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## Three Kinds of Suspended Belief

### Abstract

This paper argues for a third kind of suspended belief. Two that have already been distinguished in the literature are *positive suspension* and *negative suspension*. The third kind that we describe is (what we call) *aporetic suspension*. All of these kinds of suspension count as suspended beliefs in the sense that they each share the same fundamental features of suspended belief—they are all a kind of neutral doxastic attitude. Yet they are also unique in some important respects. Positive and negative suspension can be distinguished along evidential lines. Positive suspension arises when one has (more or less) equally balanced evidence for a proposition; whilst negative suspension arises when one lacks evidence either for or against a proposition. Aporetic suspension, we argue, can be further distinguished from both positive and negative suspension in three important respects. According to (i) its evidential-input, (ii) its functional-output, and (iii) its phenomenal character.

### Keywords

Suspended Belief; Suspended Judgment; Withheld Belief; Withheld Judgment; Agnosticism; Doubt; Aporia

## 1. Introduction

What is suspended belief? A quick look at the literature tells us that it's difficult to say. Errol Lord (2023: 7) describes the current debates as 'in some ways the Wild West', and in this he is right. There is very little agreement about the nature of suspension.<sup>1</sup> One point that has not received much attention, however, is that there are arguably different kinds of suspended belief, at least within some broadly

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<sup>1</sup> We refer to the attitude under discussion as 'suspended belief' and 'suspension'. Different authors use many other terms to refer to the same attitude. These terms include 'suspended judgment', 'withheld belief', 'withheld judgment', 'agnosticism' and 'doubt'. Indeed, there is an ongoing debate about which label is more appropriate (see e.g. McGrath 2020 and Rosa *forth*). We return to this issue in section 4.

accepted parameters. Two kinds of suspension that have been discussed before are positive and negative suspension. Positive suspension, as we understand it, is the attitude that arises when one has (more or less) equally balanced evidence for a proposition; whilst negative suspension arises when one lacks evidence for and against a proposition (cf. Guilielmo 2025: 320-321).<sup>2</sup> These kinds of suspension are thus distinct in terms of their evidential-input. We say more about this distinction later in the paper. Our main aim, however, is to suggest that there is yet another kind of suspension; a third that we call ‘aporetic suspension’.<sup>3</sup>

In the following section, we outline what it means to be a suspended belief. In section 3, we use examples to draw out the individual properties of the different kinds of suspension. And in sections 4-5, we discuss some of the potential criticisms and implications of our proposal, respectively. The hope is that, in drawing attention to some of the more subtle distinctions that exist under the umbrella of ‘suspended belief’, we can continue to make progress into understanding this otherwise elusive state.

## 2. Suspension as an Attitude

All three kinds of suspension that we describe must meet certain fundamental criteria. These are the conditions that allow us to characterise an attitude *as* an instance of suspension. Perhaps the most commonly accepted features of suspension are as follows:

- (i) Suspension is an attitude (something more than the total absence of an attitude).
- (ii) Suspension is an attitude of neutrality.
- (iii) Suspension is subject to doxastic norms.

Following Jane Friedman, many theorists have accepted the first condition. Friedman writes, ‘My great grandparents did not suspend about whether Google Chrome is better than Firefox’ (2013a: 168). Her

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<sup>2</sup> We assume that suspension is an attitude taken towards a proposition. It can be argued, however, that suspension is better understood as an attitude taken towards a question (see e.g. Booth 2012; Friedman 2013c). We discuss the implications of a question directed view for our proposal in section 4.

<sup>3</sup> Sextus Empiricus often states that it is not that he disagrees with his opponents. It is that he cannot grasp what they are trying to say. He thus always finds himself ‘at a loss’ about what to think; that is, in a state of *aporia*. As is made clear below, this sense of being ‘at a loss’ closely aligns with ‘aporetic suspension’, hence the name. For further discussion of Sextan’s Pyrrhonian scepticism, see Mates (1996).

great grandparents had never heard of Google Chrome nor Firefox, so it makes no sense to talk about them suspending. The point is that suspension is more than the mere absence of an attitude.<sup>4</sup>

The second condition is that suspension is an attitude of committed neutrality to whether or not a proposition is true. Luis Rosa (*forth*) describes what it means for suspension to be a neutral state (which he calls ‘the third stance’).<sup>5</sup> The important features of which are (we paraphrase for ease of expression):

- (a) In adopting the third stance regarding whether  $p$ , a subject neither takes  $p$  to be true nor takes  $p$  to be false; both  $p$  and not- $p$  are possible from the subject’s perspective.
- (b) In adopting the third stance regarding whether  $p$ , one is, other things being equal, disposed to rely on neither of  $p$  nor not- $p$  as a premise in practical and theoretical reasoning.
- (c) The third stance regarding whether  $p$  can be expressed through interrogatives such as ‘Is it the case that  $p$ ?’

As Rosa writes, these features capture the idea that, when one adopts the third stance, one is ‘on the fence’ about the truth of a proposition (Rosa *forth*: §2). That is to say, they capture the neutrality of suspension: to suspend about  $p$  is to adopt an attitude that is neither assent for  $p$  nor assent for not- $p$ .<sup>6</sup>

The third condition takes us from the descriptive to the normative features of suspension in stating that suspension is subject to doxastic norms. Rosa (*forth*: §2) again captures these features well:

- (d) It is incoherent for a subject to adopt the third stance regarding whether  $p$  and to believe or disbelieve that  $p$  at the same time.
- (e) When a subject’s total body of evidence  $E$  supports neither  $p$  nor not- $p$ , the third stance regarding whether  $p$  is the stance that is vindicated by  $E$ .

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<sup>4</sup> Friedman (2013a) proceeds to defend attitudinal accounts of suspension against various non-attitudinal alternatives. The full details of her discussion need not concern us here.

<sup>5</sup> Rosa uses the term ‘the third stance’ initially to remain terminologically neutral between ‘suspension’, ‘withholding’, etc. After some consideration, he argues that the most appropriate label for this attitude is ‘is in doubt as to whether...’ Again, we point the reader to our discussion of the terminological issue in section 4. In any case, we have the same attitude in mind.

<sup>6</sup> One might doubt any of the individual features of suspension under discussion. For instance, is it necessarily the case that, when suspending, a subject is disposed not to use  $p$  and not- $p$  in reasoning, as per (b)? Perhaps not. One can pragmatically accept  $p$ , and thus use  $p$  in reasoning, whilst suspending belief about  $p$  (see Bratman 1992). Our aim, however, is not to defend any of these features of suspension from objections. It is to outline some commonly accepted parameters for discussing the different kinds of suspension that fall within these parameters. Insofar as these features prove *not* to hold for suspension (in general), then we are happy to accept that they do not hold for the different kinds of suspension (in particular).

Condition (d) is widely accepted, even if there is disagreement about the nature of this ‘incoherence’ (is it epistemic, pragmatic, or even moral?). Just as believing that  $p$  at the same time as disbelieving that  $p$  is incoherent, so is suspending about  $p$  whilst believing that  $p$  (or believing that not- $p$ ). And condition (e) picks out the evidential situation that ‘vindicates’ suspension. That is, when the evidence is indeterminate between  $p$  and not- $p$ .<sup>7</sup> Thus both (d) and (e) together capture a minimal notion of what it means for suspension to be subject to doxastic norms.<sup>8</sup>

The picture that begins to emerge is one of suspension as a kind of doxastic attitude. One that occupies a neutral position between its doxastic siblings, belief and disbelief. This has sometimes been called the ‘Triad view’ of doxastic attitudes (Turri 2012). One can believe a proposition, disbelieve a proposition, or suspend belief about a proposition (see Feldman 2014: 46). That’s not to say that we are committed to the Triad view here—we are open to the idea of there being more or less than three doxastic attitudes.<sup>9</sup> We are simply committed to the idea that suspension is one of them. It is within these parameters that all instances of suspension fall. However, as we argue presently, there are different kinds of suspension that meet these conditions, but that are each unique in their own way.

### 3. Positive Suspension, Negative Suspension, and Aporetic Suspension

Our aim in this section is to demonstrate that positive, negative, and aporetic suspension are distinct from one another in at least one of the following ways. In terms of: (i) their evidential-input, (ii) their functional-output, or (iii) their phenomenal character.

Concerning (i), we argue that each kind of suspension arises due to different evidential situations. Positive suspension arises due to an equity of evidential reasons, negative suspension arises due to the absence of evidential reasons, and aporetic suspension arises when a subject cannot (and they know they cannot)

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<sup>7</sup> Rosa uses the term ‘vindicated’ to avoid committing to evidentialism about doxastic norms, which the pragmatists might immediately object to. Likewise, we intend to remain neutral on this matter. Although we talk in evidentialist terms, we are not necessarily against the idea that pragmatic reasons sometimes influence our doxastic attitudes—including suspension (see e.g. McHugh 2013).

<sup>8</sup> An interesting question is whether the norms of suspension are implied by more fundamental norms of belief. For arguments to this end, see Sosa (2011: 5-7) and Engel (2013: 213-214). For dissent, see Atkinson (2021).

<sup>9</sup> It is often said that the disbelief that  $p$  might reduce to the belief that not- $p$ . That would imply that there are only two doxastic attitudes: belief and suspension. For example, see Friedman (2013a: 166, fn. 2) and Spencer (2016: 512). But for maintaining a distinction between belief and disbelief, see Smart (2020).

grasp their available evidence. Concerning (ii), we argue that aporetic suspension performs a unique functional role, in contrast to positive and negative suspension. This is due to the fact that positive and negative suspension are constituted by middling credences, in a way that aporetic suspension is not—a difference that has implications for how the functional roles of these attitudes are carried out. And concerning (iii), we argue that aporetic suspension has a unique phenomenal profile when compared with positive and negative suspension.

It is also worth noting that the descriptions we offer should be understood as rational descriptions of each kind of suspension. That is to say, we are characterising different ways of suspending rationally. This is because each kind of suspension is (at least in part) defined by the evidential situation that a subject takes themselves to be in. Given that this is the case, it is impossible for a subject to adopt the wrong kind of suspension relative to their evidential situation. For instance, and as the examples below make clear, it is not possible for a subject to be negatively suspending when a subject *has* evidence both for and against a proposition. In that case, the subject would *just be* positively suspending. And the same is true of all three kinds of suspension: positive suspension is rational *qua* positive suspension, negative suspension is rational *qua* negative suspension, and aporetic suspension is rational *qua* aporetic suspension.<sup>10</sup>

Now, to draw out these distinctions, we outline examples of all three kinds of suspension. First, we further elaborate on the distinction between positive and negative suspension. Following that, we introduce aporetic suspension as the third kind of suspension.

### 3.1 Positive and Negative Suspension

The following is a case of positive suspension.

**Dog Breed Case:** You are trying to decide the breed of dog that you see running in the distance. You notice that the dog has (almost) all of the features of a Yorkshire Terrier. It has, for instance, a long dark coat with a tanned head and chest. You take this to be good evidence that the dog is a Yorkshire Terrier.

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<sup>10</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging us to make this point explicit.

However, as the dog approaches, you also notice that it is tall for its breed, perhaps around 30cm at the withers. Since you know that Yorkshire Terriers don't typically grow taller than 23cm, you start to question your initial evidence. Is the dog really a Yorkshire Terrier? You have (what you take to be) good evidence both for and against a positive answer. In the end, you settle on suspension, having assigned your competing evidence (more or less) equal weight.

The next example is a case of negative suspension.

**Stargazing Case:** You are out with your friend one night, gazing at the stars. She asks you: do you think the number of stars in the universe is odd or even? That's something you've never thought about before. However, after some consideration, you can't think of any good reasons favouring either answer. As with the previous case, you suspend belief. This time, however, you do so *not* because of equally good competing evidence, but because of the total lack of available evidence either way.<sup>11</sup>

Both of these cases involve typical instances of suspension. Nevertheless, they differ in an important respect. In the dog breed case, you are subject to the incoming pressure (so to speak) of conflicting evidence. This means you have the opportunity to reflect on the competing evidence. You might ask yourself (something like): should I assign more weight to one side or the other? In the stargazing case, however, you are not subject to the incoming pressure of competing evidence. There *is* no competing evidence. You thus cannot consider which side of the evidence to assign more weight to. These two instances are therefore distinct in terms of their evidential-input.

This distinction has a history dating back to at least Joseph Rickaby (1888: 44-45; see Guilielmo 2024). The reason we draw attention to it is that these examples of both positive and negative suspension provide a point of contrast for our third kind of suspension; that is, aporetic suspension. We begin with another example.

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<sup>11</sup> Said Lucullus of the academic sceptics: 'We can forget about the ones who claim that everything is as unclear as whether the number of stars is even or odd. They're hopeless cases.' (Cicero, *Ac.* 2.32)

### 3.2 The Theologian and the Fool

It's the start of a school year, and a young theologian is reading the arguments both for and against God's existence. He wants to decide, once and for all, whether it is true *that God exists* (call this  $p$ ). The first argument he comes across is Anselm's ontological argument. Now, we won't get into the details of the ontological argument here, but let's say that our theologian finds it convincing. Indeed, he thinks to himself, God *is* perfect, and that must mean he exists! He thus comes, for the moment, to believe that  $p$ . However, this will not last. Later that same day, he comes across an argument with a conflicting conclusion: the problem of evil.

On considering the problem of evil, our theologian begins to doubt his belief that  $p$ . He asks himself: if God really is perfect, then why is there evil in the world? Perhaps  $p$  isn't true after all—he continues to reflect for a while. In the end, the theologian decides that the problem of evil is equally as compelling as Anselm's ontological argument. Thus, unable to commit either way, he suspends belief about  $p$ .

This is another case of positive suspension—the theologian's evidential situation is such that he takes himself to have equally balanced evidence. The important thing to notice, however, is that the theologian *grasps* (or at least he takes himself to grasp) his evidence.<sup>12</sup> He understands the ontological argument and the problem of evil. He suspends belief because he finds the arguments equally compelling.

The story continues.

Remembering that Anselm said even the 'fool' should be able understand his argument, and not yet wanting to end his inquiry, the theologian decides to ask his friend's opinion on the matter (a fool in all things theological).<sup>13</sup> The theologian explains to the fool both Anselm's ontological argument and the problem of evil. He then asks: do you believe that God exists?

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<sup>12</sup> It is not important whether he really grasps the arguments or not—he might be mistaken about his ability. Nevertheless, he still forms an instance of positive suspension if he *takes himself* to grasp the arguments and, according to his own understanding, takes the arguments to be equally balanced.

<sup>13</sup> Don't feel sorry for the fool. The authors are themselves fools in many matters.

After some consideration, and to the theologian's surprise, the fool replies that he is perplexed at all this talk of 'God', 'perfection', 'existence', 'evil', and the like. It is not that he doesn't understand the words—he can use them perfectly well in ordinary language. It is that, in the context of the arguments under consideration, he has no clear grasp of how all of these concepts are supposed to fit together. There is something about it all that he cannot—and he knows he cannot—fully understand. He thus, like the theologian, suspends belief about *p*.

The claim we want to make is that there is something different about the fool's instance of suspension. It is not, like the theologian's, an instance of positive suspension; nor is it, for that matter, an instance of negative suspension. It is, we want to suggest, an instance of aporetic suspension.

### 3.3 Aporitic Suspension

The aim of the above examples is to begin to push the intuition that there is a distinct kind of suspension here. Nevertheless, to fully establish the distinction, we need to describe exactly what the differences are between positive and negative suspension, on the one hand, and aporetic suspension, on the other. To reiterate, there are three. They are distinct in terms of (i) their evidential-input, (ii) their functional-output, and (iii) their phenomenal character. We discuss each in turn.

*Evidential-Input.* Positive and negative suspension, as we have seen, arise from distinct evidential situations. Aporitic suspension, we claim, arises from yet another distinct evidential situation. To continue with the above example, the theologian who suspends about God's existence does so because he assigns (more or less) equal weight to the competing arguments. In the case of the fool, however, this is not possible. The fool cannot assign equal weight to the arguments because, by his own lights, he is not in a position to judge the arguments. That is to say, one cannot (rationally) assign weight to arguments that one does not understand. Indeed, we can compare how the theologian and the fool might reason about their respective evidential situations. The theologian thinks (something like): 'Anselm's ontological argument and the problem of evil are both good arguments, I simply cannot decide between them'. But

the fool, in contrast, has no such thought. He thinks to himself (something like): ‘I cannot tell how strong each of these arguments are, nor how weak, I simply cannot judge’.

The difference that we begin to see between positive suspension and aporetic suspension centres on the subject’s ability to grasp their available evidence. Both kinds of suspension involve a neutral doxastic commitment towards a proposition. But much like positive and negative suspension, they are distinct in terms of the evidential-inputs that give rise to them. The difference is that, for positive suspension, the attitude arises when a subject is *able* to grasp their evidential situation; whilst for aporetic suspension, the attitude arises precisely when a subject is *unable* to grasp their evidential situation.

Granting this much, it can be asked whether the same distinction also holds between aporetic suspension and negative suspension. On the surface, it might appear as though the former collapses into the latter. This is because being in a situation such that one is unable to grasp one’s evidence is similar in some respect to not having any evidence. In particular, neither an aporetic suspender nor a negative suspender is in a position to properly weigh the competing evidence for or against a proposition. Nevertheless, the main point of contrast still holds: aporetic suspension involves a subject’s inability to grasp their evidential situation, negative suspension does not. To demonstrate the point, this distinction corresponds with both a metaphysical and psychological difference between the evidential situations of aporetic suspension and negative suspension.

Contrast this time the case of the fool with the case of the stargazer (discussed in 3.1). The metaphysical difference is that, for the fool, evidence is *at that moment* present for the subject to deliberate on; but for the stargazer, there is no evidence at that moment present for the subject to deliberate on. Of course, there are cases of negative suspension such that additional evidence is readily available. For example, you might know that as soon as you open your emails, you will find evidence (which you currently lack) about whether or not you got the job you applied for. But this is not the same as the evidence being present at the particular moment of deliberation. Indeed, if you are in a state of negative suspension, and you then deliberate on some evidence, you will (depending on the nature of that evidence) either form an outright

belief or disbelief in the relevant proposition; or, if the evidence is equally balanced, you will continue to suspend, but your suspension will now be an instance of positive suspension. Our claim is that there is another possibility in this situation. If you consider the evidence but are perplexed by it, then you enter into a state of aporetic suspension. This is metaphysically distinct from lacking evidence at a particular time (negative suspension) and from having competing evidence that you assign equal weight to (positive suspension).

Furthermore, the psychological difference is that, for aporetic suspension, the evidential situation gives rise to a particular kind of (what we might call) cognitive struggle. The fool, for instance, must struggle with the evidence that is available to him, at least to some extent, if he is to realise that he does not understand it. This is not the case with negative suspension, given that there is no evidence to struggle with. The stargazer, for instance, does not struggle with the evidence concerning whether the number of stars is odd or even. He understands well enough that there is no evidence either way, and for that reason suspends. For the negative suspender, then, there is no evidence to struggle with; but for the aporetic suspender, there is evidence, it just cannot penetrate (so to speak) in the right sort of way.

In summary, if this analysis is correct, then there are three different kinds of suspension that can be distinguished along evidential lines. Positive suspension occurs due to equally balanced competing evidence; negative suspension occurs from a lack of evidence in either direction; and aporetic suspension occurs when a subject is incapable of properly grasping the evidence that is available to them.

**Functional-Output.** There is also a functional difference between positive and negative suspension, on the one hand, and aporetic suspension, on the other. Matthew McGrath (2020) points out that one of the functions of suspension is (much like other doxastic attitudes) to exert ‘rational pressure’ on other attitudes.<sup>14</sup> The most basic example of this is reflected in the normative conditions of suspension (outlined in section 2): that it is irrational to suspend belief about  $p$  whilst also believing that  $p$ . But the general

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<sup>14</sup> McGrath (2020) prefers the term ‘agnosticism’ for what we are calling ‘suspension’.

point applies more broadly. The rational pressure that suspension exerts also carries over in inference to attitudes about different propositions. For instance, if you believe that  $p$  implies  $q$ , and you are suspending belief about  $q$ , then it is irrational (at the same time) to believe that  $p$ .<sup>15</sup> What we want to suggest is that, while this same general function is true of all three kinds of suspension, positive and negative suspension do not carry it out in quite the same way as aporetic suspension.

To establish this distinction, we defend the following two assumptions:

- (i) Positive and negative suspension are constituted by middling credences; aporetic suspension is not.
- (ii) This difference has implications for how the functional roles of these attitudes are carried out.

To begin with (i). Both positive and negative suspension allow a subject to assign—in principle—underlying credences to their instance of suspension (at least roughly).<sup>16</sup> To take a case of positive suspension, a subject might suspend belief about  $p$ , whilst acknowledging that their evidence (to some degree) favours  $p$  over not- $p$ . For instance, our young theologian might in fact think that the ontological argument is slightly stronger than the problem of evil, and form a 0.6 credence in favour of God's existence. This is possible as long as the evidence is not sufficient to compel an outright belief. And the same is true of negative suspension: a negative suspender is—in principle—in a position to assign underlying credences to their instance of suspension; again, precisely because of their ability to grasp their evidential situation. Indeed, absolute cases of negative suspension, such as the stargazer case, are interesting in the sense that they are (arguably) always constituted by a credence of 0.5. Nevertheless, the point still holds: a subject's understanding of their evidential situation allows them to determine the credences that constitute their instance of suspension. The same cannot be said of aporetic suspension.

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<sup>15</sup> This example is also from McGrath (2020: 13). For an interesting discussion of the logic behind such principles, as applied to suspension, see Rosa (2019).

<sup>16</sup> We are not committed to reductionism about suspension: that suspension can be reduced to precise credences. That view is consistent with, but not implied by, what we have to say about positive and negative suspension. As for aporetic suspension, however, a reductionist view almost certainly fails. We discuss the reasons for this in section 5. For criticisms of reductionism in general, see Friedman (2013b).

Aporetic suspension does not allow a subject to assign—even in principle—any underlying credences to their suspended belief. This is because, in contrast to a positive and negative suspender, an aporetic suspender is (by definition) not in a position to properly assess their evidence. That is to say, an aporetic suspender cannot rationally determine whether the credences that constitute their instance of suspension lean 0.6 in favour of  $p$ , 0.6 in favour of not- $p$ , support a precise 0.5 credence in  $p$ , or so on. As discussed above, an aporetic suspender cannot grasp their available evidence and is thus simply not in a position to judge. It is for this reason that positive and negative suspension are constituted by middling credences, but aporetic suspension is not.

Turning now to (ii). The above point has implications for how the different kinds of suspension perform their functional roles. As we have seen, one of suspension's functional roles is to exert rational pressure; and this rational pressure carries over in inference. However, precisely how this function is carried out depends on the kind of suspension involved. For both positive and negative suspension, it is possible—again in principle—for a subject to make certain judgments about how committed they ought to be to the truth or falsity of other propositions, when they take those propositions to be inferentially linked to the content of their suspended beliefs. In contrast, this is not possible in the case of aporetic suspension. To see why, it helps again to reflect on the case of the theologian and the fool, but with some modifications. This time imagine that after considering the evidence, the theologian suspends about  $p$  (that God exists), but that he also believes that  $p$  implies  $q$  (let's say, that God's existence implies moral realism). Furthermore, let's assume that, as an instance of positive suspension, the theologian forms an underlying credence of 0.6 in favour of God's existence (he thinks that the ontological argument is slightly stronger than the problem of evil). Given this set of assumptions, the theologian is in a position to make a rational judgment about how committed he should also be to  $q$ . Specifically—and assuming that he has no other beliefs about the relationship between  $p$  and  $q$ —he ought to have a credence of at least 0.6 in favour of

$q$ .<sup>17</sup> Of course, the credences might not (and often will not) be this precise. The judgments we make based on the evidence might be such that we are just *somewhat* more or less inclined to favour certain other propositions—and there is no reason to suppose that we will always think these inferences through. However, the point is still the same: suspended beliefs that are constituted by middling credences, even if those credences are not always precise, allow us (in principle) to make judgments about how committed we should be to other (inferentially related) propositions. This is the case for positive and negative suspension. For aporetic suspension, the situation is not the same.

This time consider the case of the fool. Imagine, however, that as well as aporetically suspending about  $p$  (God's existence), the fool also happens to believe that  $p$  implies  $q$  (i.e. that God's existence implies moral realism). In this case, like the theologian, is the fool able to make a similar judgment about how committed he should be to  $q$ ? No—an aporetic suspender is not in a position to assign underlying credences to their suspended beliefs, and for that reason cannot make inferences based on those credences. Fundamentally, this is because aporetic suspenders are not able to grasp their available evidence. The best an aporetic suspender can say is that they *have* certain rational commitments that follow from being in a neutral doxastic state. For instance, that it would still be irrational for them to outright believe that not- $q$  whilst also suspending about  $p$  and believing that  $p$  implies  $q$ . But what the aporetic suspender cannot do—even in principle—is assign credences to other propositions that are inferentially tied to their suspended beliefs. If we were to apply labels to this distinction, it is as though inferences involving positive and negative suspension are *de jure*, and that inferences involving aporetic suspension are *de facto*. This is because inferences involving positive and negative suspension are based on a principled assessment of the evidential situation; but those involving aporetic suspension arise as more of a default response to, rather than a principled assessment of, the evidential situation.

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<sup>17</sup> The probability in this situation is 'at least' 0.6 because the current set of assumptions only places a lower bound on the probability that should be assigned to  $q$ . As things stand, if  $p$  is not true, nothing can be inferred about the truth of  $q$ . If the theologian believed, however, in a biconditional relation between  $p$  and  $q$ , then he could also assign the more precise credence of 0.6 to  $q$  (holding his credence of 0.6 in favour of  $p$  fixed).

Assuming therefore that one of suspension's functional roles is to exert rational pressure on other attitudes, we can now see that there are differences in how this functional role is carried out by the different kinds of suspension. All three kinds share the same functional role broadly speaking—i.e. to exert rational pressure. However, in a more fine-grained sense, this role is not carried out in the same way by positive and negative suspension as it is by aporetic suspension.

**Phenomenal Character.** Aporetic suspension is also phenomenally distinct from positive and negative suspension. This is (perhaps) the most controversial distinction we draw, as it is notoriously difficult to make claims about the phenomenology of specific mental states (for some of the reasons discussed below). Nevertheless, it is plausible that aporetic suspension comes with a different phenomenal profile than positive and negative suspension.<sup>18</sup> Consider again the theologian and the fool. It seems reasonable to suppose, for instance, that on considering the arguments for and against God's existence, the fool has (something like) a feeling of confusion or frustration when trying to understand the arguments; whilst the theologian has (something like) a more settled feeling of confidence in his understanding of the arguments. These differences in their qualitative states might also be reflected in their actions. For example, if the theologian is asked to give a talk about why he suspends belief about God's existence, he would (other things being equal) feel confident in explaining the reasons for his attitude; but the fool would surely feel more hesitant to do the same, given his lack of understanding.

One of the difficulties of fully spelling out the phenomenology of these attitudes concerns exactly where to place the phenomenology. Is it part of the mental state itself, or does the mental state (perhaps alongside other mental states) just dispose one to feel a particular way? That is to say, is the supposed phenomenology of suspension *intrinsic* or *dispositional*? It is not our goal here to commit either way on this issue. However, it is worth noting that both options allow for the view that aporetic suspension has a different phenomenal profile than positive and negative suspension, broadly speaking.

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<sup>18</sup> We say 'comes with' because one of the difficulties in making this phenomenal claim concerns whether the phenomenal difference is intrinsic or dispositional. We discuss this issue below.

To say that aporetic suspension has an intrinsic phenomenology that is distinct from positive and negative suspension, is to say that a constitutive feature of aporetic suspension is its phenomenal character, and that positive and negative suspension do not share this feature—call this the ‘intrinsic difference thesis’. This thesis assumes that doxastic attitudes, in general, possess some kind of phenomenal character. This might be, for instance, a kind of proprietary cognitive phenomenology (Bayne & Montague 2011). Applied to suspension, the claim is that *in virtue of being* in a state of aporetic suspension, the suspending subject has a conscious *feel* that is distinct from that of a positive or negative suspender. That is to say, in the case of the theologian and the fool, the fool’s feeling of e.g. frustration attaches directly to their aporetic state; and likewise for the theologian’s more settled feeling.

If the intrinsic difference thesis is correct, then it would imply a strong metaphysical distinction, along phenomenal lines, between aporetic suspension, on the one hand, and positive and negative suspension, on the other. Nevertheless, it is admittedly not an easy matter to prove, in general, that doxastic states have an intrinsic phenomenal character. It is always possible to generate contrasting cases in which different variables are (arguably) responsible for the phenomenology of a particular state (see Koksvik 2015). For example, we might say that the phenomenology of aporetic suspension should not be attributed to aporetic suspension *per se*, but to other mental states (perhaps some other affective or cognitive states), that are correlated with, but not intrinsic to, suspension. But whatever the case may be, the point we want to make here is just that, if it turns out to be the case that we can correctly attribute an intrinsic phenomenology to doxastic attitudes, then there is a case to be made for distinguishing aporetic suspension from positive and negative suspension along these lines.

The alternative is to say that aporetic suspension is phenomenally distinct from positive and negative suspension in a dispositional sense—call this the ‘dispositional difference thesis’. This thesis does not assume that doxastic attitudes have an intrinsic phenomenology. Rather, it assumes (more moderately) that doxastic attitudes lead to certain phenomenal states under specific conditions (see Schwitzgebel 2002). As applied to suspension, the thesis holds that aporetic suspension is dispositionally distinct from positive

and negative suspension, in the sense that, under the same conditions, aporetic suspension disposes the subject to different phenomenal experiences than positive and negative suspension. To focus on outright belief for a moment, Eric Schwitzgebel (2002) gives the example of the belief that there is beer in the fridge, and the corresponding disposition to feel surprised if one discovers that, in fact, the fridge is empty. Analogously, we might say that aporetic suspension comes with (say) the disposition to feel frustration when the conditions arise such that an aporetic suspender is asked to explain the reasons for his suspended belief. In contrast, a positive or negative suspender would not have the same disposition to feel frustration under the same conditions. There is no reason for these subjects to be disposed to feel the same kind of frustration, given that they can grasp the reasons for their suspended beliefs.<sup>19</sup> And to offer one more indicative example, under certain conditions we might associate aporetic suspension with a feeling of ‘insight relief’. An aporetic suspender might be disposed to feel (something like) relief or satisfaction if conditions pertain that cause the subject to come to better understand their evidential situation. This would not be the case for a positive or negative suspender (again, under the same conditions), since these instances of suspension already come with a built in (so to speak) understanding of the evidential situation.<sup>20</sup>

As mentioned, there are many difficulties when it comes to associating phenomenal experiences with specific mental states. However, all things considered, we think that the phenomenology of suspension is an area worthy of further inquiry. The case we hope to have made is just that—whether the phenomenology of suspension is intrinsic or dispositional—there are grounds for holding that aporetic suspension can be further distinguished from positive and negative suspension along phenomenal lines.

#### **4. Potential Criticisms**

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<sup>19</sup> That’s not to say that a positive or negative suspender can’t also feel frustration for other reasons. They might be frustrated by, for example, their interlocutor’s inability to understand what they are trying to say. But this has nothing to do with the dispositional profile of their suspended belief.

<sup>20</sup> The experience of insight relief and its role in belief formation are discussed, for example, in the philosophical and empirical literature on delusion and schizophrenia (e.g. Mishara & Corlett 2009 and Bortolotti 2020).

There are four potential criticisms we aim to address in this section. The first concerns whether suspension (in general) is really an attitude at all. The second concerns the nature of suspension as an attitude: should suspension in fact be understood as an attitude towards a question? The third is about whether aporetic suspension (specifically) is an attitude. And the fourth concerns some problems of indeterminacy.<sup>21</sup>

*Is Suspension an Attitude?* There is a recent trend in the literature arguing that the neutral doxastic attitude that lies between belief and disbelief is best described—not as ‘suspension’ (that is, neither as ‘suspended belief’ nor ‘suspended judgment’)—but as something else. For instance, McGrath (2020) argues for the term ‘agnosticism’ to describe the neutral doxastic attitude; whilst Guilielmo (2025) and Rosa (*forth*) argue for variations on ‘doubt’ (although Guilielmo does not reject the use of ‘suspension’ altogether, whereas Rosa does). In this respect, it might be thought that talk of suspended beliefs is wholly (or partly) misguided; and that therefore talk of a third kind of suspended belief is equally misguided.

Our response to this concern is to point out that we are not essentially committed to expressing our proposal in terms of suspended belief (although that is how we have chosen to express it). If it turns out that our use of ‘suspension’ is misguided, and that it should be replaced with other more appropriate terminology, then the underlying points that we have made remain the same. To put things in a more neutral vein, we have argued that there is a third kind of neutral doxastic attitude (whatever that might be called), and that this third kind can be distinguished from the other two kinds along evidential, functional, and phenomenal lines. With that said, there are some metaphysical implications of our view—specifically, of how we describe aporetic suspension—that appear to undermine *some* features of *some* interpretations of suspension. This is discussed in the next section. However, as a purely terminological matter, nothing is lost on our view if we are forced to rename the third kind of neutral doxastic attitude ‘aporetic agnosticism’ or ‘aporetic doubt’ or etc.

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<sup>21</sup> Thanks to two anonymous reviewers for raising and/or asking us to elaborate on the first, second, and fourth of these objections.

*Is Suspension an Attitude towards a Question?* We have discussed suspension throughout this paper as though it is a propositional attitude. As some theorists have pointed out, however, attributions of suspended belief more naturally embed interrogative complements than declarative complements (see Booth 2012 and Friedman 2013c). For example, it is natural to say that the theologian *suspends belief about whether God exists*, but it is not natural to say that he *suspends belief that God exists*. This suggests that suspension is a question directed attitude, rather than a propositional attitude.

This is a complex issue that raises many questions about the nature of suspension, generally speaking. However, regarding our proposal, we think that with some appropriate adjustments, the central distinctions that we draw can survive a shift from talk of suspension as a propositional attitude to talk of suspension as a question directed attitude. These details cannot be spelled out in full here—indeed, there is still a lot of work to be done to understand precisely what it means (in general) for an attitude to be question directed. However, we can give some indication of how this might work.

If we assume that suspension is a question directed attitude, then it must still bear important relations to a subject's evidential situation. The subject suspends about a question when they are not in a position to answer that question *based on their evidential situation*. To give an example: a subject might be suspending about *what is in the box*. In this case, there might be a range of propositions that potentially answer the question—say, *p*, *q*, *r*, or *s*. On the question directed view, these propositions do not form the content of the suspended belief. Yet the attitude is still formed (and maintained) as a response to the evidence for and against these propositions. That is to say, if a subject suspends about a question, it is because they cannot (from their perspective) determine the correct answer to the question based on their evidence. Now, if that's the case, there is still a distinction to be drawn between the different kinds of suspension along evidential lines. Concerning *what is in the box*, the subject might suspend because they have (more-or-less) equally balanced evidence for *p*, *q*, *r*, and *s*; they might suspend because they have a total lack of evidence for *p*, *q*, *r*, and *s*; or they might suspend because they do not understand the evidence for *p*, *q*, *r*, and *s*. All of this makes for a more complicated understanding of the relationship between suspension and

evidence than on an understanding of suspension as a propositional attitude. However, insofar as question directed attitudes *are* connected to the evidence, the evidential distinctions we draw between the three kinds of suspension hold. This of course leaves more work to be done to spell out the functional and phenomenal differences on a question directed view. However, we can see no reason why such work could not, in principle, be done.

***Is Aporetic Suspension Really an Attitude?*** Even if it is agreed that suspension is an attitude in general, it might be denied that aporetic suspension is an attitude in particular. One way to argue as such would be to suggest that a subject's inability to understand their evidential situation undermines their ability to form such an attitude. This idea is reflected in Friedman's discussion of non-attitudinal accounts of suspension: 'One cannot count as agnostic about  $p$  if one cannot even grasp  $p$ ' (2013a: p. 168).<sup>22</sup> This concern raises some interesting points about aporetic suspension, but it does not undermine the possibility of such an attitude.

The first thing to note is that, taken at face value, this concern only *limits* the range of possible instances of aporetic suspension. Consider again the fool. It seems intelligible to say that the fool can grasp the proposition *that God exists*, even if he cannot understand the arguments for and against that proposition. That is to say, one can grasp a proposition sufficiently well to form an attitude about it, even when one does not understand the evidence for and against that proposition. This kind of case is thus consistent with the claim that we must grasp a proposition to form an attitude about it, and with the conditions of aporetic suspension (i.e. of not grasping the available evidence).

The second point to note, however, is perhaps a more interesting one. Contrary to Friedman's statement, it does in fact seem possible to suspend about  $p$  when one does not grasp  $p$ —or at least when one does not *fully* grasp  $p$ . Consider outright belief for a moment. It is natural to attribute the belief that  $p$  to subjects who have a limited understanding of  $p$  (or perhaps the concepts involved in  $p$ ). Such is the case

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<sup>22</sup> The inability to grasp a proposition in Friedman's case derives from never having considered a proposition. She is not talking specifically about cases of aporetic suspension. Nevertheless, if she is correct, her statement raises some questions about aporetic suspension.

with Tyler Burge's (1979) famous arthritis example. There is nothing wrong with attributing beliefs about arthritis to patients who have a limited understanding of arthritis. This might be because the patient's understanding is incomplete, in the sense it does not track *all* of the correct applications of 'arthritis'; or it might be because the patient's understanding is (to some extent) incorrect, in the sense that the concept is sometimes applied incorrectly (such as when a patient believes he has arthritis in his thigh). It is nevertheless still appropriate to attribute beliefs about arthritis to the patient.

What we want to suggest is that suspension is similar. If one can believe a proposition that one does not fully grasp, then one can also suspend belief about a proposition that one does not fully grasp. If this is correct, then it opens the door for a much wider range of possible instances of aporetic suspension. There are those that involve an inability to understand the relevant evidence; and there are also those that involve an inability to fully understand the proposition that one is suspending about.

***Problems of Indeterminacy.*** The final issue we want to address is whether it is sometimes indeterminate which kind of suspension a subject holds. It looks as though it is. This is for reasons relating to both the evidential and phenomenal features of suspension. Concerning the evidential features, it might not always be clear (from a first- or third-person perspective) what evidential situation a subject is in. The subject might, for instance, be watching a news report from a source that they take to be very unreliable, and that defends  $p$ . In this situation, does the subject lack evidence for  $p$  (other things being equal), or do they now have positive evidence against  $p$ ? The answer will depend on what counts as evidence for the subject (for instance, the extent to which their background beliefs about the news source should in turn count as evidence)—and indeed the subject themselves might not always be able to tell. Moreover, from a phenomenological perspective, we can also imagine a subject who reports that they know what it feels like to be confused about some evidence, and that they also know what it feels like to have a good understanding of some evidence, but with regards to some particular proposition at that moment, they cannot quite tell which state they are in. After all, we might not be as good at introspecting our own

phenomenal states as we think (Schwitzgebel 2008). The point is that both of these issues create a problem of indeterminacy about the kind of suspended belief one holds.

In response to this concern, we acknowledge that there is going to be some indeterminacy here. However, we do not think this undermines the fact that there are three different kinds of suspension. Our reply is twofold. First, we want to point out that this kind of indeterminacy is not unique to the different kinds of suspension. Similar issues arise when we try to distinguish between other attitudes, as well as other doxastic attitudes. For instance, it is not uncommon to be unsure about whether we believe some proposition or merely accept it (say, for pragmatic reasons). To be sure about whether we believe or accept a proposition we need to have a fairly clear understanding of our evidential situation; but this understanding might not always be available. This indeterminacy does not undermine the fact that belief and acceptance are distinct attitudes. And second, we are not against the idea that there could be (something like) *in-between* cases of suspension, such that it is not always quite right to attribute one specific kind of suspension to a subject. Granting that the features of a particular instance of suspension can be indeterminate, it might sometimes be right to attribute a suspended belief to a subject, even though it is not possible to state exactly what kind of suspended belief they hold. Again, however, this does not imply that there are not three uniquely characterizable kinds of suspension, just as *in-between* believing does not imply that there is not a distinction between believing that  $p$  and disbelieving that  $p$  (cf. Schwitzgebel 2001).

## **5. Why is Aporetic Suspension Important?**

Aporetic suspension might well be a distinct kind of suspension, but why does it matter? It's not possible to foresee all of the possible implications of aporetic suspension; but here we offer two indicative examples that might be of interest to those engaged in the current debates.

The first implication concerns some of the metaphysical debates about suspension. We mentioned in the previous section that some authors, when discussing the neutral doxastic attitude, reject the 'suspension' label in favour of other labels that they deem to be more appropriate, such as 'agnosticism' and 'doubt'.

Now insofar as this is a terminological matter, as stated, we do not think these issues conflict with the fundamental points we want to make about aporetic suspension. However, some theorists have made metaphysical claims about the relationship between suspension and other similar attitudes that do potentially come into conflict with our account of aporetic suspension. One example is Friedman's (2017) claim that there is a biconditional relation between *suspension* and *inquiry*. The question we have is whether this biconditional is equally as plausible in the case of aporetic suspension, as it (arguably) is in the case of positive and negative suspension—and, as a matter of fact, we think it is not. Friedman (2017: 307) writes that, 'Being in an inquiring state or frame of mind is a matter of being in [an] aim- or goal-directed state'. It seems to us, however, that interpreting aporetic suspension (in particular) as an aim- or goal-directed state has less plausibility than interpreting positive or negative suspension in that way. In the case of the theologian and the fool, for example, it might be fair to describe the theologian as having the goal of inquiring into God's existence; but it is not obvious that the fool shares anything like this goal—despite also suspending belief. Indeed, after reflecting on the truth of God's existence, and determining that he doesn't fully grasp the issue, the fool might well take this to be a good reason to cease his inquiry. But this does not seem to imply that he thereby drops his suspended belief. Of course, this is not conclusive, but aporetic suspension certainly poses additional questions for accounts such as Friedman's.

The second potential implication worth discussing concerns the extent to which suspension can be formalised. Standard reductionist accounts of suspension, for instance, aim to reduce suspended beliefs to some standard credences towards a proposition.<sup>23</sup> Aporitic suspension, however, arguably presents its own kind of problem for reductionist accounts. In particular, aporetic suspension—as a *kind*—is a general instance of what Friedman (2013b: 67) calls a 'credence gap'. These are instances of suspension that are possible (and permissible) even when one cannot (and should not) assign credences to them. The example Friedman (2013b: §2) gives is of a subject who is asked to consider whether each of a collection of real snowflakes resembles a picture of a snowflake that she has been given, despite not being able to see the

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<sup>23</sup> For this debate, see van Fraassen (1998), Hájek (1998), and Monton (1998). For a more recent discussion, see Friedman (2013b).

real snowflakes, and despite having very little knowledge about snowflakes. In this case, Friedman argues, the subject should have no particular credence about whether her picture of a snowflake resembles the real snowflakes, yet she can (and should) suspend belief. This looks a lot like another instance of what we are calling aporetic suspension.

The point we are making is that—taken as a whole class—aporetic suspension causes this kind of problem for reductionist accounts. It only makes sense to assign standard credences to suspended beliefs if one can—at least in principle—have such credences. However, as discussed in section 3, this is not possible, even in principle, with aporetic suspension. An aporetic suspender can rationally suspend belief; but given their inability to understand their evidence, they cannot rationally assign to their suspended belief any specific credences.

## 6. Conclusion

Where does this leave us? One unresolved issue is just how substantial the metaphysical distinction between aporetic suspension and the other two kinds of suspension is. On the one hand, it might be agreed that aporetic suspension is *just* another kind of suspended belief. That is how we have discussed the distinction throughout—and we are happy with that conclusion. But on the other hand, it might also be possible to argue for a more substantial metaphysical conclusion. Namely, that aporetic suspension is a whole new *species* of attitude. This would be the case if we made the (not entirely unreasonable) assumption that one or more of the three features that we have used to demarcate aporetic suspension from positive and negative suspension is sufficient for a species distinction. This is also a conclusion that we would be happy with. For now, we leave this matter open to interpretation. In either case, the fundamental points we have made, and the implications thereof, hold: aporetic suspension can be distinguished from positive and negative suspension along evidential, functional, and phenomenal lines.

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