Epistemic Akrasia and Rational Belief

Morten L. Dahlback
morton.dahlback@ntnu.no

Abstract. Agents who have misleading higher-order evidence seem to be trapped in rational dilemmas: they must either violate an evidential norm or form akratic beliefs. However, Michael Titelbaum and Clayton Littlejohn argue that this appearance is deceptive: if akratic belief is irrational, one can’t rationally have false beliefs about what rationality requires. In this essay, I argue for three claims. (1) Titelbaum and Littlejohn’s argument for their view faces counterexamples – only a limited version of their view can be established by an argument from the irrationality of akratic belief. (2) There is an unrecognized type of misleading higher-order evidence – indirect higher-order evidence – that leads to a different paradox involving a plausible closure principle for rational belief. (3) This paradox can only be solved by appeal to the Uniqueness thesis, which says that no epistemic situation permits more than one doxastic state. I end by considering the theoretical costs of this solution, and discuss an important methodological upshot: our answers to questions about the requirements of rationality have implications for our epistemological theory-choice.

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1. Introduction

It’s hard to be a believer. Sometimes our evidence misleads us by supporting belief in falsehoods. But that’s not our only misfortune. In the last decade, philosophical attention has been directed increasingly at a different type of misleading evidence: misleading higher-order evidence. This kind of evidence misleads us by indicating that our beliefs are irrational or that our evidence fails to support the attitudes it in fact supports. Paradigmatic cases of misleading higher-order evidence have two distinctive features:

(1) S has evidence that conclusively supports taking doxastic state D to P.
(2) S has evidence that conclusively supports that it is irrational to take doxastic state D to P.

This essay is about a problem the possibility of misleading higher-order evidence raises for a particular family of views about epistemic rationality. The views I have in mind – and which I will group together under the heading “the hybrid view” – hold that whether an agent S is epistemically rational depends on whether she satisfies two kinds of rational requirement. The concerns her evidence-responsiveness, the second her attitudinal coherence.¹ They can be stated as follows:

Evidence Requirement (ER): If S’s evidence decisively supports taking doxastic attitude D to the proposition P, rationality requires that S takes D towards P.

Akratic Principle (AP): Rationality requires of S that S does not (take doxastic attitude D to P and believe that she herself is irrational in taking D to P).²

It is often argued that the hybrid view leads to paradox in cases of misleading higher-order evidence. For in such cases it requires both (by ER) that you take D to P and believe that it is irrational to take D to P and (by AP) that you avoid the state where you take D to P and believe that doing so is irrational (Christensen 2014, Worsnip forthcoming). Thus, the

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² There are two key differences between ER and AP. In the terminology introduced by Broome (1999), ER is a narrow-scope requirement. It says that given that your evidence decisively supports taking D to P, the only rational thing for you to do is to take D to P. AP is a wide-scope requirement. It does not tell you that rationality requires you to have a particular attitude to some proposition, but that a specific combination of attitudes is irrational. If you end up taking D to P while believing that it’s irrational to take D to P, AP does provide guidance as to whether you stop being in such a state by ceasing to take D to P or by ceasing to believe that it’s irrational to take D to P. No matter how you get yourself out of such a state, you end up satisfying the requirement.
possibility of misleading higher-order evidence threatens to render the hybrid view incoherent.

There are several responses to this problem on the table. Some, like Christensen (2014), argue that misleading higher-order evidence gives rise to rational dilemmas – situations where it is impossible for an agent to be fully epistemically rational, and concludes that ER and AP have sufficient intrinsic plausibility to justify acceptance of rational dilemmas. Others have taken the problem to call for the rejection of hybrid views. Worsnip (forthcoming b) holds that if misleading higher-order evidence is possible, ERs and coherence requirements should be thought of as requirements with fundamentally different sources. Maria Lasonen-Aarnio (2014) thinks that the possibility of misleading higher-order evidence gives us reasons to believe that AP is false, since, on her view, ER plays a more significant role in our conception of epistemic rationality than AP.

More recently, some hybrid theorists have taken a different approach. Titelbaum (2015) and Littlejohn (forthcoming) claim that as long as they include AP, hybrid theories entail that misleading higher-order evidence is either unproblematic or impossible. On their view, AP entails the Fixed Point Thesis (FPT), which says that beliefs about what rationality requires are either true or irrational. If they’re right, hybrid theorists have had the solution to the problem of misleading higher-order evidence within their reach all along. For the FPT implies that if one is rationally required to believe P, one can’t rationally believe that one is not. The general idea is that while finding myself in a state where I violate AP doesn’t, by itself, give me any guidance as to how I should resolve the tension between my first- and higher-order
doxastic attitudes, information about I ought to resolve the tension is nonetheless *a priori* accessible to me, and I’m rationally required to resolve the tension in the way that this *a priori* accessible information supports. Thus, if S has higher-order evidence, only one of the following can be rational: S believes what her first-order evidence supports and doesn’t believe that she’s rationally required not to so believe (if the higher-order evidence is misleading), or that S believes that she’s rationally required not to believe P and doesn’t believe P (if the higher-order evidence isn’t misleading). If the AP in fact entails FPT, therefore, the problem of misleading higher-order evidence simply goes away.

Here’s the plan for the paper. First, I show (section 2) that AP only entails a restricted version of FPT. This restricted version is powerful enough to solve the problem of misleading higher-order evidence as traditionally conceived. In section 3, I introduce a new kind of misleading-higher order evidence that I call *indirectly misleading*. This kind of evidence seems to force hybrid theorists to choose between AP, ER, and a plausible closure principle for rational belief: if you rationally believe P and competently deduce Q from P (and thereby come to believe Q), you rationally believe Q. This inconsistency remains on any reasonable weakening of the principle. In sections 4 and 5, I show that hybrid theorists can avoid this problem by endorsing the Uniqueness Thesis, according to which no body of evidence permits more than one doxastic attitude towards any proposition. This response has considerable theoretical costs, which I discuss in section 6. I end by briefly considering the implications of claims about epistemic rationality for epistemological theory-choice.
2. AP, the No Way Out Argument and the Special Case Thesis

Consider the following example of misleading higher-order evidence:

_The Sample._ Petra is an excellent medical scientist, and Steve is her lab assistant. They are currently looking at a blood sample, trying to see if it contains ebola. Suddenly, Petra looks at Steve and says: “It is irrational to believe, on the basis of the evidence we have, that the sample contains ebola.” In fact, the evidence each of them obtains by looking at the sample is conclusive: it’s ebola.

Steve’s evidence conclusively supports the belief that the sample contains ebola. However, supposing that Petra’s testimony is sufficiently authoritative, his evidence also provides conclusive support for the belief that it is irrational to believe that the sample contains ebola. Thus, if Steve is to satisfy ER, he must violate AP, and if he is to satisfy AP, he must violate ER. If that’s right, hybrid theorists are in trouble. For then they are committed to requirements of rationality that are not jointly satisfiable, and must either accept that their theory gives rise to rational dilemmas or concede that their theory is inconsistent. Neither option is very attractive.

It may seem that the hybrid theorist has a response to this problem. For she can follow the lead of Michael Titelbaum (2015) and Clayton Littlejohn (forthcoming) and defend the FPT, which I restate here:

FPT: Beliefs about what rationality requires are either true or irrational.\(^3\)

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\(^3\) I take this formulation of the thesis from Littlejohn (forthcoming).
If the FPT is true, misleading higher-order evidence is unproblematic for hybrid theorists. For then it would either be the case that an agent faced with misleading evidence ought to believe what her first-order evidence supports, but ought not to believe that it is irrational to so believe, or that she ought to believe that it is irrational to believe what her first-order evidence supports, but ought not to believe what her first-order evidence supports. If so, there’s no paradox after all.\(^4\)

According to Titelbaum, FPT follows from AP. If that’s true, the hybrid theorist is in a position to derive a response to the problem of misleading higher-order evidence from one of her favorite principles. But things aren’t that easy. I’m going to argue that, pace Titelbaum, there’s no argument from AP to FPT. Let’s begin by taking a closer look at Titelbaum’s argument for FPT. His argument starts by deriving the following claim from AP:

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\text{Special Case Thesis (SCT): If you’re rationally required to believe that } P, \text{ you’re rationally required not to believe that it’s irrational to believe that } P.\]\

Titelbaum’s argument – the “No Way Out argument” - for this thesis goes as follows. Suppose that belief in P is rationally required. Then there’s no rational doxastic state you can be in that’s not such that you believe P. Now consider the proposition that it’s irrational to believe that P. Can you rationally believe it? On the assumption that AP is correct, the answer is no. For since you’re rationally required to believe P, every rational doxastic state open to you includes the belief that P. But, given AP, none of these states can also include the belief that it’s irrational to believe that P, since these states would include both the belief that P and the

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4 I’m going to assume that what rationality requires doesn’t depend on what anyone \textit{believes} that rationality requires. Both Titelbaum and Littlejohn endorse this “objectivist” take on the requirements of rationality.

5 This is my formulation. It’s equivalent to Titelbaum’s, whose formulation is somewhat more complicated.
belief that belief in P is irrational, a set of beliefs that’s prohibited by AP. Thus, SCT follows from AP.6

After establishing SCT, Titelbaum argues that we can obtain the FPT by generalizing SCT:

“To reach the full Fixed Point Thesis, we would have to generalize the Special Case Thesis in two ways:

(1) to mistakes besides believing that something required is forbidden; and
(2) to mistakes about what’s rationally required by situations other than the agent’s current situation.” (Titelbaum 2015, pp. 269-270)

However, there’s no argument from AP to (1). For there are false beliefs about what rationality requires that can’t be shown to be irrational by the No Way Out argument. These beliefs include:

- Believing of something rationally forbidden that it’s permitted.
- Believing of something rationally optional that it’s rationally required.

(By “X is optional”, I mean that rationality permits X and rationality permits not-X.) Both of the above are false beliefs about what rationality requires: the first underestimates what rationality requires, the second overestimates what rationality requires. If the FPT is true, they’re both irrational. But their irrationality doesn’t follow from AP. Consider:

**Permissive Petra.** Petra is about to finish a book summarizing her scientific beliefs and the research supporting them. She’s currently writing the preface to the book. When she’s about to write the obligatory “the errors that are found herein are mine alone”,

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6 If we read “requires” as a necessity operator, the Special Case Thesis follows from AP by an application of the K-axiom. Here’s how. Let “□” stand for “rationality requires” and “Bel” for “believe that”. Note that AP is logically equivalent to the following: □(Bel(p) → Bel(□¬Bel(p))). The K-axiom says that □(p → q) entails □(p) → □(q). Supposing that □(Bel(p)), we get □(¬Bel(□¬Bel(P))) by an application of K. Thus, we have the Special Case Thesis. Thanks to Simon Goldstein for discussion.
she stops, wondering whether it’s rational to believe that her book contains falsehoods. She concludes that she can go either way – in her opinion, rationality permits her to believe that the book contains falsehoods and rationality to permits her not to believe that the book contains falsehoods. However, she ends up believing that the book contains falsehoods, “because it’s more honest”. In fact, rationality requires her to believe that the book contains falsehoods.\footnote{I’m not taking a stand on what rationality requires in cases like this; the example is meant to illustrate a type of false belief about rational requirements whose irrationality doesn’t follow from AP.}

Petra falsely believes of something rationally forbidden – believing that her book doesn’t contain falsehoods – that it’s permitted. Call this a \textit{permissive mistake}. Permissive mistakes can’t be shown to be irrational by an argument from AP. For since Petra believes that her book contains falsehoods, she has the belief that rationality requires her to have. And since she doesn’t believe that it’s irrational to believe that the book contains falsehoods, she’s not in a state that AP requires her not to be in, and so she’s not irrational. Thus, Petra’s case constitutes a counterexample to the claim that FPT follows from AP.

There’s another kind of false belief about what rationality requires that the No Way Argument doesn’t rule out.\footnote{This example may seem superfluous, but it’ll be important at a later stage.} Consider:

\textit{Strict Steve}: Steve, a budding logician, has reviewed the literature on different logical systems extensively, and is deliberating about whether he should believe in classical or intuitionist logic. He concludes that rationality requires him to believe in classical logic, and becomes a classical logician. In fact, rationality permits both belief in classical logic and belief in intuitionist logic.
Steve believes of something rationally optional – belief in classical logic – that it’s rationally required. Let’s call this kind of mistake strict. Strict mistakes aren’t vulnerable to the No Way Out argument. For note that Steve has a belief that rationality permits, namely the belief that classical logic is correct. Moreover, he believes that he’s rationally required to have that belief. But AP doesn’t rule out believing that P and believing that you’re rationally required to believe P. So it can’t rule out Steve’s belief as irrational. Thus, we have two counterexamples to the claim that there’s an argument from AP to the FPT. AP is consistent with there being rationally held false beliefs about what rationality requires, and therefore, pace Titelbaum, doesn’t imply the FPT.

3. Indirect misdirection

Since the argument from AP fails, the hybrid theorist lacks an argument for FPT. That being said, the hybrid theorist only needs SCT to avoid paradox in cases of misleading higher-order evidence. For she can replace the ER with the following:

(Restricted ER): If S’s evidence conclusively supports P, rationality requires S to believe P, unless S’s belief that P violates SCT.⁹

Restricted ER expresses a constraint on what doxastic attitudes it can be all things considered rational to have. On a natural interpretation, it says that one can never have sufficient evidence for propositions that violate the SCT – no one is ever justified in believing that something rationally required is rationally forbidden. As Titelbaum puts it:

⁹ Titelbaum defends ERs of this general type, but he relies on the complete version of FPT, which is inadmissible at this stage of the dialectic, given the failure of his generalization of SCT.
“Ultimately, we need a story that squares the Akratic Principle with standard principles about belief support and justification. How is the justificatory map arranged such that one is never all-things-considered justified in both an attitude A and the belief that A is rationally forbidden in one’s current situation? The most obvious answer is that every agent possesses a priori, propositional justification for true beliefs about the requirements of rationality in her current situation. An agent can reflect on her situation and come to recognize facts about what that situation rationally requires. Not only can this reflection justify her in believing those facts; the resulting justification is also empirically indefeasible.” (Titelbaum 2015: 276)

In this quote, Titelbaum takes himself to have established FPT by way of AP. Since that argument fails, the hybrid theorist must be content with a more moderate claim. She can’t yet say that all false beliefs about what rationality requires are unjustified, only that beliefs that violate SCT are unjustified. However, Restricted ER is all the hybrid theorist needs at this stage. Beliefs that “fit” misleading higher-order evidence violate Restricted ER, since if one’s evidence conclusively support P, thereby making belief in P rationally required, Restricted ER implies that one can’t rationally believe that it’s rationally forbidden to believe P. However, as I’ll now argue, the restricted version of ER only allows the hybrid theorist to avoid problems where the misleading evidence directly supports belief in P and the belief that it is rationally required not to believe P. It does not rule cases where one is required, given one’s evidence, to believe not-P, yet has conclusive evidence for propositions that jointly entail that belief in P is rationally required. Each of these propositions satisfy Restricted ER, but the proposition they entail doesn’t.
I will call this phenomenon *indirectly misleading evidence*. It involves the following four elements:

1. A fact about what rationality requires of an agent in the situation under consideration.

2. A proposition P that is decisively supported by the agent’s evidence where P is such that belief in P does not violate any requirement of rationality.

3. A proposition Q that is decisively supported by the agent’s evidence where Q is such that belief in Q does not violate any requirement of rationality.

4. A proposition R that is jointly entailed by P and Q such that belief in R violates a requirement of rationality.

If indirectly misleading evidence is possible, hybrid theories are *prima facie* inconsistent with the following principle:

(Closure): If you rationally believe P, and rationally believe if P, then Q, then, if you competently deduce Q, you rationally believe Q.

It’s very plausible that rational belief is closed under competent deduction, at least in *most* cases. If I rationally believe that the carpet is green, and rationally believe that if X is green, X is colored, I’ll rationally believe that the carpet is colored if I competently infer, and thereby come to believe, that proposition from my beliefs. While counterexamples to Closure exist, most epistemologists agree that some restricted version of Closure is correct.\(^\text{10}\) However, given the possibility of indirectly misleading evidence, hybrid theories cannot validate

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\(^{10}\) For some of the familiar counterexamples, see below.
Closure, since, by the Special Case Thesis, it is irrational to believe that one is rationally required to believe P when one is, in fact, rationally required not to believe P. But in cases of indirectly misleading evidence, such beliefs can be obtained by competent deduction from rationally believed propositions, in which case Closure implies that they’re rational.

Here’s a possible case of indirectly misleading evidence. Recall the case of Petra, who is writing the preface to the book summarizing her scientific beliefs and the evidence supporting them. Suppose, as before, that Petra is currently considering whether she should believe that the main part of her book contains at least one falsehood. Suppose, further, that she realizes that she’s not sure how to answer this question. Finally, suppose that rationality requires that she believes that her book contains a falsehood. Petra isn’t aware of this latter fact – she has no beliefs at all about what it’s rational to believe or not believe in her situation. To figure out what she should think, she seeks out two epistemologists, each with superb credentials. They tell her the following:

(P1): You’re rationally permitted not to believe that the main part of your book contains a falsehood.

(P2): For any proposition P: If rationality permits you not to believe P, rationality requires you not to believe P.

We may assume that the restricted version of ER is triggered by excellent expert testimony – make the expert’s reliability as close to perfect as you’d like (short of making it perfect). If so, the epistemologists provide Petra with evidence that makes it rationally required for her to believe the claims they are asserting. Note, moreover, that neither asserts a claim that violates the Special Case Thesis. P1 is false, but as we saw in the previous section, SCT does not
imply that it’s irrational to believe that something forbidden is permitted. Thus, Petra can rationally believe that she’s permitted not to believe that the main part of the book contains a falsehood. P2 satisfies SCT as well: in the cases where it goes wrong, it’ll entail that something permitted is required, and SCT doesn’t apply to such mistakes.

If Petra rationally believes each epistemologist, she’s in a position to reason as follows:

(P1) For any proposition P: If rationality permits me to not believe P, rationality requires me to not believe P.

(P2): I’m rationally permitted not to believe that the main part of my book contains a falsehood.

(C): Therefore, I’m rationally required not to believe that the main part of my book contains a falsehood.

SCT implies that C isn’t rationally believable, since it says of something rationally required – Petra’s believing that the main part of her book contains a falsehood – that it’s rationally forbidden (if you’re rationally required not to believe P, you’re rationally forbidden from believing P).\(^\text{11}\) Nonetheless, nothing seems to rule out that Petra competently infers C from the P1 and P2. Then, since C was competently deduced from rationally believed premises, it follows from Closure that C is rationally believed. But if so, we’ve shown that Closure and AP are inconsistent: since the latter implies SCT, it also implies that C is not rationally believable.

\(^{11}\) If you think that this entailment isn’t obvious enough, assume that Petra can rationally believe that she’s rationally required not to believe that the main part of her book contains a falsehood, but that she can’t rationally believe – on the basis of a competent inference – that rationality prohibits believing that the main part of her book contains a falsehood. The argument goes through in either case, all that’s needed is to introduce a further (competent) inferential step.
whereas Closure implies that C is rationally believed. Thus, AP, the restricted ER, and Closure are jointly inconsistent. 12

In order to avoid this result, the hybrid theorist must give up or revise one of these three claims. In my view, rejecting Closure is a non-starter in this context. The literature is already filled with constraints on and exceptions to Closure. However, even when we take all of the known exceptions into account, SCT still conflicts with Closure in Petra’s case. For example, we could accept that Closure doesn’t apply to Moorean inferences like “I have hands; therefore, I’m not a brain-in-a-vat”, because Moorean inferences do not confer doxastic justification. This fact, in turn, might be explained by the fact that “I’m not a brain-in-a-vat” is a heavyweight proposition, whereas “I have hands” isn’t, or because there’s something fishy about the way the latter proposition supports the former. 13 Moreover, we could take other exceptions to Closure into account, such as the Lottery and Preface paradoxes (cf. Kyburg 1961 and Easwaran & Fitelson 2015), long deduction cases, where the reasoner’s inferential competence are less than perfectly reliable or he believes that are (Lasonen-Aarnio 2008; Schecter 2013), and certain inferences involving probabilities (Moretti & Piazza 2013). The problem for the hybrid theorist is simply that it’s clear that none of the exceptions to Closure apply in Petra’s case. So if she were to reject Closure on the basis of such cases, she’d find

12 Note that this situation is not a rational dilemma. It’s not the case that Petra is under conflicting rational requirements. Rather, we have two claims about rational belief that deliver contradictory verdicts about the status of Petra’s belief in C. Closure implies that it’s rational, and the Special Case Thesis implies that it’s not. If the former were a rational requirement, we’d have a dilemma, but we’re not assuming that it is.

13 For discussion of closure principles and Moorean inferences, see e.g. Wright 2002 and Tucker 2010.
herself committed to defending an entirely new class of counterexamples to Closure. There ought to be a better solution.\textsuperscript{14}

4. The \textit{de re} view of epistemic rationality

What options remain for a hybrid theorist who wants to resist the pressure to reject Closure? Note that it seems impossible to reconcile AP, ER, and Closure without endorsing FPT. For consider any condition C on rational beliefs about what rationality requires that doesn’t require that these beliefs be true. Call such conditions \textit{non-factive}. For any such non-factive condition, we can construct a case in which Petra rationally believes the premises in the example. As we’ve seen, if C is an evidential condition, we can construct a scenario in which there’s sufficient evidence for each of P1 and P2. If C is a non-factive competence condition, we can describe a case where Petra comes to believe P1 and P2 by competently treating a set of (apparent) facts to yield the relevant beliefs. If C is a reliability condition, we can describe a case where Petra comes to believe P1 and P2 by way of a reliable belief-forming process. And so on. Thus, there’s a strong case against any solution to the puzzle that doesn’t appeal to a factivity constraint on rational belief about what rationality requires. And such a constraint is exactly what the FPT posits, since it says that beliefs about what rationality requires are rational only if true.

\textsuperscript{14} The hybrid theorist could also get out of this pickle by denying that evidence is \textit{commutative}, i.e. that if you receive evidence E and evidence E’, the order in which E and E’ are received matters to what it’s rational to believe given both E and E’. In Petra’s case, for example, it might be rational to believe P1 after receiving testimony that P1 \textit{before} receiving testimony that P2, but not rational to believe P1 if one received testimony that P2 before receiving testimony that P1, and \textit{mutatis mutandis} for P2. This response strikes me as far-fetched, but it might be worth exploring.
We already know that AP can’t be used to establish the FPT. But there are other ways. Clayton Littlejohn (forthcoming) sketches a view of epistemic rationality that supports the FPT. According to Littlejohn, having false beliefs about what rationality requires is irrational in virtue of manifesting a lack of *de re* sensitivity to epistemic reasons, in a way that other false beliefs need not do.\(^{15}\)

The notion of sensitivity *de re* is taken from ethics, where it plays an important role in theories of morally worthy action and culpability (Arpaly 2002, Markovits 2010, Harman forthcoming). Being *de re* sensitive to moral reasons means caring about and being motivated by things that have genuine moral importance, such as the welfare of others.

On this kind of view, an agent manifests *de re* sensitivity by, for example, being moved to help an obviously destitute stranger by the fact that the stranger is destitute. Note that being *de re* sensitive doesn’t require *believing* that the fact that the stranger is destitute is a moral reason to help him, only being motivated to help by the fact that he’s destitute. Some go further. According to Harman (2015), having false moral beliefs is a sufficient condition for lacking *de re* sensitivity. On her view, a mafioso who kills his victims while being fully aware that they’re persons who’ll suffer – perhaps because he falsely believes that he has an

\(^{15}\) Just for good measure: Littlejohn’s view depends on the possibility of reducing claims about what rationality requires to claims about reasons, in the vein of Kolodny (2007). It would, presumably, be denied by those who adhere to coherence theories of rationality, like Broome (2013) and Brunero (2010).
overriding duty to his *Famiglia* – lacks genuine *de re* responsiveness. On Harman’s view, having this belief is already a moral failing, because lack of *de re* responsiveness to moral reasons is a moral failing.

According to Littlejohn, having false beliefs about what rationality requires shows that one lacks genuine sensitivity to epistemic reasons, and that one is thereby irrational. How can we establish such an idea in the epistemological domain? Littlejohn’s strategy consists in tying epistemic reasons to epistemic value. He writes (the phrase “mock insight” refers to false claims about what rationality requires):

“In the case of mock insight, you’re committing yourself to something perverse, something bad, something untoward and revealing that your values are out of line with the things that epistemology cares about. It’s perverse to care about things that epistemology takes to be worthless or to fail to respect the things that epistemology values and then to insist that you care about epistemology’s approval.” (Littlejohn forthcoming, p. 12-13)

For the record, Littlejohn assumes that the FPT is correct, and offers the *de re* view as a view of epistemic reasons that fits with it. Interestingly, however, Littlejohn’s view appears to support an argument for the FPT – one based on the idea that false beliefs about what rationality requires are irrational because *de re* unresponsive – that’s independent of there being an argument from AP to the thesis. For if the *de re* view is correct, it would be irrational to believe falsehoods about what rationality requires, no matter what rationality in fact requires. There would be no need to appeal to AP – the fact that false beliefs about what rationality requires are in irrational in virtue of being *de re* unresponsive is enough.

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16 Elsewhere, Littlejohn has defended the view that justified belief requires truth (Littlejohn 2012). As far as I can tell, his argument for the FPT does not depend on this view. After all, if rational belief requires truth, the FPT follows immediately; there would be no need to appeal to *de re* sensitivity.
However, using the *de re* view to argue for the FPT is problematic. Suppose, for simplicity, that epistemology cares exclusively about *truth*. This view is otherwise known as *veritism*.\(^{17}\) According to veritism, I have decisive reason to believe P if we have evidence that provides sufficient – and reliable – indication that P is true. If I believe that my evidence doesn’t support belief in the *de re* account implies that I’m irrational. Sufficiently reliable expert testimony that P is a strong and reliable indication that P. For this reason, the veritistic *de re* view implies that if I receive expert testimony that global warming is real, then, if I fail to believe that global warming is real, in spite of acknowledging that the testimony I receive is expert testimony, I’m irrational because I’m failing to respond to my epistemic reasons in a way that indicates that I don’t care about truth. This is so (or so I’ll assume) even if the experts, improbably, turn out to be wrong.

If this is correct, Petra’s case shows that there’s a tension in the *de re* view. For Petra receives excellent expert testimony that she’s rationally permitted not to believe that the main part of her book contains a falsehood. Since expert testimony is a reliable indication of truth, veritism appears to imply that she’d be irrational if she didn’t form the belief that she’s rationally permitted not to believe that the main part of her book contains a falsehood, because not forming that belief manifests a lack of concern for truth – in exactly the same way as refusing to believe in global warming after receiving expert testimony that it’s a real thing. But since it says that it’s irrational to believe falsehoods about what rationality requires, Littlejohn’s view implies that Petra would be irrational if she believes that she’s rationally permitted not to believe that the main part of her book contains a falsehood, since that proposition is a falsehood.

\(^{17}\) I only need the weaker claim that truth is among the epistemic values, but assuming epistemic value monism – that truth is the sole epistemic value - makes the argument that follows less complicated.
falsehood about what rationality requires; indeed, it would imply that she doesn’t have reasons to have this belief, in spite of receiving expert testimony. This leads to an unfortunate disparity in the view. The view that something – e.g. expert testimony – can provide epistemic reasons to believe a proposition in virtue of indicating that it’s true, except if the proposition in question is a falsehood about what rationality requires seems arbitrary. While the de re view may be a plausible view given the truth of the FPT, it’s far less persuasive as a premise in an independent argument for the FPT. While it may be possible to fix this problem – for example by following Titelbaum and claim that we have a priori and indefeasible propositional justification for believing truths about what rationality requires, it’s hard to see how epistemic value and epistemic rationality could be connected in a way that supports such a conclusion. The hybrid theorist would be better off with another solution.

5. Uniqueness and Doxastic Uniqueness

There’s another option. The hybrid theorist can also argue for the FPT by endorsing coherence requirements that are logically stronger than AP. Consider:

Doxastic Uniqueness (DU): Rationality requires of S that S: takes D to P and believe that it’s rationally permissible not to take D to P.

Prima facie, DU is quite plausible. Roger White (2005) argues that you can’t rationally believe that P while believing that it’d be equally rational of you not to believe P. He compares your situation to someone who has taken a pill that has a 50% chance of causing

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18 Titelbaum (2015) suggests that the view of justification defended by Feldman (2005) and Smithies (2012) also supports the FPT. On this view, one can’t be justified in believing that one is unjustified in believing P if one is, in fact, justified in believing P. Both Feldman and Smithies rely on a principle like AP to establish their views, so they’ll presumably face a version of the problem raised in the previous section.

you to form the doxastic attitude your evidence supports, and claims that in those cases, you can’t rationally hold on to your current doxastic attitude:

“(…) if I have concluded on the basis of the evidence that Smith is guilty, my conviction should be undermined if I really think that a belief in Smith’s innocence is also rationally permissible in the light of this evidence. For if I believe this, then I should judge myself no more likely to have arrived at the truth than a random pill-popper. (…) That is, believing P is not rationally compatible with believing that one could just as rationally have believed not-P given the same evidence.” (White 2005: 450)

If White’s point generalizes to doxastic attitudes besides belief, you can’t rationally take D to P and believe that it’s rationally permissible not to do so.20 Thus, it appears, we have reasons to accept DU.

At first glance, DU appears to solve most of the hybrid theorist’s problems. First, it gives her an analogue of the No Way Argument for permissive mistakes. (To see how this argument goes, one only needs to substitute “permitted not to” for “required not to” in the original No Way Out argument.) Moreover, Doxastic Uniqueness entails AP, for if it’s irrational to take D to P and believe that it’s permissible not to take D to P, it must also be irrational to take D to P and believe that it’s required not to take D to P. Thus, it rules out permissive mistakes, and

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20 Cohen’s version of DU applies explicitly to credences.
therefore eliminates one of the features we needed to generate cases of indirectly misleading evidence.

However, DU has awkward consequences. For it is compatible with the doctrine of permissivism, according to which there are situations in which rationality permits you to believe P and not believe P.\textsuperscript{21} If permissivism is true, Doxastic Uniqueness implies that there are true beliefs about what rationality requires that we can’t rationally hold. For suppose that you’re in a situation that permits belief in P and permits belief in not-P. Then DU implies that if you believe P, you can’t rationally believe that you’re rationally permitted to believe not-P. But it’s true that you’re rationally permitted to believe not-P. So there are true propositions about what rationality requires that you can’t rationally believe.

If permissivism is true, moreover, Doxastic Uniqueness is inconsistent with deductive closure for rational belief in true propositions (and, presumably, with deductive closure for knowledge, since what can be truly believed can also be known under the right circumstances\textsuperscript{22}). Suppose that you are in a permissive case, and that you have sufficient evidence for the true propositions P1, P2, and P3, from which you competently deduce C1 and C2:

\[(P1): P.\]

\textsuperscript{21} As White (2005) remarks, Doxastic Uniqueness expresses the idea that believing that you’re in a permissive case is “epistemically disastrous” rather than the idea that there can’t be permissive cases. \textsuperscript{22} Ignoring Fitch-style cases.
(P2): If I’m in circumstances C, I’m rationally permitted to believe P and rationally permitted to believe not-P.

(P3): I’m in circumstances C.

(C1): Therefore, I’m rationally permitted to believe P and rationally permitted to believe not-P.

(C2): Therefore, P, and I’m rationally permitted to believe P and rationally permitted to believe not-P.

By Doxastic Uniqueness, you can’t rationally believe C2, even though it’s true, since you would fall prey to the version of the No Way Out argument that Doxastic Uniqueness entails. But that deductive closure can fail for competent inferences from true and rationally believed premises is incredible. If the hybrid theorist wanted to appeal to DU in order to avoid having to give up Closure, she can’t be content with this result.23

This problem only arises if we grant the possibility of permissive cases: cases in which more than one doxastic attitude is rationally permitted. This points to a natural solution - denying that permissive cases are possible. Doing so is equivalent to endorsing:

Uniqueness: No body of evidence permits more than one doxastic attitude toward any given proposition.24

Since the tension between Doxastic Uniqueness and Closure arose from the fact that there are permissive cases, the hybrid theorist is forced to endorse Uniqueness in order to retain EN,

23 Again, both long deductions by self-aware and less than perfectly reliable reasoners and Neo-Moorean deduction may be exceptions. But, again, the present example involves no such factors. 24 White (2005), Feldman (2007), and Matheson (2011) all endorse Uniqueness.
AP, and Closure. Once she does so, however, her view entails FPT, since DU and Uniqueness jointly entail that beliefs about what’s rationally required are either true or irrational, by the No Way Out argument. For since only one doxastic attitude towards some proposition is permitted in any situation, the No Way Argument will apply to all false beliefs about what rationality requires, since these beliefs will be ruled out by DU (in the case of permissive mistakes) or by SCT (in the case of strict mistakes). Thus, endorsing Uniqueness and Doxastic Uniqueness allows the hybrid theorist to avoid paradox in cases of both directly and indirectly misleading higher-order evidence.

6. The hybrid view and its discontents

This solution comes at a price. Many epistemologists believe, following William James, that epistemically rational agents have to balance two conflicting goals: believing truths and avoiding belief in falsehoods. How they strike the balance determine how epistemically risk-seeking they are. Agents who value believing the truth more highly than avoiding falsehood will be risk-seeking: they will tend to be more confident that P given E than agents who are risk-averse and value avoidance of false beliefs more than believing truths. As Kelly (2013) points out, Uniqueness implies that there must be a uniquely correct balance between the Jamesian goals in any given situation. For example, if Petra is risk-seeking and Steve is risk-averse, Petra might be highly confident that P, given some evidence E, and Steve might only moderately confident that P, given E. If Uniqueness is true, at most one of them has the right credence. Since their credences are informed by the way they balance the Jamesian goals, at most only one of them can have done so correctly. Epistemologists of a Jamesian stripe will

want to avoid this consequence, and therefore resist solving the problem of indirectly misleading evidence by endorsing DU and Uniqueness.\textsuperscript{26}

Uniqueness has another troubling feature: it is only available to a minority of epistemological views. As Ballantyne and Coffman (2011) show, Uniqueness rules out a large number of views about justified and/or rational belief. They include coherentism, reliabilism, and views that allow for pragmatic encroachment (à la Fantl & McGrath 2009). Consider, for example, reliabilism, which says that a belief is justified if it was produced by a reliably truth-conducive psychological process and is undefeated. It’s conceivable that an agent who possesses evidence E would justifiably believe P were she to apply process P1 to E, and that another agent who also possesses E could justifiably not believe P were she to apply process P2 to E. But that contradicts Uniqueness.\textsuperscript{27} Similarly, theories on which pragmatic factors help determine the level of evidential support required for rational belief for some subject S are inconsistent with Uniqueness, since it’s possible for one subject to have evidence E at time $t_1$ and at time $t_2$ yet for it to be true at $t_1$ that S can rationally believe P on the basis of E, but false at $t_2$ that S can rationally believe P, since the practical stakes may have changed in the interval between $t_1$ and $t_2$, without there having been any change in S’s evidential situation.

\textsuperscript{26} Though see Levinstein (2015) for several interesting arguments against permissive views. 
\textsuperscript{27} Perhaps Uniqueness will be made consistent with reliabilism if we only adopt a so-called intrapersonal version, according to which E can render no more than one doxastic attitude rational for a single subject. However, it seems conceivable that at least some (simple) forms of reliabilism will allow there to be more than one reliable process, call them P1 and P2, available to a single subject S such that if S were to apply P1, she would believe P, whereas if S were to apply P2, she would suspend judgment on whether P. If so, even intrapersonal Uniqueness is inconsistent with reliabilism.
Indeed, if Ballantyne and Coffman are right, only three known views about justification are consistent with Uniqueness: the *knowledge-first* view of Williamson (2000), a Fumerton-style acquaintance-based view (Fumerton 1995), and *evidentialist internalism*, according to which you’re justified in having doxastic attitude D only if D fits your evidence, where your evidence consists of internalistically accessible phenomenal facts (Conee & Feldman 1985). As Ballantyne and Coffman conclude (they call Uniqueness “U”):

> Anyone with good reason to believe U will (...) be poised to resolve some persistent debates over the nature of evidence and rationality. But then you’ll need a strong argument for U to be justified in believing it. (Ballantyne & Coffman 2011, p. 8)

If this is correct, hybrid theorists who want to solve the problem of indirectly misleading evidence must be willing to resolve, for example, the debate between reliabilists and evidentialists, and between pragmatists and non-pragmatists. That makes it a more elusive theoretical option than we might have expected. Theorists who reject evidentialism - either for pragmatic reasons or because they prefer some externalist account of rational belief - thus have reasons to give up the hybrid view. Thus, while it’s *possible* to solve both the problem of directly misleading higher-order evidence and the problem of indirectly misleading higher-order evidence, this solution is only available to some epistemologists.

However, even epistemologists who reject Uniqueness can draw a general lesson from the arguments presented here. If we think of theories of rationality as packages of claims about what rationality requires, we should not think of such packages as something we can accept independently of taking a stand on which substantive epistemological views we consider viable. For if ER, Closure and AP are only consistent on views that endorse Uniqueness,
having all of three principles requires us to take on serious commitments about which overall epistemological theory is correct. By endorsing specific claims about what rationality requires, we may commit ourselves to, say, specific resolutions to the debate between internalists and externalists or that between pragmatists and intellectualists. This, I think, is a significant result in its own right, and one epistemologists would do well to take seriously.

The theory of epistemic rationality can’t be – as the theory of practical rationality was sometimes thought to be – common ground between otherwise competing epistemological theories, for depending on its content, it will rule some epistemological theories in, and others out. Deciding what the correct theory of rationality looks like determines what we can say about other fundamental issues in epistemology, and deciding what we want to say about fundamental issues in epistemology determines what we can say about the requirements of rationality.

7. Conclusion

I have argued for three claims. First, I argued that the hybrid theorist can’t derive the Fixed Point Thesis from the irrationality of epistemic akrasia, but that she’s nonetheless able to respond to the problem of directly misleading-higher order evidence. I then argued that she faces a different problem – the problem of indirectly misleading evidence, and that she will ultimately have to choose between rejecting Closure and giving up Uniqueness to maintain her view. Finally, I argued that since the latter option is only available to some epistemological views – evidentialists and knowledge-firsters – how the hybrid theorist responds to the problem of indirectly misleading evidence will impose tight constraints on her
overall theory-choice in epistemology. I expect that the is true of other combinations of rational requirements. Investigating whether this expectation matches reality is, however, a task for another time.

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