasons to believe  $p$  and one's constitutive reasons to disbelieve  $p$ , and if they are found to be equally convincing or otherwise insufficiently conclusive, one suspends judgement on the question that  $p$  is meant to answer. However, as Friedman has pointed out, these reasons fall short of pushing one over the edge to the suspension of judgement; it is purportedly possible in the face of such evidence to merely neither believe nor disbelieve the proposition. These cannot be the constitutive reasons to suspend judgement that we are after, because they only get one as far as this other form of non-committal neutrality.

We seem to be in a bind: the commitment to neutrality that is constitutive of the suspension of judgement means that considerations that are not taken to bear on the truth of any of the possible answers to a question are merely extrinsic reasons. But then we are left with only considerations that do bear on the possible answers to a question, which do not seem by themselves to dictate that one suspends judgement instead of merely neither believe nor disbelieve propositions. On the one hand, there are merely extrinsic reasons to suspend. On the other, there are constitutive reasons to believe one or another of the answers to a question. It seems that the advocate of the evidentialist approach that I have articulated is left with nothing with which to populate the category of constitutive reasons for suspension itself.

#### V. The Mental Action Response

One *prima facie* promising way to sidestep the puzzle is to argue that I have mischaracterized suspension of judgement as commitment-constituted. If suspension is not a commitment-constituted attitude, then it would clearly be inappropriate to hold reasons for suspension to Hieronymi's standard for reasons for belief. This response is appealing because Hieronymi describes a commitment-constituted attitude as an attitude that one forms simply by settling a question for oneself. Belief is a prime example of such an attitude because becoming convinced that  $p$  simply is coming to believe that  $p$ , but the suspension of

judgement may not seem like a prime example of such an attitude, since suspension precisely is the failure to definitively settle a question for oneself. If suspension does not involve settling a question, then it is obvious why we have not found any candidates for constitutive reasons to suspend: constitutive reasons just are those reasons that bear on the question, the settling of which results in adopting the commitment-constituted attitude in question.<sup>8</sup> So, one may conclude that suspension is not a commitment-constituted attitude because it is not the sort of attitude that is formed by settling on an answer to a question.

If one suspends judgement for reasons extrinsic to the question upon which one suspends, then suspension must be what Hieronymi calls a ‘mental act.’ By this Hieronymi just means any attitude that one can form for extrinsic reasons.<sup>9</sup> Imagining is a good example of a mental act understood in this way: one imagines just by deciding that one wants to imagine, and whether one imagines is not constrained by whether the content that one has chosen to imagine obtains. If this line of response is taken and suspension is understood as a mental act and not a commitment-constituted attitude, then it is analogously permissible to suspend judgement whenever one sees fit, regardless of the content of the question upon which one suspends. This mental action response is able to retain Hieronymi’s evidentialist account of reasons, while still granting that suspension of judgement is an attitude, not a mere lack of belief; it is just a different kind of attitude than the one I initially thought it to be.

I have three primary worries about the mental action response. The first is that whether one suspends judgement *is* constrained by the content on which one suspends, which is not typically the case for mental actions. Friedman writes that one suspends judgement so that one can inquire further into the correct answer to the question upon which one suspends.<sup>10</sup> One can suspend judgement in order to avoid hasty, non-truth-conducive reasoning. If one already knows the answer to a question, it is inappropriate to suspend judging. This is not true of imagining; you can imagine whatever you want (and have the conceptual resources to imagine). The only considerations that bear on whether to imagine are reasons that bear on the question of whether you *want* to imagine. When it comes to suspension, you must consider reasons that bear upon whether the question upon which you might suspend judgement should be or has already been settled for you. Content quite clearly matters when it comes to suspending judgement.

My second worry is that Friedman’s attitudinal account of suspension importantly *does* involve settling a question in a way characteristic of commitment-constituted attitudes. Friedman writes that suspending can be a way of “terminating a deliberative process and ... moving into a more settled state, viz., a state of

<sup>8</sup> Hieronymi, “The Wrong Kind of Reason,” p. 449.

<sup>9</sup> Hieronymi, “The Wrong Kind of Reason,” p. 451, footnote 29.

<sup>10</sup> Friedman, “Why Suspend Judging?”

suspended judgement.”<sup>11</sup> Although suspension does not constitute settling on an ultimate answer to the question under deliberation, to suspend is certainly to become *more* settled in regard to this question (more settled than the person who remains neutral by simply walking away from a question without forming any doxastic attitudes at all).<sup>12</sup> An intuitive idea is that suspension involves something like settling the question of ‘whether one has so far successfully answered the question,’ or ‘whether one’s evidence for  $p$  is sufficient to support the belief that  $p$ .’ I will ultimately argue that this idea is not quite right—that suspension does not involve higher-order evaluations of this kind—but I think that considering this intuition is illuminating. However one ultimately characterizes the question upon which one suspends, suspension does provide some sort of interim answer to some primary question, which stands so long as one fails to be convinced by reasons for one or another possible answer. So, suspension is in some way in the business of settling questions that have to do with one’s consideration of whether  $p$ , not just whether to  $\phi$ . This is true of commitment-constituted states but rarely true of mental actions.<sup>13</sup>

My third worry is that if suspension were a mental action, then it could not serve all of the purposes that it serves in reasoning. Something that differentiates suspension from mere lack of belief is that suspension somehow puts a pin in inquiry, keeping track of the results of one’s preceding deliberation (or lack thereof). Suspension could not faithfully put a pin in inquiry if suspension were formed for reasons extrinsic to the question under consideration; if considerations that are taken to be unfit to serve as constitutive reasons for beliefs can serve as real reasons for suspension, then suspension can lose track of the evidence. Remember, an extrinsic reason is one that, by an agent’s own lights, does not bear on a given question. How could we take ourselves to be faithfully keeping tabs on our progress in answering a question by forming an attitude for reasons we take to be extrinsic to that question? If suspension were a mental action, then there would be no necessary connection between what one takes to

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<sup>11</sup> Friedman, “Suspended Judgment,” p. 179.

<sup>12</sup> Friedman also claims that one must suspend judgement in order to begin earnest inquiry in the first place. According to Friedman, “Why Suspend Judging?” when one begins inquiry, one surveys one’s beliefs to see if one already knows the answer to the question at hand, and if it is found that one does not, one suspends and thereby begins to inquire into its correct answer. So, this deliberation-settling suspension might be best understood as a reaffirmation or maintenance of an attitude that one already has; after a given round of deliberation, one keeps a question on one’s research agenda by *maintaining* an attitude of suspension toward the question.

<sup>13</sup> An example of a mental action that one can form based on reasons that bear on questions like ‘whether  $p$ ’ is the mental act of imagining the sentence ‘it would be good to imagine this sentence.’ I doubt that suspension is one of these special cases of mental action.

be one's evidence and suspension, and so suspension's ability to serve this purpose would be severely diminished. If you wanted to pick up where you left your investigations off and continue on the path toward belief-formation, having the attitude of suspension would not help you much. If having this attitude tells you nothing about the state of your inquiry, then you would have to go through all of your evidence again anyway. It would be no better than merely lacking doxastic states about the question. For these reasons, I doubt that suspension is a mental action.

## VI. The Second-Order Response

Perhaps these problems can be avoided by thinking of suspension as a second-order attitude. Here is one *prima facie* plausible candidate for the question, the settling of which results in the suspension of judgement: 'whether I have (already) successfully settled the question of whether *p*.' Considerations that bear on this question are different from those that bear on whether *p* itself, but some connection between the weight of one's reasons to believe *p* and one's suspension of judgement is maintained. However, it comes with a *prima facie* worry: the attitude formed by settling this question would not be the sort of neutral doxastic attitude we're after. It would be a (second-order) belief, not a suspension of judgement.

To illustrate this point, imagine that you believe that *p* and you settle for yourself the question 'have I (already) successfully settled the question whether *p*?' Is there any way that you could *therein* form the doxastic attitude of suspension? It would seem not; settling that question positively would result only in the belief that you have successfully settled the question 'whether *p*,' and settling it negatively would result in forming the belief that you have not so far successfully answered the question. Suppose that this disbelief is a defeater for your belief that *p*.<sup>14</sup> If you appreciate that this second-order belief is a defeater for your belief that *p*, you might then scale back your confidence in *p* and become neutral on *p* instead of committed to the truth of *p*. They key point is that you *might* then scale back your confidence in *p* and become neutral instead of committed; forming your second-order disbelief did not in itself constitute suspension. Negatively settling the question 'whether I have (already) successfully answered the question whether *p*' does not directly result in suspending judgement in the way that positively settling questions like 'whether *p*' result in forming beliefs. It results only in one second-order belief or another, which then, if taken the right way, will result in becoming neutral on whether *p* by retracting one's belief that *p*.

There is another reason for the advocate of the kind of evidentialist view we have been considering to reject a second-order account of suspension. So far, we have been approaching the topic of what kind of reasons one can have for

<sup>14</sup> This thought is developed in Bergmann, "Defeaters and Higher-Level Requirements."



a commitment-constituted attitude by starting with the question that is related to the attitude and asking which reasons bear upon this question. There is another direction from which we can approach the problem, and it is informative for present purposes. To have a commitment-constituted attitude is to be answerable to certain questions and criticisms.<sup>15</sup> If you believe that *p*, you are answerable to questions about why you believe that *p*, and satisfying answers to that question have to do with your evidence that *p* is true. As you would expect, this lines up nicely with Hieronymi's account of the right kind of reasons for the belief that *p*; they will bear on the truth of *p*. It should be expected that the right kind of reasons for an attitude will also be the kind of reasons that can satisfy the demands of answerability for the attitude.

If the question that one settles when one suspends is 'whether I have (already) successfully answered the question whether *p*,' then we should expect the criticisms to which one is answerable when one suspends to be satisfiable by answers to this question as straightforwardly as they are for belief. However, this is not the case. When one holds someone responsible for suspending judgement and demands an explanation, 'I haven't yet successfully answered the question' is not a satisfying response. What one wants is closer to a summary of the purportedly inconclusive evidence in virtue of which one has failed to answer the question. Conceiving of the question at the heart of suspension as this second-order, reflective kind has an effect on what should be expected of answerability for suspension, and the result is unsatisfactory.

## VII. Conclusion

I have identified a puzzle that emerges for attitudinal accounts of the suspension of judgement: unlike reasons for the other doxastic attitudes, reasons for suspension cannot be identified when an evidentialist framework for reasons is adopted. I have also considered two ways out of this puzzle, and found them both wanting; the mental action response gets the nature of suspension wrong, and the second-order response reduces suspension to second-order belief.

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<sup>15</sup> Hieronymi, "Controlling Attitudes," p. 50.

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