

## 1. Summary of the research plan

Suspension of judgement undeniably has a very rich history in philosophy. It emerges in the Stoics' discussions of the possibility of knowledge. It is central to Sextus Empiricus's Pyrrhonian views and is obviously closely related to doubt, which plays a crucial role in Descartes' theory of knowledge. Strikingly, however, suspension of judgement has received little attention in the intense epistemological debates of the past fifty years.<sup>1</sup> The aim of the project "Suspension of judgement. Its nature and its norms" is to remedy this situation and to demonstrate how fruitful the study of suspension of judgement is for contemporary epistemology.

The project "Suspension of judgement. Its nature and its norms" is structured around two subprojects A and B, each of which are subdivided into two further subparts (A1, A2 and B1, B2).

Subproject A is entitled "Suspension of judgement: its nature". In this subproject, we mainly intend to disclose the specific metaphysical nature of suspension of judgement. In subpart A1, we would like to question the traditional idea that suspension of judgement is a doxastic *state* like beliefs and disbeliefs and consider the hypothesis that suspension of judgement has more to do with a performance than with a state. In subpart A2, we intend to cast light on the nature of suspension of judgment by contrasting it with other doxastic attitudes like doubt and credence.

Subproject B is entitled "Suspension of judgement: its norms". In this subproject, we aim at investigating the specific (if any) normativity of suspension of judgment in comparison to belief. Subpart B1 mainly discusses the *epistemic* normativity of suspension of judgment. One main issue that we intend to address in this framework is whether the epistemic normativity of suspension of judgment is specifically instrumental. One might be conducted to take this to be the case given the tight connection that suspension of judgment seems to hold with inquiry. Additionally, subpart B1 is devoted to the consideration of the connection between suspension of judgment and the intellectual virtue of open-mindedness. While subpart B1 focusses on the epistemic normativity of suspension of judgement, subpart B2 focusses on its potential *practical* normativity. Are there practical reasons (i.e. reasons that have to do with the satisfaction of our practical interests rather than with the pursuit of truth) to suspend of judgement? And how are these practical reasons (if any) related to the epistemic normativity of suspension of judgement that we consider in subpart B1? Eventually, we would like to make use of the results achieved in subparts B1 and B2 to provide an acceptable interpretation of the Precautionary Principle, one that traces a middle-way between a paralysing form of doxastic prudence and a hazardous form of doxastic recklessness.

The general methodology underlying the project "Suspension of judgement. Its nature and its norms" is one that has already proved successful in other of the applicant's works and research projects. It consists in establishing a dialogue between, on the one hand, the descriptive results (achieved in subproject A) and, on the other, the normative results (achieved in subproject B). What this means, more concretely, is that the descriptive investigation that we intend to conduct in subproject A will benefit from the normative results obtained in subproject B and vice-versa (we say more on this methodology and on the fact that it does not involve any specific research risks in section 2.3.)

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<sup>1</sup> If you want to get a rough idea of the extent to which suspension of judgement is neglected in the contemporary philosophical literature you can browse the 135 JStor philosophy journals in order to find how many times "suspension of judgement" appears in an article's title. The answer is 2. Compare this to "rational belief", which occurs 32 times, and "belief", which occurs 1602 times, in the titles of articles in these journals.

## 2. Research plan

### 2.1. Current state of research in the field

Three distinct ongoing philosophical discussions have immediate connection with subprojects A and B. There is, first, the debate about whether the classical tripartite division between doxastic attitudes —belief, disbelief and suspension of judgement— is legitimate. One pressing question is whether suspension of judgement really constitutes a *sui generis* doxastic attitude. Is it not possible to capture it in terms of another doxastic attitude, in particular, in terms of belief? Such questions clearly matter for subproject A. See section 2.1.1. A second lively debate concerns the connection between suspension of judgement and the possibility of inquiry. See section 2.1.2. A third ongoing contemporary discussion — which is obviously central to subproject B— concerns the conditions under which suspension of judgement is rational. See section 2.1.3.

#### 2.1.1 Is suspension of judgement a *sui generis* attitude?

It is traditionally admitted that only three basic doxastic attitudes exist: belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgement.

“There are three possible belief-attitudes that I may take with respect to the proposition that this faith in myself is justified: (1) I may deny the proposition; or (2) I may affirm the proposition; or (3) I may withhold the proposition.” Chisholm 1989: 6

Philosophers are divided over whether suspension of judgement really is a *sui generis* doxastic attitude.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, there are the philosophers who (like Friedman 2017, 2013a; McHugh 2012) think that suspension of judgement can be considered a *sui generis* doxastic attitude because:

“It isn’t a state that we are in in virtue of being opinionless, rather it is a state of opinion.” Friedman 2013c: 59

More generally, the idea is that suspension of judgement is more than a simple failure to believe or disbelieve but constitutes a very specific kind of doxastic commitment that one cannot simply capture in terms of beliefs. On the other hand, some philosophers (Salmon 1986, 1989; Wedgwood 2002; Sturgeon 2010 and Moon 2018) try to reduce suspension of judgement to other doxastic attitudes, in particular, to beliefs. According to Russell (1997), for instance, a subject S suspends judgement about proposition *p* if and only if she believes that she does not know whether *p*.

Among the philosophers who deny any independent existence to suspension of judgement, some of them try to reduce it to credences. It is sometimes argued that belief, rather than being an all-or-nothing affair, can be reduced to credence and “just is degree of confidence above a certain threshold” (Locke 2014: 28). This is what Locke calls the “The Constitutive Threshold Account of Belief”.<sup>3</sup> Supposing there is also a constitutive threshold for disbelief that *p* (which seems uncontroversial—but see (Smart 2017) for a different view), there are then two ways in which one might want to reduce suspension of judgement to credences: either suspending judgement on whether *p* is having a credence or degree of confidence in *p* whose value is 0.5, or it is having a credence in *p* whose value is between the threshold for belief that *p* and the threshold for disbelief that *p*. And depending on whether these thresholds are constitutive or practically encroached, we have in fact four ways in which one might want to reduce suspension of judgement to

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<sup>2</sup> See (Masny 2018) for a nice overview of the various positions. Another question is whether disbelief constitutes a *sui generis* attitude or whether disbelief that *p* merely consists in the belief that not-*p*. This question is not as controversial as the question pertaining to suspension of judgement since the majority of authors consider the reduction to be legitimate in the case of disbelief.

<sup>3</sup> And, as he underlines, this metaphysical thesis about the nature of belief is in line with the Lockean normative epistemological thesis according to which “S’s belief that *p* is rational if and only if it is rational for S to have a degree of confidence in *p* that is greater than the constitutive threshold for belief that *p*” (*ibid.*).

credences.<sup>4</sup> One of the main challenges that these views have to face is to indicate how then suspending judgement on whether  $p$  differs from being in the *state of doubting* that  $p$ . The relation of suspension of judgement to both credences and doubt are issue that we intend to consider in this project.

Another related contemporary discussion concerns the content of suspension of judgement. The aforementioned reductivists obviously tend to describe this content in such a way that it makes the reduction to beliefs possible. Many reductivists claim that the content of the suspension of judgement is therefore propositional. In contrast, non-reductivists attribute a content to it that precludes reduction. According to Friedman (2013a, b, 2017, forthcoming), for instance, suspension of judgement is question-directed. She defends this on the grounds that:

“we don’t say that S suspends that God exists or that S is agnostic that Allan went to the party, but rather that S suspends about whether God exists or that S is agnostic about whether Allan went to the party.” Friedman 2013a: 166-167n

### 2.1.2 Suspension of judgement and its relation to inquiry

How is suspension of judgement related to the possibility of inquiry? According to Friedman (2017), the relation is very tight. Suspending judgement on whether  $p$  is true is necessary and sufficient for being in an inquiring state of mind as to whether  $p$ . Masny (2018) —along with Feldman and Conee (2018) and Wieland— deny that suspension of judgement is necessary for inquiry. According to Feldman and Conee (2018), inquiring into whether  $p$  is true is even compatible with knowing that  $p$ . Sylvan (2016) also denies that suspension of judgement is a necessary component of inquiry. To suspend judgement about whether  $p$  is, indeed, to have settled the issue whether  $p$ . It is to be in a state of “committed neutrality”. Now, to be in a state that settles the question whether  $p$  does not seem to be coherent if one’s goal is to decide whether  $p$  is true. For Wieland (2014), one can believe that  $p$  and still be open to further evidence about  $p$ , and so still inquire into the truth of  $p$ . Belief that  $p$  is, according to him, compatible with open-mindedness about whether  $p$  (even though being certain that  $p$  is not).

The debate on the relation between suspension of judgement and inquiry is thus connected to the question of how suspension of judgement is related to open-mindedness, and hence to the normative question of whether suspension of judgement is intellectually virtuous. This question is a central theme of Peirce’s—the founder of pragmatism—epistemological writings, and is hence central for Peircean scholars (cf. Hookway 2012; Kasser 2018; Levi 2012; Migotti 2005; Misak 2014). Recent works of so-called “responsibilist virtue epistemologists”, for whom intellectual virtues are cultivated character traits (see e.g. Baehr 2011; DePaul and Zagzebski 2003; Fairweather and Zagzebski 2001), and recent results such as those achieved by Stump’s and Greco’s large project “The Philosophy and Theology of Intellectual Humility” (2013-2015), have importantly enlightened our understanding of intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness. These discussions are particularly interesting for our project on suspension of judgement because: A) they connect suspension of judgment to doubt and intellectual virtues B) they focus on the question of how to distinguish intellectual virtues from moral virtues, which is directly relevant to the question of whether there are practical (in the broadest sense of the term) reasons to suspend judgement (see section 2.3.5 below).

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<sup>4</sup> The “credence-first view”, as (Jackson 2018b) calls it—whether it holds, with (Dodd 2016), (Wedgwood 2012) or (Clarke 2013), that belief is maximal credence, or that belief is less-than-maximal credence (e.g., Lee 2017; Frankish 2009; Foley 1992, 2009; Locke 2013)—is contested by partisans of a “belief-first view” (cf. Collins 2018; Moon 2017, 2018; Harman 1986; see also (Kauss 2018) for a different type of belief-first view). The credence-first view is also contested by supporters of dualism for whom “both belief and credence are equally fundamental and neither is reducible to the other” (Jackson 2018b) (cf. Frankish 2009; Buchak 2014; Pettigrew 2015a, 2015b; Carter, Jarvis and Rubin 2016).

### 2.1.3 The epistemic rationality of suspension of judgement

What are the conditions under which it is epistemically rational to suspend judgement? What are the conditions under which one *ought* to suspend judgement? The usual view, as Roeber remarks, is as follows:

“your evidence supports suspending judgement with respect to  $p$  better than it supports believing  $p$  when it supports  $p$  and  $\neg p$  equally well (that is, when the probability of  $p$  conditional on your evidence is exactly 0.5)”. Roeber 2019: 2

Diego Machuca makes a similar observation when he writes that

“It is generally thought that suspension of judgement about a proposition  $p$  is the doxastic attitude one is rationally compelled to adopt whenever the epistemic reasons for and against  $p$  are equipollent or equally credible, that is, whenever the total body of available evidence bearing on  $p$  epistemically justifies neither belief nor disbelief in  $p$ .” Machuca 2015: 177.

Drake calls this view “Equal-Reason Agnosticism” (Drake 2017). Equal-Reason Agnosticism has recently been put into question. For instance, according to Friedman (2013c), the fact that my epistemic reasons are equally supporting  $p$  and  $\neg p$  is sufficient but not necessary to make my suspending judgement towards the truth of  $p$  rational. She underlines that there is another norm for suspension, namely “the *absence of evidence* norm”, which states that:

“in the absence of [“relevant”] evidence for or against an ordinary contingent proposition  $p$ , it is epistemically permissible to suspend judgement about  $p$ .” Friedman 2013c: 60

In other words, you are not wrong to suspend judgement about whether  $p$  when you understand the proposition but have absolutely no evidence either for or against  $p$ .

Moreover, even when you have evidence supporting either  $p$  or  $\neg p$ , it is not obvious that this evidence needs to be absolutely neutral (0.5 for  $p$  and 0.5 against  $p$ ) for it to be rational to suspend judgement. It seems sufficient that the evidence is close to neutral, and so neither makes it epistemically permissible or rational to believe  $p$ , nor to disbelieve  $p$ . As (Friedman 2013c) remarks, it seems intuitively correct to suspend judgement every time one has some evidence regarding the truth of  $p$  as long as the evidence in question is not sufficient enough to settle the question whether  $p$  is true or not. This consideration connects to the so-called “Uniqueness thesis” and the debate regarding permissivism in contemporary epistemology.

The Uniqueness Thesis can be stated as follows:

“For any body of evidence  $E$  bearing on some proposition  $p$ , there is, given  $E$ , some unique epistemically rational doxastic attitude for any agent  $A$  to adopt with respect to  $p$ .” Drake 2017: 4898

Are there “borderline cases”, that is, cases in which both suspension of judgement and belief (or disbelief) would be a rational attitude? According to Friedman (2013c), there are such borderline cases. She argues that, from the fact that suspension of judgement is permitted in certain evidential circumstances, we cannot conclude that belief is not permitted in these circumstances. Similarly, Wieland proposes:

“to broaden the conditions for suspension, and argue that it is rational to suspend belief on a certain issue even if one’s current evidence is *not* neutral (or even close to neutral).” Wieland 2014: 222

This form of permissivism must however be limited. As Greenberg 2018 remarks, if the conditions under which it is rational not only to believe but also to suspend judgement are not limited, it will always be better to suspend judgement than to believe. If suspending judgement were always permitted, then one would never be at risk of violating any norm by suspending judgement, whereas forming a belief is always risky, in that the evidential circumstances might always be such that you ought not to believe. But we do not want people to constantly suspend judgement and have their whole doxastic lives paralysed. Permissivism therefore needs to be limited.

Friedman’s view that the connection between suspension of judgement and inquiry is very tight (see section 2.1.2) also has some important consequences for the conditions under which one ought to suspend judgement. More precisely, if inquiring into  $p$  requires suspending judgement about  $p$ , then in cases in which one ought to inquire into  $p$ , one ought

to suspend judgement about  $p$ . In other words, according to this view, the conditions under which it is epistemically rational or permitted to suspend judgement are those under which it is rational or permitted to inquire into whether  $p$ . Equal-Reason Agnosticism does not endorse this strong implication.