

Research Statement | The Significance of Suspension

My primary research is in epistemology, motivated by a metaethical question about moral knowledge. Why aren't we rationally required to suspend judgment about moral claims? The evolutionary debunking argument, presented by Sharon Street, claims that we must either abandon moral realism or abandon moral knowledge. Some critics—Mooreans—essentially beg the question but argue that it is permissible to beg the question in this instance. Other critics, wanting to avoid this route, argue that some premise in the debunking argument should be denied because it is unsubstantiated. These critics merely undermine a premise. My early research developed the ideas that merely undermining a premise only justifies suspension on the premise, not disbelief, and that it is plausibly incoherent to believe one premise of the debunking argument, be agnostic about the other premise, but disbelieve the conclusion. I argue that these non-Moorean debunking critics should suspend judgment about whether they have moral knowledge. I developed this argument in “Why Undermining Evolutionary Debunkers Is Not Enough,” forthcoming in *Synthese*. This metaethical research led me to a more fundamental question: What is the nature of suspension?

RECENT RESEARCH:

Suspension is a widespread phenomenon. It is common in philosophical contexts, but we also suspend about mundane matters. For example, I suspend on whether the Cardinals will sweep the Brewers and whether it will rain this afternoon.

My dissertation examines the nature of suspension. I argue against existing theories of suspension that try to connect, reduce, or identify suspension with some other attitude. I propose a novel theory of suspension that avoids the problems I raise for other accounts.

Perhaps the most widespread view of suspension, exemplified in some form by Alan Hájek and Scott Sturgeon, is that suspension reduces to or just is some kind of credence (a quantifiable degree of belief). Jane Friedman has made the most sustained critique of credal views, but her critique is limited in two ways: first it rests on a fallacious argument and second it does not attack the credal accounts that employ imprecise credences. In “Absences of Evidence and Friedman’s Infinite Partition Argument,” (under review) I show that her argument rests on an equivocation on “absence of evidence.” Then, in “Suspending Belief in Credal Accounts,” (under review) I provide a new argument that attacks all possible credal views of suspension, whether they employ just precise credences or also imprecise credences. I show that all possible credal accounts either (i) falsify central claims that uphold the credal picture itself or (ii) do not permit suspension in cases where it is permissible or (iii) rule out the possibility of plainly possible confidence comparisons.

If suspension isn't some kind of credence, what is it? I argue that Jane Friedman's theory that suspending is necessary and sufficient for inquiring (and Errol Lord and Kurt Sylvan's revised inquiry-focused theory) cannot account for various cases including the apathetic agnostic who suspends but doesn't inquire, the hopeful atheist who inquires but doesn't suspend, and examples from borderline instances of vague predicates where we suspend but don't inquire. Furthermore, I argue that higher-order belief accounts of suspension (such as Thomas Raleigh's) cannot account for the fact that we sometimes suspend about the higher-order matter while also suspending about the first order question.

If suspension is neither a degree of belief, an inquiring attitude, nor some higher-order belief, what is it? I propose the following: suspension is a *fundamental* doxastic attitude, as is belief and disbelief. Belief, suspension, and disbelief are all judgments about the truth of a proposition. Belief is a positive alethic judgment. Disbelief is a negative alethic judgment. Suspension is a neutral alethic judgment. I compare my view with the refraining-from-belief/disbelief accounts of Ernest Sosa and Matthew McGrath, arguing that my view, unlike theirs, can explain cases where it seems that one can refrain from belief and disbelief by refraining from belief, disbelief, and suspension altogether.

FUTURE RESEARCH:

The potential for future research is substantial. The literature on suspension is an emerging growth industry. By my count, over the last 40 years there have been only 27 publications that discuss the nature of suspension. Of those, over half have been published in the last 5 years. [Redacted]

What's more, my dissertation addresses only the ontological nature of suspension. On the normative side, I have works in progress about both the justification of suspension, and the coherence of suspension with other doxastic attitudes. For example, [Redacted]

The nature of suspension bears on debates across the board in philosophy. It bears most directly on debates in epistemology. For example, [Redacted]

There are also important consequences for metaphysics. For example, [Redacted]

There are more implications in ethics (e.g. [Redacted]), philosophy of mind (e.g. [Redacted]), philosophy of science (e.g. [Redacted]), and philosophy of religion (e.g. [Redacted]) just to cite a few others. Suspension is ubiquitous in philosophical inquiry and therefore a careful appreciation of its subtleties opens up a wealth of opportunities for future contributions.