

Suspended Judgment*

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Abstract

In this paper I undertake an in-depth examination of an oft mentioned but rarely expounded upon state: suspended judgment. While traditional epistemology is sometimes characterized as presenting a “yes or no” picture of its central attitudes, in fact many of these epistemologists want to say that there is a third option: subjects can also suspend judgment. Discussions of suspension are mostly brief and have been less than clear on a number of issues, in particular whether this third option should be thought of as an attitude or not. In this paper I argue that suspended judgment is (or at least involves) a genuine attitude.

1 Introduction

Traditional epistemology is sometimes characterized as presenting a “yes or no” picture of the doxastic attitudes: if a subject is going to take a doxastic attitude towards a proposition p , he can fully accept it by believing p or fully reject it by disbelieving p ; no other outcomes are possible.¹ But when we look to what these epistemologists say, a more complex picture emerges. Consider:

- (1) “ h is certain for S at $t =_{df}$ (i) Accepting h is more reasonable for S at t than withholding h (i.e., not accepting h and not accepting $\neg h$)...” (Chisholm, 1976: 27).

*I would like to thank audiences in Oxford, at the Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society in Norwich, and at a conference on the nature of belief in Odense for helpful discussion. I would also like to thank referees for *Philosophical Studies*, as well as John Hawthorne, Jennifer Nagel, Scott Sturgeon, and especially Tim Williamson for invaluable comments and criticism.

¹This claim is not meant to take a stand on whether it is possible for the subject to have both attitudes at once, but only to take stock of how many attitudes there are.

- (2) “According to evidentialism, a person is justified in believing a proposition when the person’s evidence better supports believing that proposition than it supports disbelieving it or suspending judgment about it” (Conee and Feldman, 2004: 3).
- (3) “Three attitudes one might take towards a proposition p are believing p , disbelieving p (i.e., believing p is false), and withholding p (i.e., refraining from either believing or disbelieving p)” (Bergmann, 2005: 420).

These authors do not seem to be endorsing a “yes or no” picture. They all want to bring out some third thing: withholding belief from p or suspending judgment about p .² I take it that (1) - (3) all advert to the same mental state. Let’s call that state a state of agnosticism or suspended judgment. (1) - (3) seem to give us a number of different terms to describe the state of suspended judgment. I don’t think that all of these terms do an equally good job of describing that state. In a later section I will say more about why, strictly speaking, agnosticism is not a matter of refraining or withholding. I will drop those locutions but continue to use ‘suspended judgment’ to make agnosticism reports. The state of suspended judgment and the state of agnosticism will be treated as one and the same. (1) and (3) provide us with suggestions for two distinct kinds of accounts of suspended judgment: attitude accounts and non-attitude accounts. For instance, (1) has Chisholm describing suspending as simply not accepting some hypothesis h and not accepting $\neg h$, and (3) has Bergmann claiming (among other things) that “withholding p ” is an attitude towards p . In this paper I want to show that non-attitude accounts fail, and that S’s being agnostic necessarily involves (or just is) his having an attitude.

Let’s call the state that S is in when he has no p -belief and no $\neg p$ -belief, a state of non-belief with respect to p (or a state of p -non-belief). We can call the particular kind of non-attitude account of agnosticism suggested by Chisholm (and others), a “non-belief account”.³ In this paper I want to show that we cannot capture suspended judgment about p via non-belief with respect to p , and that we must adopt an attitude account of suspended judgment. As we try to refine a non-belief account of suspended judgment by adding additional necessary conditions it will begin to emerge that what we need in our account is an attitude. What kind of attitude?

²If a p -disbelief is nothing more than a $\neg p$ -belief (which is a fairly standard assumption in this context), then there is obviously an important sense in which this “third thing” is really only a second thing; there’s belief (in a proposition or its negation) and suspended judgment.

³I am taking ‘accept’ here to be synonymous with ‘believe’. This is a harmless assumption in this context.

We can think of the situation this way. When S is agnostic about p he is effectively neutral or undecided on the matter of which of p or $\neg p$ is true.⁴

The attempt to capture S 's agnosticism with non-belief is an attempt to capture this neutrality or indecision by way of his lacking both a p -belief and a $\neg p$ -belief. What I want to argue is that the sort of neutrality or indecision that is at the heart of agnosticism is not mere non-belief and can only be captured with an attitude. This means that the attitude will have to be one that represents (or expresses or just is) a subject's neutrality or indecision with respect to the truth of some proposition.^{5,6} This will have to be either a *sui generis* attitude of indecision, or some other more familiar attitude. For instance, we might try using higher-order beliefs that express one's indecision or neutrality with respect to the relevant propositions, *e.g.*, believing that I don't know which of p or $\neg p$ is true. And there are some

⁴I am assuming that suspension of judgment is closed under negation: one suspends about p iff one suspends about $\neg p$. That there is this sort of symmetry to suspension of judgment is not entirely uncontroversial. See [van Fraassen \(1998\)](#) and [Hájek \(1998\)](#) for some discussion. In this paper when I say that S suspends about p , I mean that she suspends about both p and $\neg p$ (even if I sometimes do not say so). In fact, I think that the right thing to say is that in these sorts of cases S suspends about whether p (or slightly more carefully, whether P where ' P ' is a sentence that expresses p). In general, it looks like the right way to make suspended judgment (and agnosticism) reports is by using interrogative complements and not declarative ones. For instance, 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 (or about who went to the party, or about which of his friends went, and so on). Might agnosticism involve an attitude towards a question rather than a propositional attitude? I explore this suggestion and its implications in more detail in [Friedman \(2011\)](#). For the purposes of this discussion I will mostly stay closer to the literature and talk about suspending about p (despite reservations about these ascriptions). Sometimes I will talk about suspending about whether P , and when I do the reader can assume that one suspends about whether P iff one suspends about p and $\neg p$ (assuming, of course, that P expresses p).

⁵Neither 'neutrality' nor 'indecision' is quite right here. If one is neutral over two options that seems to imply that one does not favour one over the other. But one can suspend about p , $\neg p$ without being absolutely neutral (in that way) about which is true. In this sense 'indecision' talk seems more appropriate. When a subject suspends she may favour one of p , $\neg p$ over the other, but she hasn't decided which she thinks is true. While I am happy to say that the agnostic is undecided in this sense, I also think that suspended judgment is or involves a settled doxastic attitude, and as such should be thought of as a way of deciding where one stands on a question or the truth of some proposition. Scott Sturgeon (via Selim Berker) has described the agnostic's attitude as a "committed neutrality" (I do not mean to imply that Sturgeon agrees with my more specific characterization of the attitude. For some of his views on suspension see [Sturgeon \(2010\)](#). Perhaps "committed indecision" is closer to what I am after here.

⁶It is worth making very clear that in characterizing the state that S is in when he is agnostic as a neutral state I in no way mean to imply that S is thinking of the world as somehow neutral, or taking sentences or propositions to have more than two possible truth values. The description is meant only to provide a characterization of the relation S bears to the relevant contents.

other plausible options as well. Let's call all of these attitudes – *sui generis* or otherwise – that express or represent or are a subject's indecision about the truth of some propositions indecision-representing attitudes. The goal of this paper is to show that a subject suspends judgment only if he has an indecision-representing attitude. The strategy will be to think about different non-belief accounts, and generate counter-examples to each. The failure of these non-belief accounts amounts to support for an attitude account. But it isn't just that these accounts fail that points us towards an attitude account, specifically how they fail does as well.

2 Suspended judgment is not mere non-belief

Is being in a state of suspended judgment about p just a matter of being in a state of non-belief with respect to p ? It is not. In this section I will argue that the following suggestion is false,

(NB) S is in a state of suspended judgment about p at t iff S is in a state of non- belief with respect to p at t .

2.1 Being in a state of non-belief is not sufficient for being in a state of suspended judgment

We don't come into the world agnostic or suspending judgment about whether bumblebees hibernate during the winter or about whether a drought killed the dinosaurs or about whether an American invented the light bulb, even though we are in states of non-belief with respect to the propositions expressed by these sentences. Cavemen hadn't suspended judgment about whether the Large Hadron Collider would find the Higgs boson and my great grandparents did not suspend about whether Google Chrome is better than Firefox, despite the fact that the relevant people lacked the relevant beliefs. One cannot count as agnostic about p if one cannot even grasp p .⁷

Moreover, it is not only propositions that S cannot grasp that show that being in a state of non-belief is not sufficient for being in a state of suspended judgment (and so that (NB) is false). For any normal S, there are a huge number of propositions that S can grasp, and has no beliefs about at all, but about which he is also is not suspending judgment. S can grasp the proposition that the closest living relative of the hippopotamus is the whale, or that the industrial engineering department at the Pennsylvania State University is called The Harold and Inge Marcus Department of

⁷In general, with respect to non-belief, as [Wedgwood \(2002\)](#) points out, “even rocks and numbers have *that* property” (p. 272).

Industrial and Manufacturing Engineering, or that populations of the butterfly Henry's Elfin are growing in New England due to the introduction of buckthorn. Before reading this, most of you weren't suspending judgment about whether Charles de Gaulle took a walk along the Seine on July 24, 1967 or whether my mother was a juror for a bank robbery trial in late 1970. Obviously I can go on and on. S's being in a state of non-belief with respect to p , even when p is graspable by S, is not sufficient for his being in a state of suspended judgment about p . The mere fact that you fail to believe a proposition and its negation is not sufficient for making it that you've suspended or are in a state of suspension about that proposition and its negation. So (NB) is false.

2.2 Is being in a state of non-belief necessary for being in a state of suspended judgment?

I take it that at first glance we think that it is. Since part the task here is to see whether we can't get to the sort of indecision required for agnosticism via non-belief, I am happy to assume for now that being in a state of non-belief is necessary for being in a state of suspended judgment. Ultimately though, I don't think that this is right. However, I think that the strongest case against the claim that non-belief is necessary for suspended judgment takes as a premise the conclusion that being in a state of suspended judgment is (or at least involves) having an indecision-representing attitude. There are cases in which something is going wrong when we ascribe agnosticism about p and belief in p (or $\neg p$) to a single subject at a single time. But once we admit that suspension is or involves its own, independent attitude, the more plausible account of what it is that is going wrong is that the subject of our ascription has rationally conflicting attitudes rather than that we have failed to describe a possible subject at all. If the agnostic's indecision is had by way of an attitude, then non-belief is not required (except rationally, perhaps). Nonetheless, for now the reader can simply assume that p -non-belief is necessary for p -agnosticism.⁸

⁸Making this assumption is tricky. If we assume that propositions are somewhat coarse-grained – say they are Russellian tuples of objects and properties – then it looks as though we can generate cases of suspension without non-belief. [Salmon \(1995\)](#) argues subjects can (easily) be “of two minds” in this way. S may suspend judgment about whether Matt is a millionaire while believing that MF is a millionaire if he doesn't know that ‘Matt’ and ‘MF’ pick out the same individual, despite the fact that ‘Matt is a millionaire’ and ‘MF is a millionaire’ express the same proposition. These sorts of examples show (at least) that one would need to do more work to secure any plausible sense in which non-belief is necessary for suspension. The standard moves for a closely related problem in the case of belief reports are to turn to more fine-grained propositions (perhaps ones that include something like senses or concepts) or to maintain that propositions are coarser-grained but introduce propositional guises or ways of grasping propositions (see [Salmon \(1989\)](#), [Soames \(1995\)](#), and [Braun \(1998\)](#) for versions of this

3 Suspended judgment is not non-belief plus having considered the matter

The objections from section 2.1 suggest an easy fix: S needs to have considered the relevant proposition as well.⁹ Here is a version of the suggestion:

(CON) S is in a state of suspended judgment about p at t iff S has considered p by t and is in a state of non-belief with respect to p at t .

We can find support in the literature for something like the condition that S have considered p if he's to qualify as agnostic about p :

- (1) “‘Suspension of belief’ does suggest a cognitive act, one that could not be performed without the proposition in question being entertained” (Hájek, 1998: 205n).
- (2) “As I shall use the term, one ‘suspends judgment’ about p when one consciously considers p , but neither believes nor disbelieves p ” (Wedgwood, 2000: 272).

Nonetheless, I shall argue that (CON) is false. Considering or having considered p is not necessary for being in a state of suspended judgment about p and p -non-belief plus having considered p is not sufficient.

3.1 Not sufficient

Let's say that S deliberates about p at 15:00 for 5 min (until 15:05) and is in a state of p -non-belief throughout. It is perfectly appropriate to describe S at 15:02 as considering or having considered p . But at 15:02 “mid-wondering”, it does not look appropriate to describe S as having suspended judgment about p . All S has done by 15:02 is begun to think about p . But that alone does not turn his state of mere non-belief into one of suspended judgment. That you have simply started thinking about whether de Gaulle

suggestion). But we should be wary of the prospect of an easy fix here. The original cases are generated at least in part because S can be ignorant about the contents of his attitudes, and so long as we allow for that possibility we will be able to generate intuitively plausible cases of suspension without non-belief. But there is no guarantee, even when propositions are very fine-grained or we specify some way in which subjects grasp contents, that subjects can no longer be mistaken about what they believe, or the way in which they believe it. For the purposes of this discussion we can do our best to sidestep this worry by assuming that propositions are fairly fine grained (this is a bit neater than having to quantify over propositional guises throughout).

⁹I assume that ‘considering p ’ need not involve coming to have the sort of neutral attitude towards p that these suggestions are trying to avoid, and that it does involve a subject being able to grasp p .

took that walk along the Seine does not on its own (or in combination with non-belief) mean you've suspended on the matter.

Being in a state of non-belief with respect to p plus having finished considering p is also not sufficient. Go back to section 2.1. There I pointed out that before reading this none of you had suspended judgment about whether my mother had been a juror in a bank robbery trial in late 1970. Once I raised that question though you might have considered it. Most of you will clearly have no evidence about whether she was or was not and will quickly have brought your deliberations to a close. Others may have tried a bit harder. For instance, if you know where my mother was living in late 1970, and what the laws were concerning women serving on juries, then you could have ruled this out: in Quebec women were not allowed to serve on juries in 1970. But let's take two readers now: A and B. A is prompted to consider whether my mother was a juror for a bank robbery trial in late 1970 (p), quickly recognizes that she has no relevant evidence and has absolutely no idea and suspends judgment about my mother's jury duties. B knows a bit about me and so starts to think about what else he knows that might be relevant. But before he gets very far, the plumber calls over to fix his leaky shower, and he drops the question about my mother completely. At 15:07 (while he's explaining the problem to the plumber), B has stopped considering p and is in a state of non-belief with respect to p , but B is not agnostic about p at 15:07; he isn't suspending judgment about my mother's jury duties. A and B are in different states with respect to p in these cases. A has suspended, but B just stopped deliberating; A might be agnostic about p , but B is not.

These cases multiply easily. S has to get to work, and he is considering whether the expressway is too full of traffic at this hour (p). While thinking this through his housemate tells him that work has been cancelled because of the snowstorm. S immediately stops considering p ; he just forgets about the whole thing. If S's deliberations are too boring or tough going he might decide to opt out or give up. But, again, quitting deliberations like that needn't involve suspending judgment. If S decides to watch television instead of thinking through who is to blame for the tuition hike, it doesn't look as though he is thereby agnostic on the matter. When one is in a state of non-belief (but not a state of suspended judgment) and then simply drops a question or proposition under consideration the resulting state is not a state of agnosticism.

What is going on in these cases? Even though S starts considering p , he never seems to get to the bit where he actually suspends. Deliberation cuts out before he does whatever he would need to do to move into a state of suspended judgment. If S starts deliberating about p in a state of mere non-belief with respect to p something has to happen to move him from that state to one of agnosticism. It looks like his merely opening deliberations

about some proposition isn't enough, and ending them in the wrong sort of way won't get him there either. We can think of what's missing as his actually suspending judgment. The question then is what that amounts to. I will consider some options before concluding that it's a matter of taking an attitude. First a little bit more about why considering p is neither necessary nor sufficient for suspension of judgment.

Other kinds of cases also show that S's having considered p by t and also being in a state of non-belief with respect to p at t is not sufficient for S's being in a state of suspended judgment about p at t . Perhaps S deliberated about p at some point five years before t and can no longer even grasp p anymore by t . Or perhaps he's simply lost track of his take on the truth of p in some more run-of-the-mill way despite having thought about the matter some time ago, and being in a state of p -non-belief. Overall, having considered p and also being in a state of p -non-belief is not sufficient for agnosticism about p . (CON) is false.

3.2 Having considered p is not necessary for being agnostic about p

In order to suspend judgment about p S needs to have had some cognitive contact (as it were) with p (or some closely related content). Suggestions like (CON) attempt to capture this cognitive contact via a "consideration condition": via some sort of considering, deliberation, wondering, entertaining and so on. According to (CON) agnosticism about p requires (first) having thought about p . But if S has to have considered p in order to be in a state of suspended judgment about p , then he couldn't become agnostic about p by being hit over the head, or by having his brain operated on, and swamp-S could never emerge agnostic about p . I don't think that we should be so quick to rule these things out. For instance, on the assumption that swamp-van Fraassen has intentional states at all, it seems right to say that he'll also be agnostic about whether quarks exist. We may well need cognitive contact (notice that an attitude account gets this for free), but it shouldn't have to come by way of having considered the relevant proposition. We may typically become agnostic about some matter by first considering it, but we shouldn't rule out getting into a state of suspended judgment by non-standard means. Considering p shouldn't be necessary for p -agnosticism. (CON) seems to fail in this direction as well.¹⁰

¹⁰A referee for this journal has suggested that the claim that considering p is necessary for being in a state of suspended judgment about p is better thought of as the claim that "having p in mind" at t is necessary for being in a state of suspended judgment about p at t . Is having p in mind necessary for being in a state of suspended judgment about p ? It depends on what it takes for one to have p in mind. If the suggestion is that S needs to be occurrently thinking about p at t in order to be agnostic about p at t , then surely S does not need to have p in mind at t in order to be agnostic about p at t .

4 Agnosticism is not refraining from believing or withholding belief plus non-belief

What lessons can we take away from the last section? Very roughly, for S to move from a state of non-belief with respect to p to a state of p -agnosticism something has to happen, and merely thinking about p isn't enough. What more should S have to do? Some people have used terms like 'withholding belief' or 'refraining from believing' to pick out the state of agnosticism, and this can give us some guidance. Should we add that S needs to withhold his belief from p or refrain from believing p ? Not if we take that suggestion literally.

'Refraining from believing' and 'withholding belief' seem to describe cognitive acts. If we take our cue from the literature on refraining from acting we can think of these sorts of cognitive acts as something like decisions not to believe.¹¹ If doing some special kind of cognitive act or making some decision is necessary for being in a state of suspended judgment we may well get around some of the objections from section 3.1. But if 'refraining' and 'withholding' describe mere cognitive acts, then the suggestion that refraining from believing or withholding belief is necessary for suspension or the claim that refraining or withholding plus non-belief is sufficient is a suggestion that some cognitive act is necessary for agnosticism and non-belief preceded by some act is sufficient. We have already seen why these suggestions are problematic. The very same considerations that showed that considering some propositions was not necessary for agnosticism apply here: if refraining or withholding (understood as cognitive acts) is necessary we rule out the possibility of getting into a state of agnosticism by non-standard means. But we also saw why we don't want to say that agnosticism is just a state of non-belief preceded by some cognitive act. In that case we will end up having to say that S counts as agnostic at some time if he performed the relevant act long ago even if he can no longer grasp the relevant propositions or cannot recall ever having performed the act or even what his take on the matter is. We also seem to get stuck having to say that in virtue of ever having done the relevant cognitive act S will remain agnostic until he moves out of a state of non-belief (since he can't

t. I think that the arguments in this section also show that p need not ever have been in occurrent thought for S in order that S qualify as agnostic about p . What if having p in mind is to be read non-occurrently? In suspending about p one has an attitude towards p or some importantly related content (*e.g.*, a question that has p as an answer, or proposition about one's deficient epistemic standing with respect to p). As such, I am happy to say that either p itself or some importantly related content must be in mind (either occurrently or non-occurrently) at t in order that one be in a state of suspended judgment about p at t .

¹¹This is obviously very rough. For some more guidance, see [Brand \(1971\)](#), [Moore \(1979\)](#), and [Bach \(2009\)](#).

take back the act), *i.e.*, until he becomes a believer. These are bad results. If the suggestion that we can capture suspension by way of withholding and refraining amounts to the suggestion that suspension is just non-belief plus some cognitive act, then we have already seen why that suggestion will fail.

I think, however, that we can do better here. Rather than thinking of withholding and refraining as cognitive acts, we can try to think of them as temporally extended states: states of continued resistance to believing.¹² When the state itself has this additional structure, we can avoid the sorts of objections from the last paragraph (and section 3.2). We can allow the possibility that S get into a state of belief resistance by non-standard means and we can allow that he stop being agnostic about some proposition if his resistance to either believing or disbelieving that proposition disappears, where that need not involve his becoming a believer. While this account makes the state of mind of the agnostic something more than mere non-belief, it (hopefully) need not add any indecision-representing attitudes (or any attitudes at all) and so can be thought of as an enriched non-belief account.

The suggestion then is that belief resistance is necessary for suspension and that a continued belief resistance plus non-belief is sufficient. The suggestion in full:

(RW) S is in a state of suspended judgment about p at t iff he is in a state of belief resistance and non-belief with respect to both of p and $\neg p$ at t .

(RW) also looks false. Being in a state of p -non-belief while resisting believing p and resisting believing $\neg p$ does not look sufficient for being in a state of suspended judgment about p . The suggestion has the result that S is in a state of suspended judgment about p at t if at t he doesn't believe p and doesn't believe $\neg p$ and is resisting both believing and disbelieving p . But there are all kinds of states that I think we will happily describe as states of p -belief-disbelief resistance (where this can include p -non-belief) that don't look like states of p -agnosticism.

Arachnophobic S may refrain from believing that spiders have good eyesight and refrain from believing that they don't and remain in a state of belief-disbelief resistance about spider eyesight since even a fleeting thought about spiders is so unbearable. Or, S may hate rhymes so much that any time he hears a rhyming sentence he will refuse to believe either the proposition it expresses or its negation and will remain in a state of continued belief resistance. In these cases, S will resist the relevant beliefs, but will S be agnostic about these propositions? I don't think so. Subjects in these

¹²Bergmann (2005) uses this "resistance" locution as well.

cases are not concerned with the whether the relevant propositions are true or false, but just avoiding some thoughts. This is not agnosticism. 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. The resistors I've described in this paragraph are simply trying to avoid having some range of thoughts or attitudes with no concern for what is or is not the case. If this sort of thinking about agnosticism is right, then not only isn't our arachnophobe agnostic, but she should want to avoid agnosticism about spider vision as well. This seems right. A resistance to having beliefs about p and $\neg p$ while believing neither does not look sufficient for being in a state of suspended judgment about p and $\neg p$. It may well be that some cases in which subjects resist believing are also cases in which these subjects are in states of suspended judgment, but that is not to be explained by the fact that a resistance to believing (even alongside non-belief) is sufficient for agnosticism. (RW) is false.¹³

5 Agnosticism is not principled non-belief

Another suggestion is that we should think of agnosticism not as mere non-belief but as reasoned non-belief or a commitment to non-belief for a reason.¹⁴ Again, this gets us past some of the objections from sections 3.1 and 3.2. Let's call the state that S is in when he commits to non-belief with respect to some propositions for a reason a state of principled non-belief with respect to those propositions. I don't think that suspended judgment is principled non-belief either.

First, it isn't clear that the suggestion can get past the objections from the last section (section 4). A commitment to non-belief with respect to

¹³I think that we can also find some other examples that confirm the thought that resistance to believing is not sufficient for being in a state of suspended judgment. If you genuinely thought that there was no fact of the matter about whether Rick is tall, then you might well resist believing that he is and resist believing that he's not, but it will not be right to say that you've suspended judgment about whether Rick is tall. You are not agnostic about p when you think that p is neither true nor false (or that there is no fact of the matter about p 's truth). We might say something similar about liar sentences. That you resist the relevant beliefs about a liar sentence (P), need not mean that you are agnostic about whether P .

¹⁴The suggestion that suspended judgment is or involves a commitment to non-belief for a reason is the suggestion that a subject is agnostic if she is committed to her non-belief. And we are now trying to capture this commitment by demanding that the subject be in her state of non-belief for a reason. There is no demand that this reason be a good reason or in fact justify her being in a state of non-belief. The suggestion that suspended judgment is a kind of principled non-belief places no significant rational demands upon the subject. S's non-belief can be badly irrational, but still principled in the sense at issue here. Perhaps the sorts of reasons I am describing then are closer to motivating or explanatory reasons than normative ones.

p need not be a commitment to neutrality or indecision about the truth of p . The arachnophobe might well be described as having committed to having no beliefs about spiders (and for a reason), but (as we have already seen) the arachnophobe is not agnostic about the relevant propositions and questions about spiders: he is not concerned with the truth about spider vision but simply avoiding the enemy. In general, if S is attempting to clear his mind of all thoughts, he might well commit to non-belief about all sorts of propositions for this reason, but again, he doesn't seem to thereby become agnostic about all of these propositions (in fact it seems as though his goal can only be achieved by clearing his mind of his agnostic commitments as well).¹⁵

The general suggestion that the state of agnosticism is just a state of principled non-belief fails. But I think we can refine the suggestion and do slightly better. If we think of the state of principled non-belief as a state in which one's non-belief is "held in place" by some principles or reasons, we might be able to get closer to a genuinely agnostic state by looking to the kind of reasons holding the non-belief in place. In particular, if S commits to non-belief with respect to p for epistemic reasons the state he ends up in may be able to retain a focus on the truth of p and so we might be able to secure a genuine agnosticism about p .¹⁶ Here "epistemic reasons" are reasons having to do with a subject's epistemic standing with respect to the relevant propositions. They are (roughly) bits of evidence, considerations about whether the subject knows, whether he is tracking the truth and so on. The suggestion then is as follows:

(EPN) S is in a state of suspended judgment about p at t iff at t he is in a state of non-belief with respect to p for epistemic reasons.¹⁷

¹⁵And we can commit to non-belief about whether Rick is tall for all sorts of reasons (*e.g.*, we think that there is no fact of the matter about whether he's tall), without being agnostic about whether Rick is tall.

¹⁶What about vague propositions and liar sentences? Perhaps one can insist that the relevant reasons in those cases are always metaphysical or semantic.

¹⁷We may be able to find support for an account like this in the literature as well. For instance, here is Crawford (2004), "Suspension of judgement necessarily involves thoughts about one's own epistemic perspective on whether or not p , namely, that one's epistemic perspective falls short of establishing whether p and thus that one does not know whether p " (p. 226). Notice though that Crawford does not seem to be describing a "principled non-belief account" (in my sense) of suspension since "thoughts about one's own epistemic perspective on whether or not p " are plausibly indecision-representing attitudes (with respect to p). If this is right then the sort of view Crawford is describing will qualify as an attitude account for our purposes. In particular, it counts as what we might call a "metacognitive account" of suspended judgment. I will say a little bit more about accounts like these at the end of this paper. I won't say much more though since my goal here is to show that we must adopt an attitude account of suspended judgment and not to say precisely which attitude account we should adopt.

One serious concern with (EPN) and in particular the claim that epistemic reasons are a necessary feature of agnosticism is that it seems to rule out the possibility of suspending for non-epistemic reasons (or at least makes it quite a strange state: one should have committed to non-belief for epistemic reasons for non-epistemic reasons). But it looks at least *prima facie* plausible that S can suspend for non-epistemic reasons. Can't S think that it's good luck to be agnostic about whether his team will win and so suspend judgment about whether they will prevail? Can't he think that it is morally corrupt to have any beliefs about Middle East politics and so adopt an agnostic stance instead? Or might he not suspend because he thinks that God or his mother or his president or his doctor or Brad Pitt wants him to?¹⁸ It is not clear how to make sense of these possibilities on a view according to which suspended judgment is just a state of epistemically principled non-belief.

Moreover, (EPN) looks false for other reasons as well. Say that at t_1 S has the sort of epistemically principled non-belief at issue here, and that he is also suspending judgment about p . But let's now say that at t_2 S loses the reasons he had for non-belief (and doesn't acquire any new ones). If (EPN) is true, S can no longer qualify as agnostic at t_2 . According to (EPN) the reasons the subject has for not believing p and not believing $\neg p$ are partly constitutive of the state of agnosticism itself, and so once a subject loses the relevant reasons he is thereby no longer in a state of agnosticism. But it looks as though S can lose the relevant reasons but remain agnostic. If that is right then (EPN) is false.

Here is an example. Say that S is agnostic about whether Martians exist (p : Martians exist), and that his reasons for non-belief with respect to p have to do with there being no way to know whether Martians exist.¹⁹ These are epistemic reasons. Now say that S comes upon what he takes to be (and is) a reason that defeats his reasons for being in a state of non-belief about Martian life. Perhaps NASA announces that they have developed a new test for discovering whether or not Martians exist (although they haven't yet received the results). Given that, S takes his reasons for non-belief to be defeated (and they are). Does S, at the very moment he loses his reasons for non-belief, thereby stop being agnostic about whether Martians exist? No. That he has lost his reasons does not guarantee that he has changed his mind about whether Martians exist. S does not automatically give up his position about Martian life – his agnosticism – merely in virtue of discovering (and registering the impact of the discovery) that NASA has

¹⁸Perhaps this marks a distinction between belief and suspended judgment.

¹⁹I am being a bit cagey here about what the reasons are since I am trying to avoid (for obvious reasons) attributing the sorts of beliefs that a non-attitude account is trying to avoid to the relevant subject, *e.g.*, the belief that no one can know p . This is not an easy task. See footnote 17.

the ability to test for Martian life. He's still very much in the dark about whether there is life on Mars, and his reasons having been defeated do not amount to (and need not even prompt) a change in view about p itself.

One may suspect that S simply replaces one reason for non-belief with another in the story from the last paragraph. But we get the same results even if we make sure that this doesn't happen. Let's instead say that S's defeating evidence is evidence that he takes to establish the existence of Martians (say NASA announces their test results) and that he no longer takes himself to have any epistemic reason for non-belief. In that case, even if S recognizes that he now has reason to believe p or reason to stop suspending, this does not mean that he will thereby have given up his agnosticism. It may be that he has been suspending for so long that stopping is difficult even if he thinks he ought to. Even if he takes the evidence to be extremely compelling, he may be slow to respond rationally to it given how much is bound up with his agnosticism. He may, in response to losing the relevant reasons, eventually stop suspending, but he does not automatically stop in virtue of losing his reasons. His reasons for non-belief may well be reasons to suspend, but they are not partly constitutive of his agnostic state.²⁰ It appears that S can be agnostic about p despite not having the relevant kind of reasons, so being in a state of epistemically principled non-belief with respect to p is not necessary for being in a state of suspended judgment about p , and (EPN) is false. But here is more.

Say S is in a state of suspended judgment about p at t_1 and has the sort of epistemically principled non-belief at issue here with respect to p at that time. And then say that S loses his reasons for non-belief such that at t_2 he is in a state of p -non-belief, but his state of p -non-belief is not epistemically principled. Let's stipulate that this is the only cognitive change that S undergoes in the transition from t_1 to t_2 . Were being in a state of epistemically principled non-belief necessary for being in a state of suspended judgment, it would have to be the case that at t_2 S is no longer in a state of suspended judgment about p . I have tried to show that this is not right: S does not stop suspending simply in virtue of losing those reasons.

So, at t_2 S will be in a state of non-belief with respect to p that is not epistemically principled, and can still be agnostic about p . But in virtue of what can S be agnostic at t_2 ? We already know that mere non-belief is not sufficient for agnosticism and that neither is non-belief temporally

²⁰In this way, suspended judgment is like belief. If I lose the reasons I had for believing that my neighbour took my newspaper – say I think I saw her pick it up at 8:15, but then discover she was at work by 8:00 that morning – I don't thereby stop believing that she took the paper. Of course, if I am rational I will revise the belief, but my revising my belief is something over and above my losing my reasons. My reasons for believing are distinct, in this sense, from the belief itself.

preceded by some cognitive act. Some other condition(s) must obtain at t_2 in order that S be in a state of suspended judgment about p . Let's call this additional condition κ . Now either κ obtained at t_1 or S came to be in κ in the transition from t_1 to t_2 . But, the only relevant change between t_1 and t_2 was that S lost his epistemic reasons for non-belief, so S did not come to be in κ in the transition from t_1 to t_2 . This means that κ had to obtain at t_1 in order that it be possible for S to remain agnostic about p at t_2 . If it is always possible that agnostic S lose his (epistemic) reasons for non-belief but continue to suspend judgment, that must be explained by some other relevant conditions that obtain right from the start. So, any possible case in which a subject is in a state of (epistemically) principled non-belief and is in a state of suspended judgment must be a case in which κ obtains. Hence, any possible case in which a subject is in a state of (epistemically) principled non-belief but not in κ is a case in which that subject is not in a state of suspended judgment. In short, being in a state of principled non-belief – even epistemically principled non-belief – is not sufficient for being in a state of suspended judgment.²¹ (EPN) fails in this direction as well.

6 Getting to an attitude

Where does this leave us? At the start of this paper I said that in order to capture the state of mind of the agnostic about p we need to find a state such that being in that state amounts to being undecided about the truth of p . This paper explored a way do this by way of non-belief. When S does not believe p and does not believe $\neg p$ he can certainly be thought of as undecided about the truth of p . But agnosticism is not this sort of mere *de facto* indecision. A number of more sophisticated suggestions for capturing suspended judgment with non-belief have been canvassed and have also been shown to fail. In general then I have tried to argue that non-belief is simply not the right sort of indecision or neutrality for capturing the agnostic's state of mind.

Obviously I have not eliminated every possible non-belief account of

²¹One might try to argue that there is no possible case in which a subject is in a state of epistemically principled non-belief, but not in κ . Perhaps, the objection goes, κ is some sort of trivial property or epiphenomenon. Without knowing more about what sort of conditions κ involves, it is difficult to fully respond to this worry. We do know something about κ though: the conditions that κ involves are ones in virtue of which the subject is able to still qualify as agnostic once his reasons are gone. These conditions must be ones that can capture the subject's neutrality or indecision about the truth of p in the right sort of way at this later time. At least at first glance then, κ does not look like a trivial property or condition and does not look to be merely epiphenomenal. Of course, I think κ must at least involve an indecision-representing attitude towards the relevant content.

suspended judgment. But the goal here has not just been to try to get at suspension via non-belief, but to try to rescue a plausible non-attitude account of suspension that captures the indecision of the agnostic via non-belief. We might think that the way to rescue a “non-belief account” of suspension is by insisting that the agnostic have some first- or higher-order indecision-representing attitudes. But of course that is just to admit the failure of non-attitude accounts of suspended judgment: to admit that the agnostic’s indecision or neutrality is not the indecision of merely lacking some beliefs. And I think that’s exactly what we ought to admit. The indecision of the agnostic is not the indecision of mere non-belief. Any account of suspended judgment that starts with non-belief (say, makes it necessary for suspension) is going to have to add some other conditions that do a better job of representing or expressing or being the subject’s neutrality or indecision about the truth of the relevant proposition. Non-belief cannot be the agnostic’s only sort of indecision. But how else can we capture S’s indecision now except by way of an attitudinal commitment to indecision? It’s not the absence of belief towards p , $\neg p$ at the core of agnosticism about p , $\neg p$, but the presence of an attitude that counts as an expression of (or just is) the subject’s neutrality or indecision about which of p , $\neg p$ is true. 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.

Moreover, in this paper I provided a series of counter-examples to different suggested accounts of suspended judgment. If we think of the different counter-examples as each providing a constraint that any account of suspended judgment must meet, an attitude account meets every constraint. An attitude account ticks all the boxes. I pointed some of this out as we moved through the individual examples, but it is worth collecting the thoughts here. Bare non-belief accounts failed because it seemed as though one needs some sort of “cognitive contact” with a proposition (or some importantly related content) in order to count as agnostic about that proposition. Having an attitude that expresses one’s indecision or neutrality about a proposition meets this demand. Non-belief plus having considered a proposition and non-belief plus having refrained or withheld (where these are understood as cognitive acts) didn’t look sufficient since the mere fact that a subject had previously performed some cognitive act and was then in a state of non-belief could not guarantee that he was agnostic post-act. Non-belief preceded by some cognitive act is still just non-belief, but the state of agnosticism is not merely a state of non-belief. When agnosticism involves an indecision-representing attitude, rather than a cognitive act followed by non-belief, these concerns about getting to the right sort of state are avoided: without the attitude one cannot count as in a state of suspended judgment. Having considered the proposition also

didn't look necessary: we should be able to get into a state of suspended judgment or agnosticism in non-standard ways. But an attitude account so far places no constraints on how a subject can get into the state. It says only that having an attitude – however one came to have it – is necessary for being in the state.

A couple of attempts were made to give the state of suspended judgment some additional structure without adding an indecision-representing attitude (either via a resistance to believing or reasons holding one's non-belief in place). But I argued that these suggestions failed as well. A resistance to believing and disbelieving is not sufficient for agnosticism (even in combination with non-belief). Agnosticism requires a position on the truth of some proposition. This is distinct from exhibiting a resistance to believing and disbelieving a proposition. We can exhibit p -belief- disbelief resistance without having any take on the truth of p . An attitude account meets this constraint as well: the attitude is an attitude that expresses/represents/is one's indecision about the truth of p . Finally, I argued that being in a state of epistemically principled non-belief was neither necessary nor sufficient for being in a state of suspended judgment. One problem with the suggestion was that it made it very difficult to capture a subject's suspending for non-epistemic reasons. Suspending for non-epistemic reasons can be unproblematic on an attitude account – a subject takes the attitude for non-epistemic reasons. Another problem with the suggestion was that it left suspended judgment hostage to the relevant reasons: if the reasons were lost so was the agnosticism. But that doesn't seem to be how the state of suspended judgment behaves. The reasons look separable from the state and it looks as though a subject can lose the reasons and remain in the state. An attitude account gets this feature of suspended judgment exactly right: the attitude is one thing and the reasons to have it another. Overall then an attitude account of suspended judgment meets the constraints imposed by the examples in this paper. This is further evidence that having an indecision-representing attitude is necessary for being in a state suspended judgment.

6.1 Suspending judgment and inquiry

I think that we can make the case for an attitude account even more compelling if we think about the process of inquiry or deliberation. While I do not think that a subject needs to deliberate about or consider some proposition in order to suspend, that is typically how a subject gets into a state of agnosticism. In deliberating about p the subject reflects on his evidence (or lack thereof) for and against p . If he takes his evidence to be sufficiently exacting he might believe one of p or $\neg p$. But what happens when he doesn't take his evidence to settle the matter? Obviously, the

subject may bring his inquiry to a close even if he hasn't settled on either of p or $\neg p$. One way to do this is by suspending judgment or moving to a state of agnosticism about $p, \neg p$.²²

So a subject can move from a state of deliberating about p to a more settled state of agnosticism by suspending judgment about p . Suspending judgment then can be thought of as one way of terminating a deliberative process and (other things equal) moving into a more settled state, viz., a state of suspended judgment or agnosticism. Suspending then is (other things equal) a way of (at least temporarily) terminating a deliberative process that is sufficient for getting into a state of agnosticism. Either this way of terminating a deliberative process is a matter of forming or coming to have an attitude towards the proposition under consideration or it is not. We can think of each of the different non-belief accounts suggested in this paper as having proposed a way of ending deliberation that might be a candidate for suspending (dropping a question, withholding, refraining, making one's non-belief principled, and so on). But then we now know that each of those ways of ending deliberations is, even in combination with non-belief, insufficient (even other things equal) for getting a subject into a state of suspended judgment.

Suspending is not a matter of dropping the question under deliberation either accidentally or intentionally (see section 3.1). It is also not a matter of withholding one's belief or refraining from believing (see section 4). And it is also not a matter of making one's non-belief principled (see section 5). None of these ways of terminating a deliberative process is sufficient for getting the subject into a state of suspended judgment (even if he is also in a state of non-belief), and so none amount to suspending judgment. But with all of these options ruled out, what else can a subject do to move from a deliberative state to the relevant settled one? Thinking about belief gives us a good suggestion: the subject can take an attitude towards the question or proposition under deliberation. Given the arguments so far this looks like our best way forward. The best suggestions for settling on no attitude – either accidentally or intentionally – seem to have failed.

Again, given this we have good reason to see suspending as a way of coming to have an attitude towards the proposition under consideration (one that represents or expresses or is one's indecision about the truth of

²²I do not mean to say that suspending about some proposition means never deliberating about it again, but only that once the question of its truth is opened in deliberation, suspending is a move, however temporary, away from active wondering and to a more settled state. This way of thinking about suspended judgment has its roots in some of the very first accounts of suspension. Sextus (*e.g.*, in *Empiricus* (1933)) characterized suspension as a “state of mental rest” and claimed that suspending judgment on all matters is the route to tranquility (although this is only one aspect of his view). For more on Sextus on settled states as well as some (early and later) modern thinking about cognitive settledness, see [Loeb \(1998\)](#).

that proposition).²³

7 Concluding remarks

I have argued that that one suspends judgment about p only if one has an attitude that expresses or represents or just is one's neutrality or indecision about which of $p, \neg p$ is true. This tells us something about the agnostic attitude, but not much. Is this indecision-representing attitude *sui generis* or is having it just a matter of having some familiar indecision-representing attitudes? What more familiar candidates are there? One plausible option that has emerged is that the attitude one has when one suspends about p is just a belief: in particular a belief about one's (somehow deficient) first-order epistemic or doxastic standing with respect to p . In footnote 17 I called this a metacognitive account of suspended judgment. Believing (*e.g.*) that one doesn't/can't know either of p or $\neg p$ looks like a sort of indecision-representing attitude with respect to p . Moreover, some of the considerations in this discussion might make a metacognitive account of the agnostic attitude plausible.²⁴ Another suggestion with obvious appeal is that the attitude(s) one has when one suspends about p and $\neg p$ are credences for or degrees of belief in p and $\neg p$ that qualify as indecision-representing (perhaps middling credences or imprecise ones).²⁵ And perhaps there are some other plausible options as well (doubt?). In the end I don't think that having the agnostic attitude is a matter of having any of these other attitudes; the agnostic attitude is, in this sense, *sui generis*. But I will have to save those discussions for another time. For now we should conclude that the indecision or neutrality that is at the heart of the agnostic's state of mind is an attitude.

²³Roughly, suspending then is to suspended judgment or agnosticism as judging is to belief.

²⁴We can also find support for such a view in the literature. For instance, "An agnostic thinks it impossible to know the truth in matters such as God and the future life with which Christianity and other religions are concerned. Or, if not impossible, at least impossible at the present time" (Russell, 1997: 91); "In order to suspend judgement about whether p , it is, I am suggesting, necessary to believe that you do not believe or disbelieve p " (Crawford, 2004: 226); and "So withholding p involves not only an attitude towards p but also attitudes towards attitudes towards p " (Bergmann, 2005: 421).

²⁵For some discussion of a view like this see van Fraassen (1998), Hájek (1998), Monton (1998), Sturgeon (2010), and Friedman (2011).

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