

COMMENTS ON THE AIM OF BELIEF AND SUSPENDED BELIEF

ABSTRACT: In this paper, I discuss whether different interpretations of the ‘aim’ of belief – both the teleological and normative interpretations – have the resources to explain certain descriptive and normative features of suspended belief (suspension). I argue that, despite the recent efforts of theorists to extend these theories to account for suspension, they ultimately fail in this endeavour. The implication is that we must either develop alternative theories of belief that can account for suspension, or we must abandon the initial assumption that these theories ought to account for suspension. In closing, I briefly consider some of the reasons we have in favour of pursuing each of these options; and I suggest that it is at least worth further exploring the possibility that suspension is best understood independently of these theories of belief’s ‘aim’.

INTRODUCTION

Teleological and normative theories of belief dominate current debates about the nature of belief. Both accounts, which offer different interpretations of Bernard Williams’s (1973: Ch. 9) remark that ‘beliefs aim at truth’, hope to explain the descriptive and normative features of belief. The teleologists achieve this by appealing to a genuine aim or *telos* that is essential to belief, commonly said to be the truth; and the normativists achieve the same by appealing to a normative requirement, also commonly said to be the truth. In this respect, the teleologists interpret Williams’s claim quite literally: there really is an *aim* of belief; while the normativists take a more metaphorical approach – talk about the ‘aim’ of belief stands in for what is actually a normative requirement.¹

In this paper, my intention is not to assess the merits of these theories as theories of *outright* belief, but is instead to consider how and whether they can be extended to account for another doxastic attitude: suspended belief (suspension). The initial assumption is that any comprehensive theory of

¹ Influential teleologists include McHugh (2011, 2012), Sosa (2010), Steglich-Petersen (2006, 2009), and Velleman (2000). Influential normativists include Boghossian (1989, 2003), Engel (2005, 2007, 2013a, 2013b), Shah (2003), Shah and Velleman (2005), Wedgwood (2002, 2007, 2013), and Whiting (2010). For a useful collection of papers on the topic see Chan (2013).

belief should also provide the basis for a theory of suspension. This is at least one of the shared ambitions of certain teleologists and normativists, such as Ernest Sosa (2010) and Pascal Engel (2013a), whose theories I discuss in detail later. However, as I will argue, the efforts of these theorists to extend their theories of belief to account for suspension fail. This leaves us with two options: either we need alternative (or differently developed) theories of belief that can account for suspension, or we must give up on the initial assumption that these theories ought to be able to account for suspension—perhaps suspension is just an altogether different kind of attitude.

In Section 1, I begin by outlining the features of suspension that are important for this discussion. These are the features that, I suggest, any plausible theory of suspension must be able to explain. In Section 2, I detail why current interpretations of belief's aim—that is, both the teleological and normative accounts—fail to explain these features of suspension. And in Section 3, I close by making a few tentative remarks about whether we really should continue to expect theories of belief to account for suspension. In general, the overarching intention is to draw attention to the fact that considerably more work is to be done if we are to establish the position of suspension in a contemporary theoretical framework—work which has already beginning to take shape thanks to Jane Friedman's (2013, 2017) recent, in depth inquiries into the nature of suspension.

1. SOME FEATURES OF SUSPENSION

As with belief, suspension has certain descriptive and normative properties that any theory of suspension should be able to explain. In a descriptive sense, we want to know what suspension *is* (in contrast to other attitudes), and in a normative sense we want to know when (if ever) it is appropriate to suspend.

To begin at the descriptive level: it is important to realise that suspension is an attitude, distinct from the mere absence or lack of holding a belief (following Friedman, I call this 'state' *non-belief*).² This is a point Friedman (2013) makes clear with a number of illuminating examples. For instance, despite holding no belief on such matters, we were not born suspending about 'whether bumblebees hibernate during the winter', and cavemen were not suspending about 'whether the Large Hadron Collider would find the Higgs boson' (p. 168). Thus, if these examples are telling, there is more to suspension than the mere absence of belief. This reveals the descriptive work that, as a bare minimum, theories of suspension must do. Assuming that suspension is an attitude, they must be able to explain what that attitude is, insofar as it is distinct from both non-belief and other (perhaps closely related) attitudes.³

At the normative level, theories of suspension must also tell us something about when it is appropriate to suspend. Clearly, there are times when the suspension is (and is not) appropriate. This is apparent if we reflect for a moment on the different normative requirements of suspension and belief. For instance, if the evidence you have for p and for not- p is unclear, such that neither p nor not- p can be established with any confidence, then it would not be appropriate to believe that p – rather, suspension towards p would be appropriate. And, conversely, if you did have sufficiently strong evidence in support of p , then believing that p would be appropriate, but suspension toward p would not.⁴ Thus, these points suggests that there are constraints on the normativity of suspension that also need to be explained.

² For ease of expression, I refer to non-belief as a 'state'. However, properly speaking, it is perhaps not best described as a state, but as the absence of any state.

³ One closely related attitude that I have in mind is *withholding assent* (more on this later).

⁴ There is perhaps some overlap between the normativity of belief and suspension, such that both believing that p and suspending towards p can occasionally both be appropriate under the same conditions. This seems to be a consequence of new forms of limited pragmatism about belief, such as McHugh's (2012, 2015). According to such theories, the evidence for p can be sufficient for belief, but we might nonetheless suspend toward p for pragmatic reasons. In this sense, pragmatic reasons (at least on occasion) have the last say on whether we believe that p or suspend toward p , so presumably either attitude is appropriate under such conditions. However, I expect that even the pragmatist

To summarise, any theory of suspension must, as a minimum, explain:

- i. The descriptive features of suspension, such that we can distinguish suspension from non-belief and other attitudes.

And,

- ii. The normative features of suspension, such that we have an account of the conditions under which it is appropriate to suspend.

Any theory that fails on either of these counts thereby fails as a theory of suspension. In the following section, I outline the fundamental commitments of the teleologists and normativists, and I argue that their theories fall short as theories of suspension in both of these important respects. As we shall see, this difficulty remains even when these theories are explicitly extended to account for these features of suspension.

2. THEORIES OF BELIEF AND SUSPENSION

Teleological theories of belief hold that beliefs are characterised by a genuine aim. This aim is typically explained in terms of the mechanisms involved in belief formation and maintenance, which are said (in some sense) to aim at the truth. At the intentional level, in doxastic deliberation, the aim is usually said to manifest in our intention to believe only truths. And at the subintentional level (as not all beliefs are formed intentionally), it is said that the aim manifests in the underlying mechanisms involved in belief production, which regulate for truth. This aim is then used to explain the descriptive and normative features of belief.⁵

would agree that if the evidence supported p beyond all doubt (e.g. with Cartesian certainty), then belief (and not suspension) would be appropriate. Therefore, my general point remains: suspension is subject to certain normative requirements, and these are not exactly the same as those of belief (even if there is some overlap).

⁵ It is sometimes added that the truth-directed mechanisms involved in belief production have most likely arisen as the result of natural selection (e.g. see Steglich-Petersen 2006, p. 510, and Velleman 2000, p. 253, fn. 18). This is in keeping with the naturalistic tendencies of the teleologists. Nevertheless, we don't need to be committed naturalists to be teleologists – perhaps God created us with truth-directed belief forming mechanisms.

To be precise, the teleological thesis can be stated as follows:

Teleological Thesis: A propositional attitude ϕ is a belief if and only if ϕ aims (in virtue of the mechanisms involved in belief formation and maintenance) to have content p only if p .⁶

According to this thesis, belief just is the attitude that aims at the truth; that is how we satisfy the descriptive ambition of demarcating beliefs from other propositional attitudes. And normatively, this thesis gives us an instrumental account of belief rationality: true beliefs are correct because they achieve belief's aim, and believing according to our evidence is rational because evidence indicates truth. Of course, these theories face important difficulties, raised notably by David Owens (2003) and Nishi Shah (2003); however the current inquiry does not directly concern us with these issues. Instead, I am interested in whether the teleological thesis can provide the basis for an account of suspension, so I simply overlook these more general concerns for the purpose of this paper.⁷

As for normative theories of belief, the central claim is that beliefs are essentially norm- (in contrast to aim-) governed. This norm, as with the alleged aim of belief, is usually said to be truth, such that beliefs are subject to a truth norm. The agreement that the teleologists and normativists share is that we must establish a close relation between belief and truth. However, the main difference between their accounts is that the normativists do not agree that we can reduce the nature and normativity of belief to descriptive properties of believers. Instead, they claim that beliefs can only be fully understood by appeal to a distinctly normative component, such that there

⁶ Not all teleologists (listed in fn. 1) explicitly commit to this statement of the teleological thesis. However, it is apparent that this thesis captures what is central to most teleological accounts of belief. For instance, see Steglich-Petersen (2006) and Velleman (2000). An exception is McHugh (2011), who suggests that *knowledge*, and not merely truth, is the aim of belief. Nonetheless, since knowledge entails truth, McHugh agrees that beliefs also aim at the truth.

⁷ For developments in the literature following Owens' (2003) objection, see [Author Removed], McHugh (2012, 2015), Steglich-Petersen (2009, 2017), and Sullivan-Bissett & Noordhof (2013, 2017). For developments following Shah's (2003) objection, see Shah & Velleman (2005) and Steglich-Petersen (2006).

is a requirement on believers to believe only truths, independently of what believers are *doing*. In this respect, the normativists and the teleologists also part ways with regards to their preferences for wholly naturalistic theories of belief.

Now, it is difficult to pin down an exact formulation of a ‘normative thesis’ that is agreeable to most normativists. This is because, in response to important criticisms of normativism, raised notably by Krister Bykvist and Anandi Hattiangadi (2007), and Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss (2009), debates surrounding normative theories of belief have become extremely complex and multifaceted—arguably more so than their teleological counterparts. For this reason, instead of trying to adjudicate between different versions of normativism here, I simply stipulate that I am interested with the following normative thesis, with a few words of justification to follow:

Normative Thesis: A propositional attitude ϕ is a belief if and only if there is a normative requirement to hold ϕ with content p only if p .

I choose this thesis because, for the most part, it is neutral between the various interpretations of normativism. In particular, it takes no stand on whether the normative requirement is a prescription, a permission, or an ideal.⁸ I also believe it to be the case that all normativists agree that truth is (at least) a necessary condition for correct belief, even though some may think that beliefs should additionally be justified or amount to knowledge.⁹

That completes our brief outline of the teleological and normative positions. My intention is to consider now whether these theories can be utilised to account for suspension, and to raise some problems in this regard.

⁸ Most normativists take the norm to be a prescription (e.g. Boghossian 1989, 2003; Shah 2003; Shah & Velleman 2005; and Wedgwood 2002). Whiting (2010) prefers to construe the norm as a permission. And Engel (2013a) considers it to be an ideal. For a general survey of issues concerning the normativity of belief, see McHugh and Whiting (2014).

⁹ For instance, Engel (2005) takes the most knowledge to be the most fundamental norm of belief.

2.1 DIRECT APPLICATION OF THESES TO SUSPENSION

Taken at face value, it's clear that the teleological and normative theses tell us nothing interesting about the descriptive and normative features of suspension. As theories of (outright) belief, neither has the resources to *directly* account for suspension. Bernard Mayo (1963-4) first raised this as a point of concern for early versions of normativism. He writes:

'An immediate consequence of the thesis that believing is what it is fitting to do with a truth is... [that] one ought never to suspend judgment, since there is nothing that it is right not to believe, except the false, the negation of which, being true, one ought to believe.' (Mayo 1963-4, p. 144)

As Mayo envisions it, the problem is that the proposed normativity of belief leaves no room for suspension. If truth is the only 'fitting' thing for belief, then it is never appropriate to suspend. Yet surely there are times when it is, in fact, appropriate to suspend. This suggests that the normativists face a problem, and the problem remains in light of our more recent formulation of the normative thesis. In both a descriptive and normative sense, the normative thesis fails to explain suspension. Descriptively, suspension is simply not the attitude that we are required to hold 'with content p only if p '—and this same condition does not set the normative standards for appropriate suspension. Indeed, this condition sets the standard for belief, as it was intended, so it should not be surprising that, on first blush, it tells us nothing interesting about suspension. Thus, in line with Mayo's observations, the normative thesis does not directly account for the features of suspension that we want to account for.

Moreover, the same can be said of the teleological thesis. As a description of what suspension is, we do not aim to suspend toward p only if p . That, instead, is what the thesis tells us about belief. So, if we are to assume (with this account) that suspension is an aim-motivated behaviour, then we cannot appeal to the aim of belief, characterised as such, in order to account

for suspension. In other words, given that suspension and belief are not exactly the same attitude, they cannot be explained according to exactly the same aim. Like the normative thesis, therefore, the teleological thesis does not directly account for suspension. If either of these approaches are going to work, insofar as they are able to provide the basis for a theory of suspension, a distinct aim or norm of suspension must be proposed. The question is whether either of these accounts can, in some sense, give rise to this distinct aim or norm.

So, do these theories have the required resources? The first thing to recognise is that neither the teleological nor the normative thesis categorically rule out suspension. Since each thesis is formulated with truth as a necessary (and not sufficient) condition for belief, neither prohibits suspension toward p even when p is true.¹⁰ In fact, according to each thesis, suspension is always allowed, in any situation. This point, in itself, doesn't tell us anything interesting about suspension as an attitude, for it is also true of imagining that p , desiring that p , and even non-belief in p , etc. that they are not ruled out by the proposed aim and norm of belief. However, it does mean that there is room for a logically consistent account of suspension to be subsumed under both of the original teleological and normative theses, if one is to be proposed. In this way, perhaps an aim or norm of suspension can be derived from the more fundamental aim or norm of belief – which brings us to the work of Sosa (2010) and Engel (2013a). These theorists attempt to show that we can get an explicit account of suspension from the teleological and normative perspectives, respectively. In the following two subsections, I outline each of their proposals in turn, and I argue that,

¹⁰ It is generally recognised that truth cannot be a sufficient condition for belief, whether beliefs are construed as teleological or normative. In the teleological case, this would mean that we have the impossible aim to believe all truths – an aim which we clearly do not have (Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof 2013). And in the normative case, this would mean that we are subject to an impossible requirement, to believe all truths, which violates the principle of *ought-implies-can* (Boghossian 2003; Bykvist and Hattiangadi 2007).

despite their efforts, neither theorist manages to establish a plausible theory of suspension.

2.2 SOSA ON SUSPENSION: A TELEOLOGICAL READING

Sosa (2010) takes believing to be a kind of performance, with an aim, like any other aim-motivated behaviour. For this reason, he regularly draws analogies between the aim of belief and other, more ordinary, aims. One analogy he makes extensive use of, and which we will focus on here, is between belief's aim and the aims of a hunter stalking his prey. Through this analogy, Sosa hopes to reveal how a teleological account of belief gives rise to a similarly teleological account of suspension.

To see how this works, we can begin by reflecting on Sosa's (2010, pp. 5-7) analysis of the hunter. The first thing to notice is that, in the act of hunting, the hunter has two related aims. He has the primary aim to hit his target, and he has the secondary aim to choose his shots well. The first of these aims requires the hunter to have a good shot, if he is to demonstrate his competence. This means that when the hunter shoots, he must be able to hit his targets with some sufficient level of consistency. In this respect, when we assess the hunter's performance, we do so based on his ability to satisfy this primary aim. However, with this primary aim, also comes a secondary aim. To be a good hunter, the hunter must also choose to shoot at the right time—that is, he also has the aim to choose his shots well. (It is quite possible for a hunter with a good shot to be bad at choosing when to shoot, and vice versa.) To thus achieve this secondary aim, the hunter cannot just shoot at random, hoping to hit some targets. Rather, he must sometimes forbear from shooting. This, of course, will mean that he sometimes misses possible targets (when he does not shoot), but it will increase the chances of him hitting targets when he does shoot (that is, of satisfying his primary aim). The primary and secondary aims of the hunter are therefore related in the following way: the secondary aim is in the service of the primary aim,

since it is in virtue of trying to competently satisfy the primary aim that the hunter has his secondary aim. In turn, given that this secondary aim is quite distinct from the primary aim, it also gives rise to its own dimension of assessment. We can assess the hunter's performance according to whether he chooses his shots well, in addition to whether he has a good shot – both assessments being possible due to their respective aims.

In general, Sosa's point is that primary aims to achieve certain goals often come with secondary aims, and these secondary aims typically involve *avoiding failure*. The hunter must choose his shots well, such that he decreases the chances of failing to satisfy his primary aim. And this, according to Sosa, is a common feature of many aim-motivated activities, 'whether athletic, artistic, academic, etc.' (p. 6). From the primary aim to achieve success in a certain domain follows the secondary aim to avoid failure.

The second point to take from Sosa's analysis is that attempting to avoid failure often requires *inaction*, yet this inaction is nonetheless a kind of performance. There is a crucial difference between *aim-motivated* inaction and *mere* inaction. Consider again the hunter: when he assesses a shot situation, and decides that now is *not* a good time to shoot, his decision not to act is *intentional*. By carrying out his secondary aim (to avoid failing to hit his target), the hunter, in Sosa's words, 'intentionally and even deliberately forbear[s]' from taking a shot (p. 6). In contrast, if he doesn't take a shot because he has, say, fallen asleep, his inaction is not aim-motivated (Sosa's example, p. 6) – in this respect, his inaction is unintentional.¹¹ Accordingly, then, an instance of inaction may or may not be aim-motivated. The important thing to note is that when inaction is aim-motivated, the aim involved is just like any other aim, in that it gives rise to all of the usual dimensions of instrumental normativity that we associate

¹¹ The hunter's decision to go to sleep might've been intentional, but his inaction with respect to taking a particular shot while he is asleep is not.

with other aims. This allows us to assess how well inaction is achieved, in instrumental terms, when that instance of inaction is aim-motivated.

Those are the two important insights that we need to take from Sosa's analysis of the hunter. The first is that aim-motivated behaviours often have two related aims. There is the primary aim to achieve success in a certain domain, which is closely related to a secondary aim to avoid failure. The second point is that inaction, which is often the result of attempting to satisfy a secondary aim, can be genuinely aim-motivated, and therefore can be subject to the same criteria of assessment as any other aim. With these two points in mind, we can begin to see how Sosa develops his teleological account of suspension. In essence, Sosa's suggestion is that suspension is the doxastic analogue of aim-motivated inaction, such that the aim of suspension derives from the more fundamental aim of belief.

To explain: As we have seen, the (primary) aim of belief is to believe only truths. But, in line with Sosa's analysis, this aim also gives rise to a secondary aim, which is to *avoid failing* to believe only truths. It is then this secondary aim that is said to motivate (and characterise) suspension of belief. In particular, if we cannot establish the truth of either p or $\text{not-}p$, then we avoid failing to believe only truths, by intentionally forbearing from belief. On Sosa's account, this intentional forbearance from belief (for ease of expression, I will sometimes refer to this simply as 'doxastic forbearance') amounts to suspension. In this sense, we can understand suspension on the basis of belief's secondary aim. By appealing to this aim, the idea is that we can distinguish suspension from other attitudes and non-belief (suspension is uniquely subject to this aim), and we can explain the appropriateness of suspension in instrumental terms (we can ask whether the subject satisfied this aim well). The result is that from the aim of belief we can derive an aim of suspension, such that we end up with a teleological account of suspension that is able to explain suspension's descriptive and normative

features. The question we are left with is whether this account of suspension really does have the resources to explain these features of suspension.

To assess this teleological account of suspension, the first thing we need to recognise is that carrying out the proposed aim of suspension (that is, the secondary aim of belief) must be both necessary and sufficient for suspension to occur. It must be necessary, otherwise there could be instances of suspension that are not described by the theory; and it must be sufficient, because the aim alone is intended to account for the difference between suspension and other attitudes. Nonetheless, on further inspection, it appears that the proposal meets neither of these requirements. I begin by considering the sufficiency condition.

There is a fairly obvious sense in which we can satisfy this secondary aim of belief without entering into a state of suspension. That is when we intentionally forbear from holding beliefs on a topic, by simply not inquiring into that topic. For instance, we might decide not to inquire at all into whether p or we might decide to cease a present inquiry into p . In both cases, we successfully avoid holding false beliefs, by intentionally forming no beliefs whatsoever on the matter. However, it would be strange to say that we are suspending on the topics that we have decided not to inquire into. It makes more sense to say that we remain in a state of non-belief about those topics.¹² So, in a very general sense, doxastic forbearance is not sufficient for suspension.

Now, the teleologists will be quick to respond that this initial criticism doesn't undermine Sosa's central claim. This is because the kind of doxastic forbearance that Sosa is talking about is not completely general, but is restricted to a certain domain. To reflect once again on Sosa's example of

¹² Regarding ceasing our inquiry, Friedman (2013, p. 170) makes a similar point. She observes that having finished considering a proposition is not sufficient for suspension, for we might become distracted during our deliberations and thus stop thinking about that proposition. In this sense, we might already be inquiring into a proposition, and intentionally stop inquiring, yet not enter into a state of suspension.

the hunter. The hunter might decide not to go hunting, or he might decide to cease currently hunting, and thus forbear from shooting any targets; but this kind of forbearance is not what Sosa has in mind. The hunter's decision not to hunt is not motivated by his aims *as* a hunter – that is, by his aim to hit his target or to choose his shots well. These aims only arise *within* the context of the hunt (i.e. while he is actively hunting), and *not* when he has already decided that he will not take part in the hunt. This is apparent when we consider how we would assess the hunter's ability as a hunter: we would base our decision on whether the hunt is going well *when he is hunting*, and not on whether he decided to go hunting or not. And something similar is supposed to be true of Sosa's account of suspension. As the hunter's aims (as a hunter) occur within the restricted context of the hunt, the proposed aim of suspension only occurs within the context of doxastic deliberation (that is, the analogue of the hunt). When we avoid inquiry, we do not 'activate' the aim of suspension (so to speak), but instead give it up in favour of some other pursuit. The kind of doxastic forbearance that is relevant, therefore, does not include intentional forbearance from inquiry, but is the kind of intentional forbearance that results *within* doxastic deliberation, when we are actively involved in belief formation and maintenance. Thus, it is within the more restricted domain of doxastic deliberation that we must focus our criticism, as it is only within this context that the aim of suspension is said to have a role.

Focusing our analysis accordingly, then, does Sosa's account fare any better? I think not – it is still not the case that doxastic forbearance, even within doxastic deliberation, is sufficient to give rise to suspension. One concern is that, for the proposal to hold, the relation between doxastic forbearance and suspension must be one of conceptual or metaphysical necessity. It cannot be the case that sometimes doxastic forbearance gives rise to suspension and sometimes it does not, as a matter of contingent psychological fact. If this were the case, then, of course, doxastic

forbearance would not be sufficient for suspension, as there would be the potential for instances of doxastic forbearance that do not give rise to suspension. But this is not the result that the teleologists want – they want a sufficient condition for suspension. So, we can ask, is the proposed relation between doxastic forbearance and suspension only contingent?

It seems dubious to suppose that doxastic forbearance necessitates suspension. At least, it seems plausible that a subject could intentionally forbear from belief, yet not enter into a state of suspension. For instance, we can conceive of a race of creatures who, upon concluding that the evidence for p and for not- p is inconclusive, intentionally drop all doxastic attitudes towards p , and instead return to a prior state of non-belief about p . These creatures, call them Deliberites (some say they are the distant cousins of Jonathan Bennett's (1990) Credamites), could have evolved (or perhaps have been programmed) not to hold indeterminate doxastic attitudes towards propositions. In this respect, when they deliberate what to believe, if they take the evidence to sufficiently support p , they go ahead and (just as we do) believe that p – and they may even do so by carrying out an aim to believe only truths. However, when they determine that the evidence is not sufficient to support either p or not- p , they finalise their deliberation by intentionally dropping any kind of doxastic attitude toward p , and then move onto whatever it is they are planning to deliberate next. The Deliberites might at some point find themselves deliberating the same proposition on multiple occasions, because circumstances might motivate them to do so, but for some period of time after concluding their deliberation, they intentionally put themselves into a state of non-belief. The relation they then have to the proposition that they forbear from believing, is thus equivalent to the caveman's non-belief about the Higg's boson. The Deliberites therefore intentionally forbear from belief, but they do so without suspending. If this is conceivable, as I think it is, then doxastic

forbearance is not sufficient to give rise to suspension as opposed to, say, non-belief.¹³

Another problem for this account of suspension, for those not convinced by the conceivability of the Deliberites, is that doxastic forbearance is not a fine-grained enough condition to distinguish suspension from another, closely related attitude. The difficulty here depends on a distinction between *suspension* and (what we can call) *withheld assent*. In the Introduction to his translation of Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Benson Mates (1996, p. 32) touches on the idea that when a subject suspends belief (or 'suspends judgment' in his terminology), this seems to imply that the subject understands the proposition in question, but that he has not yet made up his mind about whether the evidence is strong enough to believe it; however, when a subject withholds assent from a proposition, this could be because he simply does not understand the proposition and for that reason is unable to form a belief, independently of the evidence that he has. To again use Friedman's example, consider the scientist who is deliberating whether to believe the proposition that *the Large Hadron Collider will find the Higgs boson*. Presumably, the scientist understands what it means for this proposition to be true or false. He understands what evidence is relevant to the truth of the proposition, what the implications of the proposition being true and false are, etc. In this sense, when he decides to intentionally forbear from believing the proposition, he makes an *informed decision*. Now, contrast this with a non-scientist who, let's suppose, doesn't understand the proposition in question. The non-scientist might spend some time trying to figure out what it means for the Large Hadron Collider to find the Higgs boson (what it means for that proposition to be true). However, ultimately, he might realise that he simply is unable to grasp the proposition (he

¹³ This possibility is perhaps even more apparent if we imagine that the Deliberites are in fact machines that have been programmed to store true information, but that have also programmed to drop any information (e.g. to save memory) that the truth or falsity of which cannot be established to some sufficient degree.

doesn't have the necessarily scientific knowledge), and on that basis intentionally forbear from holding a belief on the matter. In this way, there is an important difference between the attitude of the scientist and that of the non-scientist, even though they both intentionally forbear from believing the same proposition. On the one hand, the scientist holds an informed attitude, while, on the other, the non-scientist is, in the Pyrrhonian sense, 'at a loss'.¹⁴

For our discussion, the implication is that two distinct attitudes can, in principle, arise from doxastic forbearance. The first requires understanding, and seems to fit better with our notion of suspension; and this appears to be the attitude that Sosa's account is an explicit attempt to capture. The second, in contrast, doesn't require understanding, and fits better with our idea of what it means to withhold assent. To a large extent, the labels that we decide to attach to these attitudes are not important. The point is that there are two logically distinct attitudes, and Sosa's appeal to doxastic forbearance does not distinguish between them.

To this difficulty, the obvious answer is for the teleologist to deny that there is a substantial difference here to be explained. While there is some logical difference between suspension and withheld assent (as I have described them), the teleologist might be reluctant to agree that our theory of suspension must distinguish between them. Both are similar enough, it might be said, to fall under same label. However, despite the fact that this response would lack philosophical rigour, it also conflicts with the general strategy of the teleologists for defining doxastic attitudes. Broadly speaking, the teleological approach attempts to define beliefs on the basis of the intentional (or subintentional) responses that we have to evidence. Beliefs

¹⁴ When making this distinction, Mates (1996, Introduction, §6) points out that, despite contemporary discussions, the Sextan Pyrrhonist is better described as someone who withholds assent from all propositions, rather than suspends belief. This is because Sextus repeatedly claims, not simply to disagree with his opponents, but to be completely unable to apprehend what they are trying to say. It is for this reason that Sextus always finds himself 'being at a loss' (*aporia*).

are distinguished from other attitudes by their unique aim, and we carry out this aim by believing the evidence. In this respect, the teleological account can be characterised as an 'input' theory of belief, since its definition of belief depends on the evidential inputs that support beliefs. The relevance of this is that, from an input perspective, we should be able to demarcate suspension from withheld assent, since they are responses to different evidential situations. On the one hand, the subject who suspends is able to take the evidence for a proposition into account, but forbears from belief because he deems that evidence to be insufficient. On the other hand, the subject who withholds assent is unable to take evidence into account for the proposition (at least, he cannot directly assess the evidence for and against the proposition), since he admits that he cannot make sense of the proposition in the first place. From this perspective, we should expect 'input' methods of defining doxastic attitudes to be sensitive to the distinction made between suspension and withheld assent, given that this distinction arises due to the different evidential inputs that those two attitudes receive.

These objections, which I have raised so far, suggest that doxastic forbearance is not sufficient for suspension. They demonstrate that forbearing from belief does not always give rise to suspension as opposed to both non-belief and withheld assent. However, we can also see that doxastic forbearance is not necessary to enter into a state of suspension. To see why, we can again appeal to Friedman's (2013) work. Friedman analyses what she calls a 'consideration condition' that might be necessary to give rise to suspension, such that it is only via 'considering, deliberation, wondering, entertaining and so on' (p. 171) that we can suspend belief. Yet, as she points out, the problem with this condition is that it rules out getting into a state of suspension by 'non-standard means' (p. 171). The examples of non-standard means that Friedman offers are being hit over the head, having your brain operated on, and even the possibility of a Swampman

version of yourself spontaneously coming into existence already suspending about all of the things that you are suspending about. The difficulty is that in all of these cases, considering a proposition is not what takes the subjects into a state of suspension—and, I believe, we can say something similar about an ‘intentionality condition’. These examples demonstrate that we need not intentionally forbear from belief to enter into a state of suspension; perhaps the neuroscientist just stimulates an instance of suspension in our mind, without us giving it any prior thought whatsoever. This suggests that the proposed intentionality is also not necessary for suspension to occur.

In summary, Sosa’s attempt to develop the teleological position to account for suspension faces a number of difficulties. Doxastic forbearance, in accordance with the aim of suspension (or, the secondary aim of belief), is neither necessary nor sufficient for suspension. It is not sufficient because it does not clearly demarcate between suspension and other states, such as non-belief and withheld. And it is not necessary because it fails to incorporate non-standard means for entering into a state of suspension. For our purposes, this means that the teleological approach thus far is unable to account for the descriptive and normative features of suspension.

2.3 ENGEL ON SUSPENSION: A NORMATIVE READING

That brings us to normativism about belief. Beginning with a normative interpretation of belief, Engel (2013a) develops and defends (albeit briefly) an account of suspension (in his terminology, *withheld belief*) that is essentially normative.¹⁵ In doing so, he uses a strategy similar to Sosa’s, in the sense that he begins with his more fundamental theory of belief, and then attempts to extend that theory to account for suspension. The main

¹⁵ In the previous section, I outlined a potential difference between suspension and withheld assent. Introducing a new term at this stage, ‘withheld belief’, would only generate confusion. However, when Engel mentions ‘withheld belief’, it’s quite clear that he is talking about our notion of suspension. With this in mind, I will continue to talk about suspension in the text, but will not edit Engel’s references to ‘withheld belief’ – these two terms should thus be considered interchangeable.

difference between their approaches thus reflect the difference between the teleological and normative approach generally. On Engel's account, the nature and normativity of suspension (like that of belief), cannot be reduced to descriptive properties of believers, unlike on the teleological account.

In response to Mayo's initial contention, that normative theories of belief cannot account for suspension, Engel writes:

'It is false that the norm of truth allows only two doxastic attitudes. If one considers whether p is true, and does not have enough evidence for either p or not- p , the norm does not prescribe believing p or believing not- p . It prescribes withholding belief. But isn't withholding belief then under the governance of the evidential norm...? It is, but it is also under the governance of the truth norm, for there is no possibility of being governed by the truth norm unless one follows the evidential norm.' (p. 213)

In this passage, the suggestion is that belief's truth norm (as captured by the normative thesis) gives rise to an evidential norm, which in turn has the resources to account for suspension. In this respect, much like how Sosa begins with a fundamental aim of belief and derives a secondary aim of suspension, Engel begins with a fundamental norm of belief and derives a secondary norm (an evidential norm) that can account for suspension. What we want to know is whether this approach to understanding suspension is more effective than that of the teleologists. My method is again to consider whether the condition offered—that of an evidential norm—is both necessary and sufficient for suspension.

To begin, it's not clear that an evidential norm *when derived from a more fundamental truth norm*, is sufficient to distinguish suspension from, in particular, non-belief. Engel tells us that belief's truth norm doesn't only prescribe outright beliefs, but that via the evidential norm it also 'prescribes withholding belief'. This is because, when we do not have enough evidence for p or not- p , we should, according to the truth norm, avoid holding a belief

on the matter, lest our belief be false. However, given that this is an essentially normative requirement, and not a descriptive restraint on our belief forming practices, we can simply note that this requirement is satisfied by remaining in (or entering into) a state of non-belief. Taken at face value, there is no reason to suppose that the truth norm prescribes anything other than non-belief, even when a subject has considered a proposition and determined that the evidence for and against it is insufficient. Both states equally allow a subject to avoid violating the more fundamental prescription of the truth norm, which is to believe only truths.

In essence, the worry is that, from the proposed evidential norm, we get no information about the difference between suspension and non-belief. In contrast, this is not true of how the normativists distinguish beliefs from other attitudes – such as, say, imaginings. Normativism tells us that belief just is the attitude that is subject to a truth norm – a condition that is not true of imaginings, so imaginings are not beliefs. But we do not get a similar demarcation between suspension and non-belief from Engel’s evidential norm. The very reason, we are told, that we are committed to the evidential norm is to serve the truth norm. That is, to avoid forming false beliefs – but we can achieve this whether we are suspending or in a state of non-belief.¹⁶

For the normativists, the way around this problem is to claim that the evidential norm requires suspension (as opposed to non-belief) under certain evidential conditions. In fact, this appears to be what Engel has in mind when he notes that suspension is ‘under the governance of the truth norm, for there is no possibility of being governed by the truth norm unless one follows the evidential norm’. The point seems to be that, given the evidential norm, we must suspend when that is what the evidence

¹⁶ Despite the difficulties mentioned in the previous section, the teleologists arguably fare better with this distinction between suspension and non-belief. The teleologists at least put a descriptive constraint on suspension that is not present when a subject is in a state of non-belief (that is, doxastic forbearance). The question, as we have seen, is whether this constraint really necessitates suspension – I’ve argued that it does not.

demands. That is, we must form *some* attitude that accords with our evidence, given the requirements of the truth norm and its connection to evidential considerations. However, while believing according to our evidence might be essential for holding true beliefs, it's still not clear why the norm requires us to do anything when our evidence is insufficient to establish the truth.

Let's agree that we cannot conform our beliefs to the requirements of the truth norm, unless we believe according to our evidence. In this sense, we must follow an evidential norm if we are to satisfy the truth norm. On this assumption, evidential considerations are essential to the normativity of belief. However—and this is the difficulty—even if believing the evidence is essential to believing truths, such that some amount of evidential normativity follows from the truth norm, still nothing follows about what attitude we are required to hold when the evidence is insufficient to establish a truth; nothing, that is, *besides not holding an outright belief*. In other words, if believing only truths is the fundamental norm of belief, then there is no requirement (derivative of this norm) to do anything at all when, by your own lights, you are unable to believe a truth. To give an analogy: suppose that you are playing a ball game, such that the norm for taking a penalty is that you should *take the penalty only if you think you can score*. From the requirement that thinking you can score is necessary for taking the penalty, it does not follow that you should do anything at all (such as kick the ball half way) if you do not think you can score. In that situation, it follows that you, in fact, should not take the penalty. That is, you should not do anything with regards to taking the penalty. The truth norm of belief, then, is similar to this norm of taking a penalty. It gives us no reason to do anything if we do not take ourselves to be in a position to satisfy its requirement. And this fact remains the same even if we accept that we must believe according to our evidence in order to believe only truths. For this reason, we can accept Engel's point that satisfying the truth norm requires

us to believe the evidence, while still rejecting the proposed implication that *this* evidential norm would ever require us to suspend belief rather than remain in a state of non-belief. All that the evidential norm does require, when it is described as being in the service to the truth norm, is that we must not hold beliefs for which we have insufficient evidence.¹⁷

These considerations demonstrate that there is a disconnect between the alleged truth norm of belief and the normativity of suspension. If we are to explain suspension as an essentially normative attitude, then the normativity cannot be derived from a more fundamental truth norm. However, there is still one final issue to consider. That is whether suspension is necessarily subject to an evidential norm. When discussing the teleological approach, we saw that non-standard means for getting into suspension undermine the claim that doxastic forbearance is necessary for suspension. The same kinds of cases, however, do not reveal a similar weakness in the normative approach. This is because, whether we are talking about being put into suspension by an advanced neuroscientist, or even instances of suspension in Swampman, it could still be the case that these instances are inappropriate in relation to the evidence. The neuroscientist, for instance, could induce in you an incorrect state of suspension, just as he could induce in you an incorrect belief. And a similar assessment could be made of Swampman's states of suspension – they could be inappropriate despite the fact that Swampman has only just come into existence, in just the same way as his beliefs could be inappropriate. Hence, the possibility of entering into suspension via non-standard means does not contradict the claim that suspension is subject to a normative

¹⁷ It is worth noting that Engel's account arguably fares better with the distinction, raised as an objection to the teleologists, between suspension and withheld assent. Engel (2013a, p. 213) characterises the truth norm as the requirement not to suspend belief when we do 'not have enough evidence for either p or not- p '. Assuming that this is true of suspension, the normative requirement for withholding assent is, perhaps, distinct. For instance, we ought to withhold assent when we do not understand the proposition in question. In this sense, a normative requirement could, in principle, demarcate between suspension and withheld assent, in a way that 'doxastic forbearance', on the teleological account, does not. Nonetheless, we would still need a more precise account of the normativity of withheld assent – an interesting project in its own right.

requirement—one that exists independently of the means by which we enter into a state of suspension. On this point, however, I simply want to note that the normativity of suspension, whatever its source might be, cannot be derived from a more fundamental truth norm for belief, as per the Engel's position. As we have seen, the evidential norm, insofar as the truth norm gives rise to one, does not in turn provide us with conditions for suspension, over and above mere non-belief. As noted, we can satisfy *that* evidential norm by just not believing. For this reason, we can agree that suspension is subject to certain normative requirements, but maintain that they cannot be derived from a more fundamental truth norm of belief (just as they also cannot be derived from a more fundamental truth aim). And this sounds about right—it appears to be the case that suspension is subject to some normative requirements, but the theories that are central to this discussion fail to provide the basis for these requirements.

The purpose of this paper has been to discuss whether different interpretations of belief's 'aim'—both the teleological and normative accounts—can explain the descriptive and normative features of suspension. If what I have said is correct, they cannot. Neither the teleological nor the normative thesis has the resources to account for suspension as an attitude, even when those theses are explicitly extended to do so.

3. CLOSING REMARKS

What should we make of this conclusion? It seems that we are left with two options to consider. On the one hand, we can take the failure of the above theories to account for suspension as a weakness of those theories. If this is the case, then we need new (or alternatively developed) theories of belief, that are able to account for suspension. On the other hand, we can give up on the assumption, present throughout, that these theories ought to account

for suspension. In this sense, it might be correct to think of suspension as an altogether different kind of attitude from belief.

Obviously, the intuitions of the theorists discussed in this paper are that theories of belief should be able to account for suspension, such that we should remain committed to our initial assumption. It is precisely this assumption that gives rise to the problem of accounting for suspension in the first place, and the subsequent attempts to deal with this problem. This is no doubt because of the close descriptive and normative relations that belief and suspension do, as a matter of fact, share. For instance, in conscious awareness, the belief that p seems to rule out suspension toward p (much like it rules out the belief that not- p). Furthermore, both beliefs and suspension are responsive in apparently similar ways to evidential reasons. While the belief that p requires a sufficient level of evidence supporting p , suspension towards p occurs prior to the evidential threshold for belief being reached, with some important caveats.¹⁸ Together, these kinds of relations do seem to support the intuition that belief and suspension occupy the same theoretical landscape, and that suspension should, therefore, be subsumed under a theory of belief. However, despite these initial considerations, perhaps we should not be too tempted to remain committed to this assumption. The option to pursue the idea that suspension is an attitude of its own kind also has points in its favour, and this idea is beginning to show precedence in the currently developing literature.¹⁹

The first thing worth considering is the general success of the established teleological and normative theories of belief when it comes to explaining outright belief. Both approaches – the suspension issue notwithstanding – have the potential to account for many features of belief, as they were

¹⁸ This paper is essentially a discussion of the inability of the teleological and normative approaches to explain what these caveats amount to.

¹⁹ For instance, see Booth (2014) and Friedman (2013, 2017).

originally intended. Perhaps the two most crucial aspects of these theories are their proposed ability to do the descriptive work of demarcating beliefs from other attitudes, and the normative work of explaining rational belief – each according to an aim or norm, respectively. Yet these are not the only benefits that have been associated with these theories. The suggestion that belief is subject to a truth-aim or -norm has been offered as an explanation of doxastic involuntarism (Williams 1973), of exclusivity and transparency (Shah 2003 and Steglich-Petersen 2006, 2008), and as an essential ingredient for understanding knowledge (McHugh 2011 and Wedgwood 2002), among other things. So, while these theories face some problems, they also promise to generate a lot of success regarding other theoretical considerations. This should therefore make us think twice before abandoning these theories in light of concerns about accounting for suspension. If we did decide to abandon these theories, in pursuit of theories of belief that also explain suspension, the task at hand would not only be to find an alternative theory that is capable of explaining suspension, but one that is also capable of doing this additional theoretical work too. Indeed, the underlying difficulty is perhaps that there cannot be a single theory that is capable of explaining all of these features of belief, while at the same time accounting for suspension.

Furthermore, recent developments in the literature support the idea that suspension is, after all, its own kind of attitude. For instance, it has been suggested that suspension could be a *sui generis* indecision-representing attitude or an attitude towards a question, rather than an attitude (like outright belief) towards a proposition (Booth 2014; Friedman 2013, 2017). And another possibility, which I have not seen developed in the literature, is that suspension could be characterised according to its outputs (i.e. its functions), which would be consistent with a more generally function account of mental states. In this sense, perhaps suspension has a unique functional role in our cognitive economy. Isolating this functional role

could, again, give us insights into suspension's descriptive and normative properties.²⁰ If any of these different approaches to suspension prove successful, then they would establish that suspension and belief are importantly distinct attitudes, much like beliefs and other attitudes such as desires, imaginings, suppositions, etc.

These final thoughts suggest that we should at least be willing to further explore the possibility that suspension is its own kind of attitude, not susceptible to analysis according to a more fundamental theory of belief. Nevertheless, whichever option we decide to pursue, what we can say for sure, at this point, is that the teleological and normative interpretations of belief's 'aim', which we have assessed in this paper, lack the resources to account for suspension, so there is certainly more work to be done.

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²⁰ I briefly discuss the functional properties of suspension in [Author Removed]. Undoubtedly, however, there is a lot more that can be said on the matter.

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