

THE AIM OF SUSPENSION

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Suspension of judgment—henceforth, ‘suspension’—presents the following problem in epistemology. Judgment and suspension both seem subject to the same kind of distinctively ‘epistemic’ evaluation—e.g., as justified or unjustified. However, judgment and suspension are two fundamentally different kinds of thing: judgment is a representation that can be correct or incorrect, and suspension isn’t. This presents a challenge for any epistemologist hoping to give a unified account of epistemic evaluation. However, the challenge is particularly acute for telic virtue epistemology, which provides an elegant account of epistemic normativity that gives pride of place to the idea that judgment aims at truth. Suspension, however, does not aim at truth, at least not in the same sense that judgment aims at truth, because suspension, unlike judgment, cannot be true.

In *Epistemic Explanations*, Ernie Sosa (2021) articulates a solution to this problem on which judgment has two aims, one of which it shares with suspension. Roughly, his proposal is that judgment both narrowly aims at truth and broadly aims at judging if and only if you would judge successfully. Although suspension cannot be true, it can realize the latter biconditional aim.

In this article, I will articulate an alternative solution to the problem of suspension. On my view, judgment aims at truth, and suspension aims at avoiding falsehood. Telic virtue epistemology is vindicated—but only by treating avoiding falsehood as a fundamental epistemic value, alongside truth.

1 The Problem

I assume the following minimal characterization of suspension: to suspend about whether p is to forbear judging about whether p . The problem of suspension in epistemology arises because judgment is a representation that can be correct or incorrect, and suspension isn’t. ‘Correct’ and ‘incorrect’ have a specific meaning here. ‘Correct’ and ‘incorrect,’ in the present senses, are synonymous with ‘accurate’ and ‘inaccurate,’ respectively. Judgment can be correct or incorrect; suspension can’t. Things that can be correct or incorrect, in the present sense, include beliefs, assertions, and guesses. Things that cannot be correct or incorrect, in the present sense, include fictions, imaginings, and questions. To further clarify the present sense of ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect,’ note that truth is the standard of correctness for judgment. A judgment that p is correct if and only if it is true that p , and incorrect if and only if it is false that p . This, it seems to me, should

not be disputed. We may want to use ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ to mean something else. So be it. Nevertheless, truth is the standard of correctness for judgment, in the present sense of ‘correctness.’ I don’t think this is controversial.

Judgment is a representation that can be correct or incorrect, and suspension isn’t. Why is this an epistemological problem? Consider telic virtue epistemology, on which epistemic evaluation is evaluation of intellectual performances relative to their constitutive aim. Plausibly, truth is the aim of judgment—to judge that p is to try to form a true judgment that p . It is more precise, if inelegant, to say that judgment aims at true judgment. However, true judgment cannot be the aim of suspension—at least not in the same sense that true judgment is the aim of judgment. Why not? Because of something like this principle: x aims at y only if x could realize y . A performance type can aim at some end only if tokens of that type can realize that end. Trying requires the possibility of success. But suspension cannot realize the aim of true judgment, because suspension is not a species of judgment—to suspend is to forebear judgment. Suspension cannot amount to true judgment. Thus, suspension does not aim at truth.

Judgment and suspension seem not to have the same aim. Why is this a problem for telic virtue epistemology? Different performances have different aims. Basketball shots and episodes of coffee-making aim at different things. That is no threat to telic virtue epistemology. The threat comes from the assumption that judgment and suspension are subject to the same kind of evaluation. I think we assume here not merely that both judgment and suspension are subject to *telic* evaluation, in the way that basketball shots and episodes of coffee-making are both subject to telic evaluation, but that both judgment and suspension are subject to the *same kind* of telic evaluation. Furthermore—although I will call this assumption into question later (Section 3)—I think we assume that both judgment and suspension are subject to evaluation relative to the *same aim*. In any event, telic virtue epistemology needs to give an account on which the telic evaluation of judgment and the telic evaluation of suspension can be seen to enjoy some kind of commonality or kinship, such that it makes sense to think of them as being ‘of the same kind.’

This problem of suspension, however, is not specific to telic virtue epistemology. For example, it also arises for evidentialism: because suspension cannot be correct or incorrect, we cannot make sense of the idea of suspension being based on evidence (cf. Sosa 2021, 54–60). To ϕ on the basis of *evidence*, as opposed to for some other reason, requires taking that evidence to indicate the correctness of ϕ ing. It is thus obscure what it would mean to base your suspension on sufficient evidence.

2 Sosa's Solution

I said that judgment aims at truth (Section 1), and that assumption will be incorporated into my solution to the problem of suspension later (Section 3). On Sosa's view, judgment aims at aptness (26), rather than mere truth. (This difference between our accounts won't matter in what follows.) To judge that p is to try to form an apt judgment that p . However, the aim of suspension cannot be apt judgment, because suspension is not a species of judgment. It seems, again, that judgment and suspension do not have the same aim.

Sosa argues that, although judgment aims at apt judgment and suspension doesn't, judgment and suspension also share the aim of judging if and only if you would judge successfully (62–64). Given that judgment aims at aptness, this is equivalent to saying that judgment and suspension share the aim of judging if and only if you would judge aptly. When you judge that p , you try to form an apt judgment that p . And when you suspend about whether p , you do not try to form an apt judgment that p . However, Sosa proposes, judging about whether p requires trying to judge about whether p if and only if you would judge aptly about whether p . And, crucially, suspending about whether p requires trying to judge that p if and only if you would judge aptly about whether p . Judgment and suspension both aim at judging if and only if you would judge aptly. This is an aim that both judgment and suspension can realize. Judgment realizes this biconditional aim when it is apt—that is, when you both judge that p and would (and indeed do) judge aptly about whether p . Suspension realizes this biconditional aim when apt judgment is not available—that is, when you both suspend about whether p (and thus do not judge that p) and would not judge aptly about whether p (were you to do so).

Judgment, on Sosa's view has both a *narrow* aim—apt judgment—and a *broad* aim—judging if and only if you would judge aptly. Judgment and suspension share the broad aim, but not the narrow aim. Because they share the broad aim, they are both subject to telic evaluation relative to that aim. Thus, we have an intuitive sense in which they are subject to the same kind of telic evaluation (Section 1). To illustrate, we need to do a little archery analysis. Diana aims to shoot aptly, but we are also asked to imagine (62) that she also aims to shoot if only she would shoot aptly. Both apt shots and certain forbearances of shooting can realize the latter aim, and both are subject to telic evaluation relative to it. Likewise, both judgment and suspension of judgment can realize the aim of judging if and only if you would judge successfully, and both are subject to telic evaluation relative to it.

Let's grant both that judgment and arrow-shooting aim at aptness; to judge that p is to try to form an apt judgment that p and to shoot an arrow is to try to shoot aptly. Nevertheless, the aim of shooting if and only if you would shoot aptly is not plausibly a constitutive aim of arrow-shooting.

We are asked to imagine that Diana aims to shoot if and only if she would shoot aptly. But why does she have this aim? The explanation must involve both her desire to shoot aptly and her aversion to shooting inaptly. There must be some reward or benefit associated with apt shots and some penalty or cost associated with inapt shots, such that Diana both wants to shoot aptly (and thus aims to shoot *if* she would shoot aptly) and wants to avoid shooting inaptly (and thus aims to shoot *only if* she would shoot aptly). Given the assumption that arrow-shooting aims at aptness, all that is required to ensure that Diana plausibly wants to shoot aptly is that she wants to shoot. That is why we imagine a hunter, or an archery competitor, or in any event someone who wants to shoot. However, someone can want to shoot without being averse to shooting inaptly. Imagine that Diana has an infinite supply of arrows and an infinite amount of time in which to make one apt shot, which will win her the prize she seeks. There is no penalty or cost associated with inapt shots. When she shoots, she aims to shoot aptly, and plausibly she aims to shoot if she would shoot aptly. But she does not aim to shoot only if she would shoot aptly. And if she forebears shooting, it will not be to avoid shooting inaptly. Although she aims to shoot aptly, she does not aim to avoid shooting inaptly. To illustrate this, consider Diana's attitude, in this version of the case, to the quality of the conditions. Normally, she would wait to shoot only when conditions were good. Now, given that inapt shots cost her nothing, she is indifferent to the conditions. She does not select her shots carefully. She shoots whenever she can and as often as she can, so long as there is a possibility, however slight, of shooting aptly.

The general conclusion I want to draw here is that aiming to perform aptly does not entail aiming to perform if and only if you would perform aptly. In particular, when there is no penalty or cost associated with inapt performance, you can aim to perform aptly without aiming to perform only if you would perform aptly.

How does all this bear on the case of judgment and suspension? Crucially, Sosa's discussion is confined to what he calls "deliberative" suspending (63), which is a species of what he calls "narrow-scope" forbearing (47). To deliberately suspend about whether p is to forebear judgment about whether p , with the aim of judging aptly about whether p . Thus, suspension, in the relevant sense, is analogous to Diana's forbearing shooting in a context in which she wants to shoot aptly. Suspension, in this sense, entails a desire to judge aptly. This explains why suspension constitutively aims at judging if you would judge aptly. However, a desire to judge aptly does not entail an aversion to judging inaptly. We have not yet explained why suspension constitutively aims at judging only if you would judge aptly, if indeed it does. Only if the person suspending is averse to judging inaptly—only if there is some penalty or cost associated with inapt judgment—will they aim to judge only if they would judge aptly. But this is not guaranteed by the fact that they want to judge aptly.

3 An Alternative Solution

On Sosa's picture, epistemic normativity is organized around one fundamental value—namely, apt judgment. The evaluation of suspending is thus understood as evaluation grounded in the value of apt judgment. Our discussion (Section 2) suggests a different approach. Rather than understanding the evaluation of suspending as grounded in the value of apt judgment, we should understand the evaluation of suspending as grounded in the disvalue of inapt judgment. Epistemic normativity is organized around two fundamental values: apt judgment and avoiding inapt judgment.

However, since on my view judgment aims at truth (rather than aptness; Section 1), what I want to propose is that epistemic normativity is organized around two fundamental values—namely, truth (i.e., true judgment) and avoiding falsehood (i.e., avoiding false judgment). And rather than positing an aim that both judgment and suspension share, I propose that judgment and suspension have different (although related) aims: judgment aims at truth (i.e., true judgment) and suspension aims at avoiding falsehood (i.e., avoiding false judgment).

The schematic idea here is: rather than saying that ϕ ing and forbearing ϕ ing have the same aim—namely, ϕ ing if and only if your ϕ ing would be successful—we should say that ϕ ing and forbearing ϕ ing have distinct aims— ϕ ing aims at success, while forbearing ϕ ing aims at avoiding failure. This makes sense, I want to suggest, when we think both that success is valuable *and* that avoiding failure is valuable. At an emotional level, it will make sense when we are both attracted to success *and* averse to failure.

However, what kind of solution is this? We are seeking to explain how judgment and suspension can be subject to the same kind of telic evaluation (Section 1). If judgment and suspension have different aims, how can they be subject to the same kind of telic evaluation?

Note that, on Ernie's view, judgment and suspension aren't exactly equivalent when it comes to telic evaluation. Judgment is evaluable relative to the aim of apt judgment; suspension isn't. Both are evaluable relative to the aim of judging if and only if you would judge aptly. There is a species of telic evaluation to which they are both subject, but there is another species to which only judgment is subject.

My proposal entails that judgment and suspension are never subject to evaluation relative to the same aim. However, there is an intuitive sense in which they are subject to the same kind of telic evaluation. Note that, given the assumption that truth precludes falsity, true judgment precludes false judgment. When you judge truly, you thereby avoid judging falsely. Thus, realizing the aim of judgment (truth) necessarily also realizes the aim of suspension (avoiding falsehood). In this sense, the aims of judgment and suspension overlap. It seems to me that this provides an intuitive sense in which evaluation relative to the aim of judgment (truth) and evaluation

relative to the aim of suspension (avoiding falsehood) are ‘of the same kind.’ And that is solution enough to our problem.

4 Accurate Suspension?

In [Section 1](#), I argued that suspension cannot amount to true judgment. That seems clear when we have in mind suspension about whether p and true judgment about whether p , because to suspend judgment about whether p is to forebear judgment about whether p . However, what if suspension about whether p incorporates some other judgment, not judgment about whether p , but judgment about some other proposition? If so, the problem of suspension will turn out to be a pseudo-problem, because suspension can, after all, be correct or incorrect, given that it is a species of judgment. Sosa suggests something like this:

[S]uspension [has] a distinctive aim: that of *judging if and only if one’s judgment would succeed*. Your suspension is thus understood as *accurate* iff it succeeds in its aim. (90; see also 77)

This suggests that suspension can be correct or incorrect, because it suggests that your suspension about whether p is correct if and only if:

(B) you would not judge successfully were you to judge about whether p .

To put that another way:

Your suspension about whether p is correct if and only if B.

In other words, B is the correctness condition for suspension (about whether p). However, recall that truth is the correctness condition for judgment ([Section 1](#)). It follows that:

Your judgment that B is correct if and only if B.

In other words, B is the correctness condition for judgment that B. Thus, suspension and judgment that B have the same correctness condition. This prompts the question: What is the relationship between suspension and judgment that B?

It seems possible to judge that B without suspending about whether p . You might know full well that you are hopelessly disposed to overestimate your child’s basketball talent, and on that basis judge that you would not judge successfully were you to judge about whether your child is the best player on their team. Nevertheless, zealous partiality might lead you to judge that your child is the best player on their team.

It also seems possible to suspend about whether p without judging that B. Now, there are cases in which you suspend about whether p because you judge that you would not judge successfully were you to judge about whether p . In one kind of case, you suspend about whether p , having

concluded that your judgment on that topic is compromised. A less zealous parent might suspend about whether their child is the best player on their basketball team, having concluded that their judgment on that topic is compromised by partiality. In another kind of case, you might suspend about whether p , having concluded that your evidence relevant to whether p is counterbalanced. I suspend about whether the number of stars is even, having concluded that I have no evidence either way. However, there are also cases in which you suspend about whether p because you *suspend* about whether you would judge successfully were you to judge about whether p . Just as we can be unsure about the first-order question of whether p , we can be unsure about the higher-order question of whether our judgment on that topic is compromised or of whether our evidence is counterbalanced. In such cases, you suspend about whether p , but do not judge that B.

One kind of case in which this might happen is when our critics challenge both our first-order judgments and our competence to form judgments on the relevant topic. Suppose you are a political liberal. On your view, the problem of racism can be addressed through reforms within the existing liberal order—civil rights legislation, electoral reforms, reparations, and so on. The more radical anti-racist disagrees: the liberal order is itself a product of global White supremacy; it needs to be dismantled and replaced with a new kind of socio-political arrangement. Moreover, they argue, your judgment on the matter is compromised by an epistemology of ignorance: White supremacy sustains itself in part by prescribing a suite of intellectual vices whose function is to prevent those caught up in the system from understanding it. Your liberalism, itself, is a symptom of the operation of those vices in your political thinking. How do you respond to all of this? The radical's theory is *prima facie* compelling. You recognize the existence of epistemologies of ignorance and see how they function as systems of domination and exploitation. But you are unsure about whether your political judgment, and in particular your thinking about whether racism can be addressed through reforms within the existing liberal order, is an instance of this phenomenon, and thereby compromised. You decide to suspend judgment as you consider the matter further—both about whether your judgment on this topic is compromised and about the first-order question of whether anti-racism is compatible with liberalism.

I have argued that you can judge that B without suspending about whether p and that you can suspend about whether p without judging that B. Suspension about whether p and judgment that B are distinct.

Now, this does not entail that B is not the correctness condition for suspension. But it should make us quite skeptical of that idea. Suppose you suspend both about whether p and about whether B. How could it then turn out that your suspension about whether p is incorrect, on account of the fact that B turns out to be true? Consider the case in which you suspend both about whether p and about whether your judgment on this topic is

compromised. How could it turn out that your suspension about whether p is incorrect, on account of the fact that it turns out that your judgment on this topic is *not* compromised? Keep in mind that both your suspension about whether p and your suspension about whether your judgment on this topic is compromised might be eminently reasonable, the result of careful attention to your evidence, good reasoning, and virtuous reflection. Your first-order suspension is thus not ‘incorrect’ in the sense of being unreasonable. How could it be that your reasonable suspension about whether p is incorrect—in the sense of being inaccurate—on account of the fact that B, given that you also reasonably suspend judgment about whether B is true? I think the answer to all these questions is that B is not the correctness condition for suspension. So, I continue to think that suspension does not have a correctness condition, and thus cannot be correct or incorrect.

5 Conclusion

In this article, I articulated the problem of suspension in epistemology, considered Sosa’s solution to the problem, proposed an alternative solution, and considered an objection to my assumption that suspension cannot be correct or incorrect. On my view, the key to solving the problem of suspension is to introduce avoiding falsehood as a fundamental epistemic value. When we judge, we are trying to get at the truth (whereby we will necessarily avoid falsehood); when we suspend, we are not trying to get at the truth, but merely trying to avoid falsehood.

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Acknowledgments Thanks to Matt McGrath for our many valuable discussions of suspension, and to Ernie Sosa for feedback on a draft of this material.