

Inquiry and Permissible Suspension

This chapter develops an account of permissible suspension that builds on the views of justification, evidence, and defeat defended in the previous chapters. The view is superior to extant competitors in that it successfully predicts epistemic normative failure in cases of suspension generated by evidence and defeat resistance. On this view, doxastically justified suspension is suspension generated by properly functioning knowledge-generating processes. In turn, properly functioning knowledge-generating processes uptake knowledge and ignorance indicators.

9.1 Suspension and the Knowledge Function

I have argued that generating knowledge is the function of our cognitive processes, and that the norms governing moves in inquiry – such as beliefs, suspensions, withholdings, credences, assertions, or pieces of reasoning – will drop out of this function.

Moves in the practice of inquiry – that is, all epistemically significant states and actions – aim either directly (plausibly: beliefs, assertions, reasonings) or indirectly (credences, suspensions, withholdings) at the aim of the practice of inquiry. The difference will lie with goal achievability: since beliefs, assertions, and conclusions of reasonings can be knowledgeable, in a way in which things like credences, suspensions, and withholdings cannot, belief formation aims directly at fulfilling the function of the practice (generating knowledge), while, at the same time, credence, withholding, and suspension aim at knowledge indirectly – they are transitional attitudes, in the sense in which these are attitudes held en route to knowledge but that are not in the running for knowledge.

On my view, such transitional attitudes¹ aim at getting us closer to knowledge: they aim directly at adjusting one's doxastic states to the available

¹ Staffel (2023) is an excellent discussion of transitional attitudes, but the terminology maps onto a different ontological category.

evidence, which, in turn, ultimately aims at the aim of inquiry – knowledge generation. In what follows, I put more flesh on the bones on this general thought.

Importantly, topics in the epistemology of credence, or degrees of belief, deserve a book-length treatment of their own, so I will not touch on this here.² This book restricts itself to full belief and suspension and how evidence and defeat resistance affect the permissibility thereof. In what follows, I offer a sketch of how the knowledge function of inquiry will generate norms for suspensions.

9.2 Justified Suspension

Suspension was, for the longest time, not very hot in epistemology: historically (from Descartes to Clifford, from internalist evidentialists to reliabilists and knowledge-first externalists), people worried mostly about the risks and sins involved in believing without justification, and they ignored the risks of failing to believe when one has plenty of evidence. Recent social and political difficulties sourced in science denialism brought the normativity of suspension to centre stage.

One might think that an account of suspension is straightforwardly predicted by the view of evidence defended here. In particular, one might expect that something like the following principle is correct:

Suspension–evidence link (SEL): A subject *S* is justifiedly suspended on *p* iff *S* has equally weighty evidence for and against *p*.

There are, however, many problems with SEL. First, there is a purely terminological problem: most often, the epistemic permissibility of suspending on *p* is taken to be synonymous with the epistemic permissibility of not forming a full belief that *p*. In this sense of suspension – which only affects full belief – SEL is false on the necessity direction: one need not have equally weighty support for *p* and not-*p* to permissibly withhold full belief in *p*. Any level of epistemic support short of full propositional justification for *p* will be sufficient for permissibly withholding full belief that *p*.

If so, we need to distinguish between (1) what makes full belief permissibly suspended – which is compatible with being permissibly more confident that *p* than that not-*p* – and (2) outright permissible neutrality³:

² See Kelp and Simion (2023b) for a full treatment.

³ Thanks to Julia Staffel for many helpful discussions on this topic.

taking a fully neutral attitude with regard to p (e.g. suspending belief and forming a 0.5 credence, or withholding (not forming) full belief and holding a 0.5 credence, or withholding both belief and credence). To this effect, for ease of recognition, I will refer to the former variety as permissible belief suspension and to the latter as permissible neutrality. On this picture, we get two different permissibility principles. Here they are:

Full belief suspension–evidence link (SEL): Suspending belief in p is epistemically permissible for S iff S does not have enough evidential support for a justified belief that p .

Neutrality–evidence link (NEL): A subject S is justifiedly neutral on p iff S has equally weighty evidence for and against p .

SEL tells us when a subject S can permissibly suspend on p – although they may well be epistemically normatively constrained to form a fairly high credence that p . In contrast, NEL normates tout court neutrality: epistemically permissibly taking a neutral doxastic attitude with regard to p .

SEL and NEL seem fairly plausible at first glance, and they also give us a nice way to think about the nature of reasons to withhold/suspend and their relation to reasons to believe/against believing: on this account, a subject S has a reason to suspend just in case S does not have sufficient reason to fully believe, and, in turn, S has a reason to be neutral on p just in case S has equally weighty reasons for and against p .

Unfortunately, things aren't as easy as this: suspension and neutrality, just like any other doxastic attitude, afford two types of justification: propositional and doxastic (see also Lord and Sylvan 2021, 2022). In particular, the two will come apart in cases in which S will have sufficient evidence to suspend on p /be neutral on p but will nevertheless fail to do so epistemically permissibly.

The reason why this can happen is improper uptake and evidence handling: one can have evidence for/against p that one fails to uptake/update on or improperly uptakes/processes/updates on, which will result in a lack of doxastic justification for suspension/neutrality just as it results in a lack of doxastic justification for belief. To see how this can be the case, it is easy to imagine cases in which S 's evidence is as per SEL/NEL, but S 's suspension/neutrality either is not based on this evidence (but, say, on wishful thinking) or is based on this evidence in the wrong way (e.g. the evidence supports suspending/neutrality inductively, but S takes it to do so deductively).

If this is so, SEL and NEL are false. What we need are more fine-grained principles that distinguish between these varieties of justification for withholding/suspending. Here it goes, for propositional justification:

Propositionally justified full belief suspension: Suspending belief on p is propositionally justified for S iff S does not have enough evidential support for a justified belief that p .

Propositionally justified neutrality: A subject S 's neutrality on p is propositionally justified iff S has equally weighty evidence for and against p .

De facto, then, propositionally justified neutrality will occur in cases in which the relevant evidential probability is at 0.5. In this, the view is evidence-based but not evidentialist (i.e. not evidence-first), since evidence is further unpacked in terms of facts that can be taken up by cognitive processes hosted by the relevant type of cogniser.

An account of doxastically justified neutrality falls outside of the scope of this book, since it will rest on the correct account of credence justification.⁴ How about doxastically justified suspension? It should not come as a surprise to the reader, at this stage, that in my view this will be, once more, a matter of proper functioning. Here it goes:

Doxastically justified suspending: S 's suspension on p is doxastically justified iff formed via a properly functioning belief-forming capacity that has the function of generating knowledge.

What is the relationship between doxastically justified suspensions and the evidence for which they are held? Once more, pieces of evidence are pro tanto, prima facie justification-makers: they are inputs to the process of belief formation, and when the latter has the function of generating knowledge and is properly functioning, the resulting doxastic attitude is epistemically justified. When evidence is sufficient for full belief, a properly functioning belief-formation capacity with the function of generating knowledge will generate a full belief. When it is not enough, a properly functioning belief-formation capacity with the function of generating knowledge will generate a suspension.

This view of permissible suspension will deal well with the cases of impermissible suspension that made trouble for Sosa's virtue-theoretic view: George the sexist, for instance, will not be permissibly suspended on where Glasgow Central is, since he has undefeated evidence (Anna's testimony) that it is to the right. More precisely, since Anna's testimony raises his evidential probability that Glasgow Central is to the right and no

⁴ See my work on justified credence (Kelp and Simion 2023b) for an account of doxastically justified neutrality.

other facts lower it, George should (at least) be more confident that Glasgow Central is to the right than that it is not.

Why should we believe that this account is the metaphysically correct account of suspension (i.e. why should we think that knowledge-generating belief-formation processes are the ones in charge of generating suspensions)? There are a few reasons for this. First, recall the normative picture defended here: I take it that generating knowledge is the function of our epistemic practice of inquiry, and that norms governing moves in inquiry – such as beliefs, suspensions, assertions, or pieces of reasoning – will drop out of this function. This normative picture fits snugly with a picture in which the cognitive capacities in charge of generating knowledge will be the same ones responsible for generating withholdings and suspensions when enough support for knowledge is not available: these processes will seek to form a belief if *and only if* the belief in question is knowledgeable (Sosa 2021). This function, in turn, will translate into them generating knowledgeable beliefs whenever knowledge is available, but also, as Ernie Sosa puts it, into forbearing when knowledge is not available. In this, as predicted, the normativity of suspension drops right out of the knowledge-generating function of our inquiring practice and of our cognitive systems.

9.3 Suspension and the Normativity of Inquiry

Before moving on, I would like to address a worry that the view of suspension – and, correspondingly, the account of the ought to believe – put forth here is too demanding, in that it would seem as though it asks of us to believe too many things: after all, it would seem as though, at all times, we are both in a position to know a very high number of facts from our immediate environment⁵ and in a position to inquire into a variety of questions.

To the contrary, as I'm about to argue, an important theoretical advantage of the account of suspension proposed here is that, while being able to account for the epistemic impermissibility intuition in cases of resistance to evidence, it also nicely explains the permissibility of ignoring a multitude of facts in our environment to the aim of focusing on issues that we care (or that we should care) about inquiring into. If this is right, the account is just as strong and just as permissive as we want it to be.

To get this into clearer view, consider a puzzle about the normativity of inquiry notably put forth by Jane Friedman:

⁵ Many thanks to Matt McGrath for pressing me on this. See e.g. Friedman 2020, Kelp 2021, Flores and Woodard 2023, Falbo 2023, Thornstad 2021, Whitcomb 2017, Willard-Kyle 2023 for recent work on the normativity of inquiry.

The Chrysler Building

Say, for instance, that I want to know how many windows the Chrysler Building in Manhattan has. I decide that the best way to figure this out is to head down there myself and do a count. To do my counting, I set up outside of Grand Central Station. Say it takes me an hour of focused work to get the count done and figure out how many windows that building has. During that hour there are many other ways I could make epistemic gains. There is obviously a huge amount of facts around me that I can come to know. (Friedman 2020, 503)

Here is the puzzle: if some inquiry norms (i.e. norms of gathering evidence, or zetetic norms) are epistemic norms, as the account defended here predicts, then it might look as though the following paradigmatic zetetic norm is an epistemic norm:

ZIP: If one wants to figure out [the answer to a question] Q , then one ought to take the necessary means to figuring out Q .

At the same time, the following is an epistemic norm par excellence:

K_p: If one is in a position to know a proposition, p , then one is permitted to come to know that p .

But, Friedman argues, it would seem as though in the Chrysler Building case, ZIP and K_p come into conflict; after all, as soon as I focus on Q (counting the windows), I am no longer able to pay attention to the myriad of other things happening around me. Because of this, there will be very many things happening around me that I am in a position to know but that I will, as a matter of fact, fail to know. I will, thereby, register a huge amount of epistemic loss. Since events like the one described in the Chrysler Building case are ubiquitous – whenever we inquire into a specific question, we seem to ignore many unrelated facts – it seems to follow that the epistemic domain is peppered with normative conflict and, indeed, failure. Since, according to Friedman, it is implausible that this might be so, one of ZIP or K_p has to go.

A few things about this: first and foremost, as currently stated, ZIP and K_p do not come into *normative* conflict – after all, in the current formulation, K_p is a permission, whereas ZIP is an obligation. Permissions and obligations cannot come into normative conflict, in that their normative strength cannot pull in two different directions: it is always permissible by the lights of both norms to do whatever the obligation requires.

That being said, on a view like mine, which incorporates justifiers as epistemic obligations, we can – and, indeed, Friedman herself does so later

in her paper – reformulate Kp as an obligation and thereby get a revamped version of Friedman’s puzzle:

ZIP: If one wants to figure out Q , then one ought to take the necessary means to figuring out Q .

Kp^* : If one is in a position to know a proposition, p , then one ought to come to know that p .

While many epistemological accounts will not accept Kp^* – indeed, as we have just seen, the vast majority of the literature we have looked at has difficulties accommodating epistemic oughts – and thus will not make the proper target of Friedman’s puzzle, that is not the case with the account defended here: OTB, together with a plausible assumption that, at least most of the time, when there is sufficient evidence for one to come to believe that p , then one is in a position to know that p ,⁶ imply Kp^* . As such, for now, it would seem as though my account owes Friedman an explanation of what is going on in Chrysler Building-type cases.

Before moving on, though, I want to take one last look at Friedman’s puzzle, only this time focusing on ZIP. Note that, as stated, ZIP is a desire-conditional ought: given the scope of the deontic operator, the obligation only arises upon the desire to inquire being present. However, inquiry norms proper (i.e. norms constituting our practice of inquiry) are not plausibly desire conditional (Kelp 2021). Indeed, constitutive norms never are: think about games. Once you’ve engaged in playing chess, and short of ceasing to do so, it is not up to your desires anymore if you are allowed to move the bishop diagonally or not: it’s a categorical rule of the game. Similarly, what is desire conditional is entering the zetetic domain to begin with, rather than being subject to its constitutive norms once already engaged in inquiry. In order to see this, it will be helpful to distinguish between zetetic norms (i.e. norms constituting inquiry) and norms about inquiry (i.e. norms regulating when one should take on inquiry in a particular domain).⁷ An example of the latter is the norm ‘if you want to be a biologist, go study biology’. Clearly, this is not a zetetic norm, although it is a norm about when one should inquire into a specific domain. In contrast, consider: ‘biologists should know the latest findings in their field’. This, arguably, is a zetetic norm proper: now that one has

⁶ Possible exceptions will be cases in which the agent can’t come to know due to something intervening in the basing process.

⁷ Thanks to Jane Friedman and Chris Kelp for many helpful discussions on this.

engaged in biological inquiry, one is under epistemic normative pressure to take up the latest evidence in the field. Let's restrict ZIP accordingly and outline the final revamped Friedman Puzzle:

ZIP*: If you engage in an inquiry aimed at figuring out Q , then you ought to take the necessary means to figuring out Q .

Kp*: If one is in a position to know a proposition, p , then one ought to come to know that p .

The final revamped Friedman Puzzle is, indeed, on the face of it, a puzzle for a view like mine, which takes epistemic justification to be epistemic obligation to believe. After all, it would seem as though, in the Chrysler Building case, there is a lot of evidence lying around about all of things happening around Central Station that I completely ignore. For instance, just as I count the windows on the Chrysler Building, there is a man with a green hat exiting the station. Clearly, the thought would go, given that the man is walking in plain view, I am in a position to know that he's exiting the station (p). If so, by Kp, I ought to come to know that he's exiting the station. However, at the same time, since I've engaged in counting the windows on the Chrysler Building, it seems as though now I am subject to an obligation to come to know the number of windows on the Chrysler Building. Since I can't do both at the same time, the thought would go, I'm faced by an inescapable normative conflict.

I believe that many views endorsing epistemic oughts to believe will face this problem (for more about normative conflicts and epistemic dilemmas, see Chapter 10); at the same time, as I'm about to argue, my account does not. Indeed, an important theoretical advantage of my account of evidence, defeat, and suspension is precisely that it not only accommodates intuitive epistemic obligations, but it also, conversely, nicely explains the permissibility of ignoring a multitude of facts in our environment to the aim of focusing on issues that we are inquiring into.

In a nutshell, the reason why my account escapes Friedman's puzzle is that, on my view, evidence, defeat, and permissible suspension are unpacked in terms of a notion of being in a position to know that predicts that I am not in a position to know that the man with the green hat left the station, nor any other such detail about what is going on at Central Station, at the time when I am counting the windows on the Chrysler Building. Recall the account:

Being in a position to know: S is in a position to know a fact e iff S has a cognitive capacity with the function of generating knowledge that

can (qualitatively, quantitatively, and environmentally) easily uptake e in cognisers of S 's type.

Recall, also, the rationale for the quantitative restriction on easy uptake: there are quantitative limitations on my information accessing and processing – the fact that there's a table somewhere towards the periphery of my visual field (in contrast of it being right in front of me, in plain view) is not something I can easily process. I lack the power to process everything in my visual field – it's just too much information.

Quantitative limitations on being in a position to know will make it so that I can only take up a limited number of the $e_1, e_2, e_3 \dots e_n$ facts that lie within reach with my knowledge-generating capacities. On the account defended, I only shoulder an epistemic obligation to take up a subset of $e_1, e_2, e_3 \dots e_n$ that is as large as my quantitative uptake limitations. *Availability rankings* will deliver the relevant set, on my view: the most easily available subset of facts that I can take up is the one that I ought to take up. Crucially, also, note that quantitative limitations on being in a position to know imply the denial of conjunction introduction for being in a position to know: being in a position to know p, q, r , and s individually does not imply being in a position to know $p \& q \& r \& s$.

If all of this is the case, and given that, by stipulation, I am not able to pay attention to everything that's going on at the train station while I'm engaged in counting the windows on the Chrysler Building, it follows that, as soon as I will have started counting, I am not in a position to know what is going on at the station anymore. I am not in a position to know that there are eighty-nine windows and a man with a green hat exited the station.

In turn, since, on my account, epistemic obligations are grounded in being in a position to know, I am also under no obligation to form any beliefs about what is going on at the station after I started my inquiry. As soon as I'm subject to ZIP* – because I will have engaged in my inquiry into the question of how many windows there are on the Chrysler Building – I am no longer subject to Kp , because I am not in a position to know what is happening at the station. Therefore, I am at no point subject to ZIP* and Kp^* at the same time, and thereby neither to a ZIP*– Kp^* normative conflict. My account escapes the Friedman Puzzle.

One might think this is a bit fast.⁸ Of course, Sophie of *Sophie's Choice* is also not faced by a dilemma anymore once she has already chosen the

⁸ Thanks a lot to Anna Mahtani for pressing me on this.

twin to save (at t_2). The interesting normative conflict, though, happens at t_1 , when she needs to make the choice and she's faced with a normative dilemma. Similarly, one might think, the interesting normative version of the Friedman Puzzle concerns t_1 , when one is supposed to choose between which epistemic obligation to fulfil: that of inquiring into the number of windows or that of forming beliefs about the man in the green hat. Or so the thought would go.

A few things about this. First, note that there is a difference between *Sophie's Choice* and the Friedman Puzzle (revamped): Sophie is subject to two unconditional obligations – to save her twins, respectively. In contrast, ZIP* is an obligation only conditional upon already engaging in the relevant inquiry. At t_1 , therefore (i.e. before engaging in the relevant inquiry), I am under no epistemic obligation to count the windows: my only epistemic obligation concerns forming beliefs about what's going on around me (i.e. at the station). At t_2 , a practical norm along the lines of ZIP simpliciter (i.e. sourced in my peculiar desire to find out how many windows there are on the Chrysler Building) overrides this epistemic obligation and makes it permissible for me to direct my attention towards the Chrysler Building and start my inquiry into the number of windows on the Chrysler Building. As soon as that occurs, I am no longer under an obligation to form beliefs about what's going on at the station because I am no longer in a position to know what is going on at the station. Since, on my account, at no time am I under the normative pressure of both ZIP* and Kp* in Friedman's case, my account does not face Friedman's puzzle.

9.4 Conclusion

One should suspend if and only if one does so via a properly functioning cognitive process that has the function of generating knowledge and that, in virtue of it being properly functioning, takes up one's available evidence and defeat. An important theoretical advantage of the account of suspension proposed here is that, while being able to account for the epistemic impermissibility intuition in cases of resistance to evidence, it also nicely explains the permissibility of ignoring a multitude of facts in our environment to the aim of focusing on issues that we care about inquiring into. If this is right, the account is just as demanding and just as permissive as we want it to be.

