On the accuracy and aptness of suspension

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Abstract

This paper challenges Sosa's account of the epistemic propriety of suspension of judgment. We take the reader on a test drive through some common problem cases in epistemology and argue that Sosa makes accurate and apt suspension both too easy and too hard.

Keywords Sosa · Suspension · Accuracy · Aptness · Skepticism · Brain in a vat · BonJour · Clairvoyance

This paper challenges Sosa's account of the epistemic propriety of suspension of judgment. We take the reader on a test drive through some common problem cases in epistemology, to see how the account of suspension deals with them. Section 1 outlines Sosa's account of accurate and apt suspension. Sections 2 and 3 focus on the skeptical scenario to argue that Sosa makes it too easy for suspension to be accurate and apt. Section 4 applies Sosa's account of accurate and apt suspension to BonJour's case of Norman the clairvoyant. The upshot is that Sosa makes accurate and apt suspension not only too easy but also too hard.

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1 Sosa on accurate and apt suspension

Like other authors, Sosa (2021) distinguishes between different types of suspension of judgment.[1] Whenever one suspends judgment on the question of whether *p*, one omits judgment regarding whether *p*—but one can do that either *deliberately* or rather *non-deliberately*. That one omits judgment deliberately means that one does so with the goal of *judging successfully* (see Sosa, 2021: 49–57). But one can also omit judgment non-deliberately, as when one simply abandons the question or leaves it aside, without making any attempt to successfully judge whether *p*.

Sosa mostly restricts his epistemological assessments to *deliberate* suspension of judgment. He is even more precisely focused on the attempt to judge *aptly*, and not just *accurately* (that is, truly). That one judges whether *p* aptly means not only that one judges that *p* accurately (getting the question's answer right), but that one so judges as a result of one's own competence, which involves among other things one's holding a sufficiently high degree of confidence that *p* (high enough to judge that *p*). One can just aim at accuracy or additionally aim at aptness of judgment. Sometimes aptness is too much of an aim for one to have—as when one must *guess* what the answer to a question is and has little confidence in one's own competence to answer it. The investigation carried out by Sosa does not concern the performance of such agents. Rather, it concerns the performance of agents who aim higher—agents who aim for aptness and not just truth or accuracy (2021: 79).

Suspended judgment, like judgment, can be accurate and it can be apt. In deliberately suspending judgment, the agent seeks to make the following true: that they judge if and only if their judgment would be apt.[2] Accordingly, one's suspension of judgment on the question of whether *p* is accurate just in case it achieves that aim (2021: 95).[3] So, on Sosa's view, when one suspends judgment on whether *p*, and neither judging that *p* nor judging that *not-p* would be apt for one, one's suspension achieves its aim and is thus accurate.

Sosa fleshes out further implications of the accuracy of one's suspension of judgment. Quite clearly, it follows from the assumption that one accurately suspends judgment about whether *p* that neither one's judging that *p* nor one's judging that *not-p* would be apt. But Sosa further concludes from that same assumption that one aptly holds a middling degree of confidence regarding whether *p* (Sosa, 2021: 83)—that is, a degree of confidence that aptly mirrors the middling epistemic probability of *p* for one (out of one's competence to form degrees of confidence). That a degree

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[1] See Miracchi (2019) and McGrath (2021).

[2] Sosa writes: "The objective [of suspension] is to judge if and only if one would judge successfully: i.e., if and only if one's alethic affirmation would be apt" (Sosa, 2021: 105). Here "apt alethic affirmation" is being used synonymously with "successful judgment." This is not always the case. There are passages where a deliberate judgment is said to be successful qua deliberate judgment only if it is apt, just as deliberate suspension is successful qua deliberate suspension only if no judgment would be apt. Moreover, judgment is sometimes used to refer to an act that is broader than affirming or assenting to a proposition.

[3] See also p. 83: "your *suspension*, on a question whether p, is accurate (succeeds) iff it succeeds in the aim of suspension: namely, the aim to affirm iff affirming would be apt".

of confidence regarding whether *p* is middling means that it is neither high enough for judging that *p* nor low enough for judging that *not-p*. For Sosa's views on the connection between judgment and degrees of confidence see Sosa (2021: 57–64 and 93–94).

And here we find the first problem with Sosa's account, namely, that the conclusion that one's degrees of confidence mirror one's epistemic probabilities does not follow from the assumption that one accurately suspends judgment, given Sosa's previous theses. Suppose that one accurately suspends judgment about whether *p*. It follows that neither one's judging that *p* nor one's judging that *not-p* would be apt for one. But does it follow that one holds a middling degree of confidence that mirrors one's epistemic probability of *p* (the probability of *p* on one's evidence)? It does not: it may be the case that it is not apt for one to judge that *p* because *p* is false, and not apt for one to judge that *not-p* because the epistemic probability of *p* for one is high. And, in that case, it is not a middling degree of confidence about whether *p* that mirrors one's epistemic probabilities, but rather the high degree of confidence that Sosa associates with judgment. The point is that there are sources of aptness-failure for judgment other than those related to how degrees of confidence mirror epistemic probabilities.

This is relevant to the discussion below. Sosa takes it that accurate suspension of judgment requires (by his own assumptions) apt middling credence, which would make it more difficult for one to accurately suspend. However, we have challenged this assertion, arguing that the constraint on the accuracy of suspension does not follow from Sosa's assumptions, as he believed it did.

What about *aptness* for suspension of judgment? That also requires, according to Sosa, apt middling credence—and we do not want to dispute that. Suspended judgment is apt just in case its accuracy is a manifestation of one's competence to align one's degrees of confidence to one's degrees of epistemic probabilities (2021: 83). Sandwiched between accuracy and aptness, there is the *adroitness* or competence of suspended judgment, which consists of its being based on an apt middling degree of confidence. We will return to the basing requirement when discussing BonJour's Norman scenario in Sect. 4.

2 The problem of easy accurate suspension

The aim of this section is to argue that, given Sosa's position, accurate and maybe also apt suspension is easier than it ought to be. To drive this point home, consider a brain in a vat (BIV, for short). The BIV cannot judge aptly whether *p*, for any empirical proposition *p*. For example, if the BIV judges accurately that it does not have hands, it resembles a quiz show contestant who correctly guesses the answer to a question. The fact that the BIV judges accurately on empirical matters is not a result of its competence and hence does not qualify as apt judgment.

Given Sosa's notion of accuracy for suspended judgment presented in the previous section, it follows that it is accurate for the BIV to suspend judgment on the question of whether it has hands (neither judging that it has hands nor judging that it does not have hands would be apt for the BIV). The same goes for any other

empirical issue that the BIV might be led to consider. Of course, if middling credence were required for the accuracy of suspended judgment, then Sosa could block these consequences and make it harder for accurate suspension to come by. But we have argued that such a requirement does not actually follow from Sosa's previous assumptions.[4]

The view whereby the BIV is accurate in suspending on the question of whether it has hands flies in the face of the truism that BIVs are handless. If the BIV's goal were to judge accurately, then it ought to affirm that it does not have hands. Given Sosa's position, it is accurate for the BIV to suspend judgment about whether it has hands but at the same time it is accurate for the BIV to judge that it does not have hands. This is a puzzling result. How can it be accurate to judge that *p* and at the same time accurate to suspend judgment on whether *p*?[5] If judging that *p* is supposed to be an alternative to suspending judgment about whether *p*, then one would expect their accuracy conditions to be mutually exclusive, too. (Compare: judging that *p* is also an alternative to judging that *not-p* and, accordingly, their accuracy conditions are mutually exclusive).

The puzzling conclusion assumes that the BIV would be accurate to judge that it is handless (*p*). This assumption can be called into question. A critic might argue that since accurately judging that *p* aims at affirming aptly on whether *p*, the truth of *p* is not sufficient for the judgment to attain its aim *qua* judgment and thus not sufficient for it to be 'accurate.' Given that judgment always aims at aptness and given that accuracy consists in the achievement of the aim, the BIV is not accurate in judging that *p*.[6] The objection calls for two responses.

First, Sosa distinguishes between animal and reflective modes of suspension (2021: 79). The distinction is illustrated by means of an example. Consider a subject who is given an eye-exam and who takes themselves to be merely guessing the bottom line of the chart with very small block letters even though they are judging competently. Sosa argues that the subject can have animal knowledge of the kind of letters displayed on the chart while reflectively suspending judgment on what these letters are. The reason the subject may reflectively suspend is that the aim of reflective judgment "is not just truth but aptness, or truth through competence" (Sosa, 2021: 57n8). However, the brain in the BIV scenario is not like the subject in the eye-exam scenario. The crucial difference is that the BIV has no reason to think that it is merely guessing correctly. For this reason, the BIV counterexample cannot be dispelled by bifurcating the level of suspension on whether *p* and the level of judgment that *p*. We will return to this point in Sect. 4.

Second, Sosa himself only requires the truth of a judgment for its accuracy. This is made clear when he distinguishes the three levels of judgment:

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your *alethic affirmation* of <p> is accurate iff it is correct (true); it is adroit (competent) iff *it* manifests sufficient confidence that is adroit; and it is apt iff its *success* (its attaining truth) manifests a competence constituted in essential part by apt sufficient confidence (Sosa, 2021: 83).

Given that the truth of a judgment suffices for its accuracy, there is room for cases in which it is both accurate to judge that *p* (not-*p*) and to suspend on whether *p*. The BIV example is a case in point. The fact that Sosa does not seem to have noticed this point may be due to the fact that he does not apply the account of suspension to the BIV case.

3 The problem of easy apt suspension

After having presented a problem for Sosa's view on *accurate* suspension, let us now turn to *apt* suspension. Does it also generate puzzling results? Is apt suspension also too easy?

Clearly, the BIV is not in a position to aptly *judge* whether it has hands. For as was stated in the previous section, if the BIV judges accurately that it does not have hands it resembles a quiz show contestant who correctly guesses the answer to a question. Lucky guesses do not constitute apt judgment because accuracy is not due to competence.

Granted that a BIV cannot aptly judge whether it has hands, can it aptly suspend judgment on the question of whether it has hands? According to Sosa, apt suspension requires not only accuracy but also a middling degree of confidence regarding whether *p*, which must in turn mirror the epistemic probability of *p*. But whether this requirement is satisfied in the case of the BIV depends on the underlying conception of evidence. For the epistemic probability of *p* is a function of what one's total evidence consists of. If the BIV's evidence is not inclusive enough to support a proposition *p* or its negation, then the relevant epistemic probability will be middling. From an externalist point of view, the BIV's evidence does not support the proposition that it has hands. From an internalist perspective, however, the BIV is like us in that it is confident that it *has* hands because the evidence suggests that it has hands. Alternatively, the point could be put as follows. Which attitude it is rational for the BIV to have towards the proposition that it has hands depends on whether perceptual seemings count as evidence, as some internalists claim.

Section 2 reached the paradoxical conclusion that it is accurate for the BIV to suspend judgment about whether it has hands and at the same time accurate for the BIV to judge that it does not have hands. Another way in which we have glossed the problem there was that it seemed *too easy* for suspension to be accurate. And now we point to the possibility that it might also be too easy for suspension to be apt. Externalist conceptions of evidence and evidential support will make it easier for suspension to be apt, whereas internalist conceptions will make it harder for suspension to be apt.

It seems, then, that for Sosa to avoid making it too easy for suspension to be apt (witness the BIV case), he has to lean towards more internalist conceptions of

evidence or evidential support. And those of us who do not lean in that direction would not be happy to embrace Sosa's framework for theorizing about suspension. This is an important issue that is left unresolved by his work on the topic.

A critic might argue against our objection by stating that, even if externalism about the possession of evidence is assumed, the BIV would not *competently* align its credences to what its evidence supports—that is, it would not have middling credence as to whether it has hands. The idea is that the BIV's credences would not differ from those of its non-envatted counterpart, and it would not be any less competent, *qua* thinker, than its counterpart.[7]

We agree that, as a matter of fact, the BIV would not have middling credences as to whether it has hands. But we submit that it would be *competent* for the BIV to have those credences. The competent way to form credences is to make them proportional to what the *factual* evidence (as opposed to one's perceptual seemings) supports. The BIV's factual evidence supports neither the proposition that it has hands nor the proposition that it does not have hands. This is why it would be rational for the BIV to have middling credences as to whether it has hands.

A critic might argue that even if evidence is sparse in the BIV scenario, the BIV still has perceptual seemings/information about seemings to support the judgment that they have hands. This could hold even under the E = K thesis, since the BIV knows it seems to them that they have hands.[8] So, perceptual seemings can support judgments about the external world, even with limited evidence. But this is precisely our point—Sosa must lean toward an internalist conception of evidence or evidential support to avoid making apt suspension too easy.

4 The problem of hard accurate and apt suspension

How does Sosa's account of suspension fares in the face of counterexamples to externalism about justification? BonJour objects to externalism on the grounds that if one is not (and cannot be) aware of what justifies one in believing something then, even if the belief is reliably formed, it lacks justification. The belief lacks justification because its truth appears accidental by one's own lights. Consider the following case:

> *Clairvoyance.* Norman, under conditions that usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant with respect to certain kinds of subject matter. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power, or for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day Norman comes to believe that the President is in New York City (NYC, for short), though he has no evidence either for or against his belief. In fact,

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7 We thank an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

8 We thank an anonymous referee for pressing us on this point.

the belief is true and results from his clairvoyant power under circumstances in which it is completely reliable.[9]

Norman is unaware that his belief about the President's whereabouts is not only true, but reliably produced. Yet knowledge is said to require justification, and justification is said to require taking active steps to assure that one forms one's beliefs appropriately. Norman has not done that; that is why, by his own lights, "it is an accident that the belief is true" (BonJour, 1985: 43).

Given the spirit of epistemic internalism, not only is Norman not justified in believing that the President is in NYC but also, he should refrain from believing it. Since he does not have a shred of evidence for the President's whereabouts and his clairvoyant powers, the epistemically responsible thing for him to do would be to suspend judgment on the question of where the President is.

Sosa's account of suspension, however, does not give us the verdict that it would be accurate for Norman to suspend judgment on the President's whereabouts. As we saw in Sect. 1, to accurately suspend judgment on the question whether *p* it must be the case that neither judging that *p* nor judging that *not-p* would be apt. Yet Sosa has maintained all along that Norman has *animal* knowledge of the President's whereabouts. Animal knowledge is defined in terms of apt belief, that is, belief that is "correct attributably to a competence exercised in its appropriate conditions."[10] According to Sosa, Norman has animal knowledge of the President being in NYC but lacks *reflective* knowledge which consists in the formation of a belief that is not only apt but meta-apt or 'well-selected' (Sosa, 2011: 8). Given that Norman's belief about the President being in NYC is apt, by Sosa's light, it would *not* be accurate for him to suspend judgment on the question of whether the President is in NYC.

Two lessons can be drawn from the application of Sosa's theory of accurate suspension to the clairvoyance case. First, the account makes it too hard for suspension to be accurate. Second, just as judgment can be assessed along two dimensions—animal knowledge and reflective knowledge—so can suspension. If Norman were to suspend judgment on the question of whether the President is in NYC, his suspension would be knowledgeable at the animal but not at the reflective level, for he lacks knowledge of his clairvoyant powers.

In response to the first charge, Sosa might try to defend the account of suspension by moving from accurate to apt suspension. Even if it is debatable whether Norman's suspension would be accurate, Sosa might insist that his suspension fails to be apt. For suspension to be apt it must be adroit and to be adroit it "must … manifest your more specific competence to tell that your judgment would not succeed, which

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[9] BonJour (1985: 41). Another well-known counterexample to externalism about justification is Lehrer's (1990: 162–164) Truetemp case. Text omitted. *Elsewhere, one of us has argued that BonJour's internalist interpretation of the clairvoyance case presupposes a bias against clairvoyance. If a clairvoyant faculty existed, then either it would prove itself reliable or not. And if it proved itself reliable, then intuitively there would be no reason to deny Norman justification and knowledge* (Bernecker 2008: 166).

[10] Sosa (2007: 93; cf. 1991: 143). Sosa (2017: 81) describes both Norman the clairvoyant and Truetemp as having animal knowledge while lacking reflective knowledge (and knowledge full well). Yet he also acknowledges the intuitive pull to deny knowledge to these subjects (Sosa 2017: 78).

is why you omit judgment" (Sosa, 2021: 97). If Norman suspends judgment about whether the President is in NYC, he does so because he has no reason for or against the President being in NYC. Yet Norman is not in a position to tell (know) that his judgment as to the President being in NYC would not be apt. How could he know that, seeing as he has animal knowledge that the President is in NYC? However, it is questionable whether it is any less strange to claim that Norman's suspension is not apt than to claim that it is not accurate. In sum, Sosa's account makes accurate and apt suspension not only too easy, but it also has the opposite effect of making it too difficult to suspend accurately and aptly.

5 Conclusion

This paper challenges Sosa's view of epistemically appropriate suspension of judgment. Sosa distinguishes between deliberate and non-deliberate suspension, focusing on the former and specifically on accurate and apt suspension. Suspension of judgement on whether p is accurate if and only if neither judging that p nor judging that non-p would be apt for one. Suspension of judgement is apt if its accuracy is a manifestation of one's competence in aligning the degrees if confidence with the epistemological probabilities. The paper argues that Sosa makes accurate and apt suspension simultaneously too easy and too difficult.

The first point is that, in Sosa's view, it is too easy for suspension to be accurate. Using the example of the BIV, we argue that the BIV cannot judge aptly on empirical questions. Yet, by Sosa's definition, the BIV's suspension of judgment on whether it has hands would be accurate, since neither judging that it has hands nor that it does not would be apt. This leads to the unpalatable result that, regarding any empirical question whether p such that it is false that p in the BIV scenario, it is both accurate for the BIV to suspend on whether p and to judge that not-p.

The second point is that apt suspension is also too easy on Sosa's view. To be apt, the suspension must be based on an intermediate degree of confidence that mirrors the epistemological probability of p. In the case of the BIV, the epistemological probability depends on the underlying conception of evidence. If the BIV's evidence is not sufficient to support p or its denial, then the probability will be intermediate, allowing for the suspension to qualify as apt. However, this is intuitively the wrong result.

The third and last point is that Sosa makes suspension not only too easy but also too hard. Intuitively, Norman the clairvoyant should suspend on the question of whether the President is in NYC. However, Norman has animal knowledge of the whereabouts of the President. Norman's suspension would not be reflectively knowledgeable, but it would clearly be accurate. The upshot is that Sosa's theory of suspension of judgement has many merits but that, as it stands, it is extensionally inadequate.[11]

Declarations

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