

Suspension of Belief



Mannheim, October 26–27, 2018

Room EO 242

Programme

Friday, October 26

08.45–09.00 Coffee and Reception

09.00–09.15 Welcome

09.15–10.15 **Sven Rosenkranz:** Agnosticism and Epistemic Norms

10.30–11.30 **Alexandra Zinke:** Varieties of Suspension

11.45–12.45 **Errol Lord:** Suspension of Judgment, Rationality's Competition, and the Reach of the Epistemic

12.45–14.15 Lunch Break

14.15–15.15 **Sven Lauer:** Suspension of Commitment or Committing to Suspend?
On the Dynamic Pragmatics of Doxastic MIGHT and (Negated) Belief
Self-Ascriptions

15.30–16.30 **Wolfgang Freitag and Nadja-Mira Yolcu:** Expressing Suspense

16.45–17.45 **Jane Friedman (via skype):** Checking Again

18.00–19.00 **Tim Kraft:** Postponing and Suspending of Doxastic Attitudes

20.00 Conference Dinner

Saturday, October 27

09.15–09.30 Coffee and Reception

09.30–10.30 **Hans Rott:** Acquisition and Suspension of Belief—Two Processes that are Dual to Each Other?

10.45–11.45 **Marc Andree Weber:** Don't Split the Difference! What the Equal Weight View Really Recommends

12.00–13.00 **Miriam Schoenfield:** Higher-Order Evidence and the Perspective of Doubt

13.00 Optional Lunch

Abstracts

Sven Rosenkranz: Agnosticism and Epistemic Norms

The agnostic about p suspends judgement on p and its negation on the grounds that we are neither in a position to know p , nor in a position to know its negation. As such agnosticism about p is sensibly arrived at only after checking either proposition's credentials.

It needs to be explained to what extent the agnostic's diagnosis of our epistemic position rationalises suspension of judgement on p . After all, to believe p , while believing that one is in no position to know p , is not to hold inconsistent beliefs.

The norm that one ought to believe only what one is in a position to know, provides just such an explanation. Thus, to the extent that this norm formulates an epistemic obligation, it can never be that *both* believing p , and believing that one is in no position to know p , count as epistemically permissible.

But at the same time, it may then turn out that *neither* believing p , *nor* believing that one is in no position to know p , is epistemically permissible. The latter jars with the observation that, after doing everything that we are in a position to do to decide whether p holds, we are left with no other sensible option than to adopt one of these two attitudes, however fallibly so.

Against the backdrop of the distinction between norms defining cognitive success and norms that guide our pursuit of such success, an alternative account of epistemic permissibility is being proposed. According to this account, believing a proposition is epistemically permissible just in case one is in no position to rule out that one is after all in a position to know that proposition.

The account successfully explains why always at least one of the aforementioned two attitudes is epistemically permissible. However, it now again seems that both attitudes may prove to be epistemically permissible. An argument is given for thinking that this impression is illusory.

Alexandra Zinke: Varieties of Suspension

According to the classical definition of suspension of belief, a person S suspends belief about p if and only if she neither believes nor disbelieves p . I explore different phenomena which fall under the classical concept of suspension of belief, and distinguish various ways to justify suspension. For example, suspension can be *indirectly justified* by the fact that the evidence neither sufficiently supports p nor *non- p* (e.g. by being balanced or having a low total weight); and doxastic suspense can be *directly justified* by a positive belief, e.g. by the belief that the chance of p is, say, 0.5, or by the belief that p is a borderline case. I suggest that this shows that there are different dimensions along which belief can be graded: there are different kinds of degrees of belief which follow different logics and relate differently to plain belief/disbelief. I end with a sketch of some possible consequences for our conceptions of theoretical and practical rationality.

Errol Lord: Suspension of Judgment, Rationality's Competition, and the Reach of the Epistemic

It's orthodoxy to think that there are three different reactions governed by epistemic rationality: Belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment. These reactions are governed by epistemic rationality in a special sense: They are *epistemic competitors*. The case for believing p competes with case for disbelieving p and the case for suspending judgment about p . The first task of this talk is to complicate this picture. The picture is complicated by the fact that there are many different ways to be committed to neutrality about p and thus many different candidates for suspension of judgment. After showing this, I will offer an answer to which of these states compete against each other. On the view I will sketch, there are least four participants in epistemic rationality's competition. The final section will argue that theorizing about the participants in epistemic rationality's competition is a good way of figuring out the *reach* of the epistemic. I will show that pragmatism about epistemic rationality is naturally motivated by my framework, *pace* a common reaction of evidentialists.

Tim Kraft: Postponing and Suspending of Doxastic Attitudes

Several phenomena suggest to draw a distinction between suspending belief on the one hand and delaying or postponing belief (or any doxastic decision) on the other hand: There is an intuitive difference between not-believing after careful deliberation (suspension) and not-believing because of being interrupted (postponement). There is also an intuitive difference between not believing that one's best friend has done something horrible because one waits for the full evidence to become available (practical reason for postponement?) and because of being biased in favour of one's friends (practical reason for suspension?). Although the distinction between suspending and postponing is useful for describing what is going on in these cases, it is also difficult to spell out in a theoretically satisfying way. In my talk I discuss both advantages of and objections against this distinction.

Jane Friedman: Checking Again

This paper is about double-checking, triple-checking, quadruple-checking and beyond. What (if anything) is epistemically wrong with checking and re-checking over and over again? In particular, if the incessant checker is continuing to improve their epistemic circumstances, then isn't continuing to check acceptable or even good epistemic practice? In this paper I argue that it is not. I argue that from the perspective of epistemology alone, incessant checking is inappropriate. Thinking about just what goes epistemically wrong

when we incessantly check has implications for the debate over epistemic permissivism, claims about the value of information, and crucially the norms of inquiry. I argue that sometimes even though we stand to improve our epistemic circumstances by inquiring into some matter again or further, epistemology tells us not to.

Wolfgang Freitag and Nadja-Mira Yolcu: Expressing Suspense

Expressing positive belief is generally held to be unproblematic: we express belief by asserting the proposition believed. The verbal expression—in contrast to the description—of *suspense* of belief, on the other hand, appears to be impossible: at a first glance, there seems to be no sense in claiming that the *absence* of belief can be expressed. We frame the problem of expressing doxastic suspense in the context of suspense of mental states generally. We then (i) argue that doxastic suspense can be expressed by utterances of the form “I neither believe nor disbelieve that p”, (ii) discuss the view that, properly speaking, the ‘object’ of expression is not (the absence of) a doxastic attitude but, in the case of suspense, the proposition *that I neither believe nor disbelieve*, and (iii) sketch a general theory of ‘explicit expressives’.

Sven Lauer: Suspension of Commitment or Committing to Suspend? On the Dynamic Pragmatics of Doxastic MIGHT and (Negated) Belief Self-Ascriptions

Hans Rott: Acquisition and Suspension of Belief—Two Processes that are Dual to Each Other?

In this talk, I will interpret “suspension of belief” literally: as the suspension of a belief that had already been present. In the classical theory of belief revision, this process was termed “belief contraction” or “belief withdrawal”. According to this theory, belief withdrawal is in a very straightforward and precise sense dual to belief acquisition. The relevant bridge principles are known as the Levi and Harper identities. I will discuss some reasons why this duality is problematic, in particular in cases in which categorical beliefs are (in some sense) derived from degrees of belief and disbelief.

Marc Andree Weber: Don’t Split the Difference! What the Equal Weight View Really Recommends

The Equal Weight View suggests that we should, when we encounter someone who is as competent and well-informed as we are concerning a specific subject matter, give the opinion of this epistemic peer concerning that subject matter the same weight that we give our own. In case of disagreement, this is commonly interpreted as the claim to *split the difference*, that is to adopt a credence equal to the arithmetic mean of the original credences of the parties to the disagreement. I will argue that this interpretation of the Equal Weight View cannot convincingly deal with long-lasting and entrenched multi-peer disagreements and should therefore be abandoned. Instead of splitting the difference, we should rather abstain from adopting a specific credence. In particular, we should characterise a particular act of suspension of belief by stating, of a specific interval of credences, that the credence supported by our first-order evidence lies somewhere within this interval, but that we, due to our second-order evidence, cannot tell exactly where.

Miriam Schoenfield: Higher-Order Evidence and the Perspective of Doubt

One of the things we humans do is subject currently held beliefs to doubt. When we doubt a belief, we examine how things look from a perspective in which that belief is set aside. Sometimes we care what that perspective recommends and, as a result, we abandon the belief we've been doubting. Other times we don't: we recognize that a perspective in which a certain belief is set aside recommends abandoning it, but we go on believing it anyway. Why is this? In this talk I'll consider some proposals concerning when we should defer to the perspective of doubt. I'll argue that ultimately this question is misguided: there are no constraints on when the perspective of doubt should be deferred to. I'll connect up these thoughts with evolutionary debunking arguments and explain why I think these debates are irresolvable.