

# The Explanatory Role of Consistency Requirements

Marc-Kevin Daoust, Université de Montréal ([marc-kevin.daoust@umontreal.ca](mailto:marc-kevin.daoust@umontreal.ca))

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**Abstract:** Is epistemic inconsistency a mere symptom of having violated other requirements of rationality—notably, reasons-responsiveness requirements? Or is inconsistency irrational on its own? This question has important implications for the debate on the normativity of epistemic rationality. In this paper, I defend a new account of the explanatory role of the requirement of epistemic consistency. Roughly, I will argue that, in cases where an epistemically rational agent is permitted to believe *P* and also permitted to disbelieve *P* (relative to a body of epistemic reasons), the consistency requirement plays a distinct explanatory role. I will also argue that such a type of permissiveness is a live possibility when it comes to rational epistemic standards.

**Keywords:** rationality, consistency, epistemic reasons, requirements, permissiveness

Linda believes that *P* and she also believes that  $\sim P$ . She displays a kind of epistemic irrationality—she is inconsistent. Here is how we can define the requirement she violates:

**Consistency.** Rationality requires that, if *A* believes that *P* at time *t*, *A* does not believe  $\sim P$  at time *t*.

Now, *why* is Linda irrational? Does her violating Consistency *explain* why she is irrational? Perhaps her inconsistency is just a *symptom* or a *by-product* of her having violated other requirements of epistemic rationality. Indeed, there are two main explanations of why Linda is irrational:

**Structural Rationality Thesis.** Epistemic rationality does not consist in responding to epistemic reasons one has. It has to do with structural requirements such as Consistency. So, Consistency has a distinct explanatory role: Linda is irrational in believing *P* and believing  $\sim P$  because she violates Consistency.<sup>1</sup>

**Strong Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis.** Epistemic rationality consists in responding to epistemic reasons one has. No body of epistemic reasons can simultaneously support the belief that *P* and the belief that  $\sim P$ . So, requirements such as Consistency have no distinct

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<sup>1</sup> Broome (2013, Chapter 5) denies that rationality consists in responding to reasons that there are or that one has. Worsnip (2015; 2016) argues that, since requirements of epistemic coherence and requirements of reasons-responsiveness can conflict, they should be theorized independently of each other.

explanatory role: Linda is irrational in believing P and believing  $\sim$ P because she is not responding correctly to her epistemic reasons.<sup>2</sup>

The above responses have important implications for the debate surrounding the *normativity* of epistemic rationality. Some authors such as Kolodny (2005; 2007b; 2008b) have suggested that there is no reason to be consistent (at least, offering a convincing argument in favour of the normativity of Consistency has proved to be very difficult). However, if Consistency is a mere by-product of other requirements such as responding correctly to epistemic reasons, there is no need to discuss the normativity of Consistency, since this requirement of epistemic rationality would have no distinct explanatory role.

This paper argues that neither the Structural Requirement Thesis nor the Strong Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis is correct. First, I will argue that the Structural Rationality Thesis can't explain ordinary cases of irrationality. Then, I will argue that the Strong Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis has a major blind spot—that is, it assumes that a specific type of permissiveness (or permissivism) concerning epistemic reasons is false. Ultimately, I will argue that Consistency provides an explanation of why agents are irrational in cases where both believing P and disbelieving P are warranted by a body of epistemic reasons. In other words, I will argue for the following view:

**Modest Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis.** Rationality consists (in part) in responding to reasons one has. No *impermissible* body of epistemic reasons supports both the beliefs that P and that  $\sim$ P. So, Consistency plays no distinct explanatory role *in impermissible situations*. However, in cases where both believing P and disbelieving P are warranted by a body of epistemic reasons, Consistency plays a distinct explanatory role.

In section 1, I will offer a brief overview of the debate surrounding the explanatory role of Consistency. In section 2, I will argue that the Structural Rationality Thesis is unsatisfactory. However, this will not lead me to endorse the Strong Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis. In section 3, I will explain why the Strong Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis presupposes that agents never find themselves in epistemically permissive situations, which is an important blind spot. I will

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2 This strategy has been pursued by Way (2009), McHugh and Way (2017), Kiesewetter (2017, Chapter 7) and Lord (2017). From an “internalist” perspective, such a view amounts to substantive internal coherence requirements between (i) *a priori* knowledge and phenomenal experiences and (ii) beliefs or credences—see Wedgwood (2017, sec. 0.5). See also Schroeder (2008; 2011). In the practical realm, the view that rationality consists in responding to reasons one has is often associated with Raz (1999; 2005).

then argue in favour of the Modest Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis. In section 4, I will refine my view in response to Kolodny’s decision-theoretic argument.

For the sake of brevity, this paper will make a few assumptions. First, I will not be concerned with group agentivity—I will focus on the explanatory role of Consistency in intrapersonal cases. Some interesting arguments have been developed by Buchak and Pettit (2015) and Hedden (forthcoming) on Consistency and group agentivity. Unfortunately, this issue requires extensive separate treatment, which is why I can’t address it here. Second, I will focus on cases where P’s truth is “mind-independent.” Some arguments in favour of permissiveness concern cases where believing P guarantees P’s truth (Kopec 2015; Raleigh 2015). Such cases are interesting, but they have little to do with the debate surrounding the explanatory role of Consistency.<sup>3</sup> So, I will ignore this possibility here. Third, while this paper argues that permissiveness is a live possibility, it does not provide a conclusive argument for or against the existence of epistemically permissive situations (this issue is very complex and calls for separate articles).<sup>4</sup> Readers who think that permissiveness is implausible can conditionalize the argument of this paper as follows: provided that there are epistemically permissive situations, the Modest Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis is correct.

## 1. The Debate Surrounding the Explanatory Role of Consistency

### 1.1. Consistency, Coherence and Elimination

Consistency is a structural requirement of epistemic rationality. There are other putative structural requirements of rationality, as expressed by the following:

**Intra-Level Coherence.** Rationality requires that, if A believes that P<sub>1</sub>, believes that P<sub>2</sub>, ... and believes that P<sub>n</sub>, then it is false that A believes that  $\sim(P_1 \wedge P_2 \dots \wedge P_n)$ .<sup>5</sup>

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3 Specifically, much of the debate has to do with the fact that Consistency is not “truth-conducive” (see section 1.2). Naturally, such an objection is pointless in cases where believing P guarantees that P will be true.

4 I discuss recent arguments for and against permissiveness in Daoust (2017; 2018b; Forthcoming).

5 The rational status of Intra-Level Coherence is contentious. Specifically, some solutions to the Lottery Paradox entail that Intra-Level Coherence is not a genuine requirement of epistemic rationality. See notably Demey (2013), Foley (2009) and Sturgeon (2008). See Daoust (2018b) for discussion of the relationship between Intra-Level and Inter-Level Coherence.

**Inter-Level Coherence.** Rationality requires that, if A believes that he or she has sufficient epistemic reason to believe P, then A believes that P.<sup>6</sup>

By way of contrast, there are putative *substantive* requirements of epistemic rationality, which govern how agents form and revise their beliefs in response to their epistemic reasons.<sup>7</sup> Now, there are important debates surrounding the nature of epistemic reasons. Specifically, there is ample disagreement over whether epistemic reasons are propositions, facts, apparent facts, mental states or facts concerning mental states.<sup>8</sup> This is not a debate that I wish to address here. Let's just say that there is *one* interpretation of reasons that has something to do with rationality, and this is the interpretation that I am interested in (more on this issue in section 2).

Since there are many plausible requirements of rationality, perhaps Consistency is just a by-product of these other substantive requirements of rationality. Call this the Elimination thesis, expressed as follows:<sup>9</sup>

**Elimination.** Necessarily, if an agent takes inconsistent attitudes towards P at time t, then he or she violates a substantive requirement of epistemic rationality other than Consistency. In other words, Consistency plays no distinct explanatory role in theories of epistemic rationality.

A quick clarificatory remark: I here insist on the notion of “*distinct* explanatory role.” Violating Consistency could be part of an explanation of why, in a given situation, an agent is epistemically irrational without being the *only* explanation of why an agent is epistemically irrational. For example, in some situations where an agent is inconsistent, there could be multiple sufficient

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6 As with Intra-Level Coherence, the rational status of Inter-Level Coherence is also contentious. For example, Coates (2012) and Lasonen-Aarnio (2014; 2015; m.s.) have argued that responding correctly to one's reasons sometimes entail believing “P, but I have sufficient epistemic reason not to believe P”, which is an incoherent combination of attitudes. They conclude that such incoherence is not necessarily irrational. See Greco (2014), Horowitz (2014a), Kiesewetter (2016), Littlejohn (2015), Titelbaum (2015) and Worsnip (2015) for various responses to this view. See also Daoust (2018b).

7 See Way (2009), McHugh and Way (2017), Kiesewetter (2017, chap. 7) or Lord (2017).

8 I wish to remain neutral towards these interpretations of what epistemic reasons are. See Sylvan (2016a; 2016b) for an overview of this debate.

I am glossing over many other subtleties here. Agents might be required to respond correctly to their epistemic reasons insofar as other conditions are fulfilled, such as caring about P, explicitly wondering whether P, considering that P is not a pointless proposition, and the like. For the sake of simplicity, I will assume in the remainder of this paper that such conditions are always fulfilled. There is also an important debate about what it means to *have* a reason. This is an orthogonal issue that I do not wish to address here. See notably Schroeder (2008; 2011) and Lord (2010) for various responses to this problem.

9 Broome (2005; 2007a; 2007b; 2013, Chapter 5) and Worsnip (2015) reject Elimination. Kolodny (2005; 2007a; 2007b) rejects Elimination insofar as rationality does not consist in responding to reasons one has. However, Kolodny thinks that reasonable agents are necessarily consistent. See Buchak and Pettit (2015), Guindon (2014; 2016) and Reisner (2011) for discussion. See also Kolodny (2008a; 2008b) and Raz (2005, p. 6) for discussion related to the practical realm.

explanations of why he or she is irrational.<sup>10</sup> Still, I am not interested in putative cases where an agent's irrationality is overdetermined. As long as inconsistent agents violate requirements of rationality other than Consistency, we can provide an explanation of why they are irrational without referring to Consistency, which supports Elimination.

The Structural Rationality Thesis entails the denial of Elimination, while the Strong Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis entails Elimination. Here is why.

If the Structural Rationality Thesis is correct, we can't explain away requirements like Consistency, because there are no other requirements susceptible of explaining why inconsistent agents are irrational. So, Elimination must be false. By contrast, defenders of the Strong Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis think that there are other requirements of epistemic rationality susceptible of vindicating Elimination, such as responding correctly to epistemic reasons one has. According to the Strong Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis, epistemic reasons can't simultaneously warrant the belief that P and the belief that  $\sim$ P. This means that one is never simultaneously permitted to believe P and to disbelieve P. So, if one simultaneously believes P and  $\sim$ P, one has necessarily failed to respond to one's epistemic reasons. Hence, Elimination is entailed by the Strong Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis.

### *1.2. Implications in the Debate Surrounding the Normativity of Epistemic Rationality*

Before I present my argument, I wish to explain briefly how the issue of the explanatory role played by Consistency is connected to broader debates concerning the normativity of epistemic rationality. Of course, the explanatory role of Consistency can be determined independently of how we solve such normative debates. I merely wish to highlight that the explanatory role of Consistency has broader normative implications.

According to Kolodny, what matters from an epistemic point of view is acquiring true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs. In other words, he endorses value monism, the view roughly stating that only true beliefs are inherently valuable and only false beliefs are inherently disvaluable. However, satisfying Consistency does not guarantee a better ratio of true to false beliefs. Kolodny summarizes his "teleological" argument in the following way:

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<sup>10</sup> Fogal (m.s.) endorses such a view.

From the standpoint of theoretical deliberation—which asks ‘What ought I to believe?’—what ultimately matters is simply what is likely to be true, given what there is to go on.... [But] formal coherence may as soon lead one away from, as toward, the true and the good. Thus, if someone asks from the deliberative standpoint ‘What is there to be said for making my attitudes formally coherent as such?’ there seems, on reflection, no satisfactory answer. (Kolodny 2007a, p. 231)

In accordance with the above remarks, determining the explanatory role of Consistency has implications for the debate surrounding the normativity of rationality. For instance, those who endorse the Strong Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis can gladly acknowledge that Consistency is not a normative requirement of epistemic rationality, but since such a requirement plays no distinct explanatory role in theories of epistemic rationality, they *do not have to* explain the normative significance of such a requirement. In contrast, those who endorse the Structural Rationality Thesis face a challenge. Either they must admit that epistemic rationality is not normative, or they have to explain why Kolodny’s teleological argument is misleading.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Against the Structural Rationality Thesis

I will start by analyzing the Structural Rationality Thesis. On such a view, epistemic rationality has nothing to do with responding correctly to epistemic reasons one has. Rather, it has to do with structural constraints such as Intra-Level Coherence, Inter-Level Coherence or Consistency.

First, a clarificatory remark: the distinction between structural and substantive accounts of epistemic rationality might be merely terminological. For instance, defenders of the Structural Rationality Thesis could very well acknowledge that there is a more substantive sense of what rationality consists in, but prefer to use the term in a narrower (or minimal) sense. As Worsnip indicates:<sup>12</sup>

[Several structuralists] are happy to acknowledge that there’s a potentially legitimate usage of ‘requirement of rationality’ whereby there are requirements of rationality to respond appropriately to reasons; still, they don’t want to lose sight of the

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11 Some deny that epistemic norms have to do with the goals of getting true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs. See the debate between Berker (2013a; 2013b; 2015) and Goldman (1986; 2015). Others admit that explaining the normativity of Consistency is an important challenge. See, for instance, Broome (2008; 2013, Chapter 11) and Way (2009; 2010).

12 See Scanlon (1998, pp. 23–30) on a similar point.

fundamental distinction Broome is after, and so they use ‘requirement of rationality’ in a narrower way to refer only to requirements pertaining to rationally (im)permissible combinations of attitudes. (Worsnip 2018, p. 63)

If the distinction between structural and substantive rationality is merely terminological, then all I can say is that I am interested in the substantive usage of epistemic rationality. Specifically, I am interested in ordinary types of epistemic irrationality that a structuralist can’t explain. For instance, consider the following case:

**Planet of the Ricks.** Rick believes that, if the theory of evolution is true, then some great grandfathers of human children were apes. However, he claims that no great grandfather of human children was an ape. This leads him to conclude that the theory of evolution is false. Rick’s reasoning is perfectly *valid*. His beliefs are perfectly *consistent*. Even better: his beliefs satisfy Inter-Level Coherence and Intra-Level Coherence! Still, Rick has numerous salient perceptions and memories indicating that his reasoning is based on wildly implausible premises. For example, Rick has heard a very large number of arguments against his premise that, if the theory of evolution is true, then some great grandfathers of human children were apes. While he remembers most of these arguments, *Rick simply ignores them*.

Let’s ignore all the other attitudes Rick might have and evaluate his rationality with respect to his beliefs, perceptions and memories mentioned in the above case. In a structuralist framework, then, Rick appears to be epistemically rational. After all, his beliefs are jointly consistent, he satisfies all formal coherence requirements of rationality (such as Intra-Level Coherence or Inter-Level Coherence), and responding to reasons such as salient perceptions is not rationally required. However, I take it as a datum that Rick is a textbook case of irrationality in the ordinary (or broad) sense. He is a paragon of dogmatism or delusion. If this is correct, Rick’s irrationality has to be explained in terms of his failure to respond to his reasons. This is why I am inclined to endorse the broader usage of the concept of epistemic rationality, which has something to do with responding to reasons one has.

The structuralist could then reply that Rick violates Inter-Level Coherence. Indeed, perhaps Rick believes that the arguments he has heard are conclusive. In such a case, Rick would believe that there is a conclusive epistemic reason against some of his first-order beliefs, which violates Inter-Level Coherence.<sup>13</sup> However, we need not make such an assumption. Perhaps Rick

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<sup>13</sup> Alternatively, perhaps Rick believes that the arguments he has heard are inconclusive. In such a case, one could argue that his belief “screens the epistemic reasons,” in the sense that such a higher-order belief defeats or undermines the arguments he has heard.

has heard a very large number of arguments against his premise without forming a higher-order judgment concerning the conclusiveness of such arguments. Rick can't violate Inter-Level Coherence if he doesn't entertain higher-order beliefs concerning the conclusiveness of his epistemic reasons.

Now, the problem is that some philosophers do not think that the distinction between structural and substantive epistemic rationality is merely terminological. A well-known defense of the severe separation between reasons and rationality can be found in Broome's *Rationality Through Reasoning* (Broome 2013, Chapter 5). Broome denies that responding correctly to reasons one has is a necessary or a sufficient condition for being rational.<sup>14</sup> Broome first presents his "quick objection": while reasons agents have might require them to believe P, if they *ignore* that their reasons require them to believe P, it is not irrational for them not to believe P (Broome 2013, pp. 74–78). In such a case, Broome thinks that agents are not rationally required to believe P, since ignorance of reasons is a rational excuse for not believing P. This means that responding correctly to reasons is not required for being rational.

Broome then considers the possibility that rationality has to do with responding to a specific class of reasons—namely, *attitudinal* reasons. By attitudinal reasons, Broome means "reasons that consist in attitudes" (Broome 2013, p. 75). After all, considering such a possibility is in accordance with Broome's view that rationality supervenes on mental states (Broome 2013, pp. 89, 151). However, Broome thinks that, in some situations, responding to attitudinal reasons leads to bootstrapping. Even if an agent believes P and  $(\sim P \vee Q)$ , this does not give him or her a reason to believe Q. For instance, an agent could have no epistemic reason in favour of his or her beliefs that P and  $(\sim P \vee Q)$ . In such a context, in believing P and  $(\sim P \vee Q)$ , a reason in favour of Q would appear *out of nowhere*. Broome takes such a bootstrapping result to be nonsensical (Broome 2013, pp. 81–82). This leads him to deny that (i) rationality is identical to responding correctly to attitudinal reasons one has and (ii) responding correctly to attitudinal reasons one has is sufficient for being rational.<sup>15</sup>

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14 As noted by Kiesewetter (2017, pp. 161–62), Broome sometimes conflate (i) responding to reasons there are with (ii) responding to reasons one has. I here assume that Broome means "responding to reasons one has".

15 A quick clarificatory remark: it is still unclear whether Broome's argument is compatible with the claim that if an agent is rational, then he or she has responded correctly to his or her attitudinal reasons (this is what he calls "Limited Entailment"). On page 79, he claims that his objection from bootstrapping does not affect Limited Entailment, but on page 82 he claims to have shown that Limited Entailment is empty.

I'll make two brief remarks on Broome's argument against the connection between reasons and rationality. First, Broome's quick objection could be avoided by making a distinction between available and unavailable reasons. Indeed, substantive theories of epistemic rationality claim that rational agents respond to reasons available to them. While one could be rational in ignoring unavailable reasons, it is far less clear that one is rational in ignoring available reasons. Suppose that Rick has no evidence that his perception is flawed and that his perceiving a dog in front of him is maximally salient (in the sense that he is currently unable to think about anything else). Plausibly, in such a context, Rick's belief that there is no dog in front of him would be irrational, notably because the reasons against such a conclusion are salient and available to him.

The problem is that the notion of ignorance is unclear in Broome's argument. Ignorance can refer to the lack of access to information, but it can also refer to something intentional such as the refusal to take notice of information. If the reasons are outside one's ken (in the sense that one lacks access to the reasons), one is not required to respond to such reasons because one *doesn't have* such reasons. But if the reasons are within one's ken, ignoring the reasons (in the sense that one refuses to take notice of the information) is not rationally excusable. For instance, it is not rationally excusable for Rick to ignore the reasons that are available to him.

Second, in evaluating whether rationality consists in responding to attitudinal reasons, Broome considers only one class of attitudes—namely, beliefs. The problem is that there are other attitudes that could count as reasons. Phenomenal experiences (such as perceptions, memories, seemings, insights, emotions and the like) could be legitimate attitudinal reasons. Broome does not rule out the view that rationality has to do with responding to phenomenal experiences. This means that, even if Broome is right about responding correctly to beliefs, rationality could nevertheless have to do with responding to other attitudinal reasons.

In summary, structuralists cannot explain why dogmatism and delusion are epistemically irrational. Since I am interested in a broad notion of epistemic rationality, which should be able to explain why dogmatism and delusion are irrational, I do not endorse the Structural Rationality Thesis. Furthermore, Broome's argument for the separation between reasons and rationality is inconclusive. His claim that ignorance of reasons provides rational excuses does not entail that reasons and rationality belong to separate normative domains.

### 3. A Blind Spot in the Strong Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis

The Structural Rationality Thesis cannot explain ordinary cases of epistemic irrationality. However, this doesn't mean that we should endorse the Strong Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis. Defenders of such a view assume that, since epistemic rationality consists in responding correctly to epistemic reasons one has, Consistency plays no distinct explanatory role in theories of epistemic rationality. I will argue that such an assumption is mistaken. The fact that epistemic rationality has to do with responding correctly to epistemic reasons one has merely entails that Consistency plays no distinct explanatory role *in cases where epistemic reasons are impermissible*. So, defenders of the Strong Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis assume that a specific type of permissiveness is false, which is far from obvious.

Here is how I will proceed. First, I will introduce Reasons Permissiveness and explain why there is an essential connection between the extreme version of Permissiveness and Elimination. Then, I will explain why the possibility of permissive epistemic reasons is a blind spot in the Strong Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis.

#### 3.1. Moderate and Extreme Reasons Permissiveness

Evidential Permissiveness roughly states that, relative to a given body of evidence, it can be epistemically rational for A to believe P and not to believe P.<sup>16</sup> While this paper is strongly inspired by the literature on Evidential Permissiveness, I am not interested in the normative status of Evidentialism. So instead of focusing on an agent's evidence, I will rather focus on an agent's epistemic reasons.<sup>17</sup> Reasons permissiveness is to epistemic reasons what evidential permissiveness is to evidence. In view of the foregoing, Reasons Permissiveness would roughly state that, relative to a body of epistemic reasons, it can be epistemically rational for A to believe P and not to believe P.

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16 See Kopec and Titelbaum (2016), White (2005; 2014) and Kelly (2014) and for an overview of the debate surrounding the evidential interpretations of Permissiveness. A quick clarificatory remark: Evidential Permissiveness can also apply to situations where multiple epistemically rational agents who share the same evidence are permitted to take distinct incompatible attitudes towards P. But as I indicated in the introduction, this paper will be concerned with intrapersonal cases only.

17 See Littlejohn (2012) or Owens (2002) on why there could be a distinction between epistemic reasons and evidence. I here remain neutral on whether such a distinction is correct. And again, in this paper, I leave aside the debate surrounding the nature of epistemic reasons. As I indicated in section 1, there must be at least one understanding of reasons that has something to do with rationality.

As noted by White, there is a moderate and an extreme sense in which evidence can be permissive (White 2005, secs. 2–4). Relative to a body of evidence, it could be rational for one to believe P and also *not to believe* P, but it could also be rational for one to believe P and to *disbelieve* P, which is logically stronger. Indeed, it is possible not to believe P while not disbelieving P (notably by withholding judgment on whether P). Following White’s distinction between moderate and extreme Evidential Permissiveness, we can distinguish moderate and extreme versions of Reasons Permissiveness, as follows:<sup>18</sup>

**Moderate Reasons Permissiveness.** Relative to a body of epistemic reasons, A can be rationally permitted to believe P and not to believe P.

**Extreme Reasons Permissiveness.** Relative to a body of epistemic reasons, A can be rationally permitted to believe P and to believe  $\sim$ P.

I will soon argue that *Extreme* Reasons Permissiveness holds if and only if Elimination is implausible. For now, I will explain why Moderate Reasons Permissiveness is compatible with Elimination.

Moderate versions of Permissiveness are inconclusive for establishing the explanatory role of Consistency. Consistency is about maintaining specific combination of attitudes. Moderate reasons permissiveness merely permits an agent to believe P and not to hold this attitude. However, an attitude and the *absence* of an attitude cannot be jointly inconsistent, since consistency governs combinations of attitudes. Since I am interested in situations where an agent is rationally permitted to hold jointly inconsistent attitudes, moderate permissive situations are not sufficient for rejecting Elimination.

Furthermore, Consistency will not play any explanatory role here, since it is *metaphysically* (or logically) impossible for an agent to believe P and not to believe P simultaneously. Given this, moderate permissive situations cannot prove that Elimination is false. Here is why. Recall that Elimination is a conditional: if an agent holds incompatible attitudes towards P at time t, then he or she violates a requirement of epistemic rationality other than Consistency. However, since it is *metaphysically impossible* for an agent to believe P and not to

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<sup>18</sup> Obviously, since evidence appears to be the main type of epistemic reason, there is a close connection between Reasons Permissiveness and Evidential Permissiveness. Specifically, if epistemic reasons are permissive, this probably means that evidence is permissive. Nevertheless, I prefer to distinguish the two views and focus on the former.

believe P simultaneously, this means that the antecedent of Elimination will never obtain in moderate permissive situations. In other words, since it is impossible to believe P and not to believe P simultaneously, it is impossible to satisfy the antecedent of Elimination with such a combination of attitudes. If the antecedent of a conditional is always false, then the conditional is trivially true. So again, moderately permissive situations are not sufficient for rejecting Elimination.

### 3.2. *Reasons Permissiveness and Elimination*

I will now argue that Elimination is plausible if and only if Extreme Reasons Permissiveness is false.

Why is there such a connection between Extreme Reasons Permissiveness and Elimination? To see how these two theses are related, let's analyze a potential argument against Extreme Reasons Permissiveness. Suppose that there are situations in which one is permitted to believe P and also to disbelieve P. If, relative to a body of epistemic reasons, an epistemically rational agent is permitted to believe P and also permitted to believe  $\sim P$ , then nothing could prevent him or her from believing P and believing  $\sim P$ . In other words, if two incompatible attitudes are rationally permitted, it seems that nothing forbids an agent from believing both propositions simultaneously. Hence, if there is a constraint prohibiting agents from believing incompatible attitudes, it must come from the fact that Extreme Permissiveness is false.

Of course, the above line of reasoning is inconclusive. Rather than following from Permissiveness, the above conclusion comes from an invalid modal inference. As Ballantyne and Coffman (2011, p. 9) point out, the modal scope of permissions must be taken into account. Specifically, assuming that  $\diamond$  is the modal operator for permissions,  $\diamond[B(P)\wedge B(\sim P)]$  is not entailed by  $[\diamond B(P)\wedge \diamond B(\sim P)]$ . For example, if you are permitted to drink and you are permitted to drive, it doesn't follow from such permissions that you are permitted to drink *and* drive. While an agent may have different permissions, this doesn't mean that all of his or her permissions can be satisfied in the same possible world. Therefore, while an agent could be permitted to believe P and to believe  $\sim P$ , it doesn't follow that he or she is permitted to have both beliefs simultaneously.

If  $\diamond B(P)$  and  $\diamond B(\sim P)$  are only rationally accessible in mutually exclusive worlds, this means that there is a rational requirement in every possible world prohibiting the conjunction

$[B(P) \wedge B(\sim P)]$ . Such a requirement would be Consistency. However, assuming that evidence can be permissive in some possible worlds, such a requirement cannot be a consequence of an agent's evidence. In other words, in permissive situations, Consistency governs an agent's attitudes even if the epistemic reasons one has may warrant believing  $P$  and believing  $\sim P$ . Thus, if Extreme Permissiveness is true, a requirement like Consistency cannot be reduced to reasons-responsiveness requirements, since incompatible doxastic attitudes are not ruled out by the epistemic reasons one has.

In view of the foregoing, Elimination entails that epistemically permissive situations (of the extreme sort) are impossible. In a permissive picture of epistemic rationality, Consistency plays a distinct explanatory role. First, assume that Extreme Reasons Permissiveness is true. If, relative to a body of epistemic reasons, distinct incompatible attitudes towards  $P$  are rationally permitted, we need a requirement like Consistency to prohibit an agent from believing  $P$  and believing  $\sim P$  simultaneously. Even if epistemic reasons warrant distinct incompatible beliefs, Consistency will prohibit an agent from believing contradictory propositions. In other words, if epistemic reasons are permissive, then Consistency has a genuine explanatory role and Elimination is false. Now, assume that Extreme Reasons Permissiveness is false. If epistemic reasons are impermissive (or moderately permissive), then an agent's epistemic reasons never warrant believing  $P$  and believing  $\sim P$ . This means that an agent should *never* end up believing  $P$  and  $\sim P$  on the basis of his or her epistemic reasons. In such a context, Consistency would have no distinct explanatory power and Elimination would be true.

### *3.3. The Possibility of Extreme Reasons Permissiveness Undermines the Strong Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis*

Let's assume for a moment that Extreme Reasons Permissiveness is a live possibility (in section 4, I will explain why such a view should be taken seriously). I previously argued that epistemic rationality has to do with responding correctly to epistemic reasons one has, or, at least, that making a separation between reasons and rationality leads to undesirable consequences. However, this doesn't mean that Consistency plays no distinct explanatory role in theories of epistemic rationality. In cases where epistemic reasons warrant believing  $P$  and believing  $\sim P$ , Consistency plays a distinct explanatory role, since an epistemically rational agent should not

believe P and believe  $\sim$ P simultaneously. So, the fact that rationality has to do with responding to reasons one has does not entail that Elimination is true, since Extreme Reasons Permissiveness could be true. Defenders of the Strong Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis implicitly assume that epistemic reasons are impermissive (or, at least, no more than moderately permissive).

This leads me to conclude that we should endorse the Modest Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis. According to such a view, Consistency plays no distinct explanatory role *in impermissive situations*. However, in cases where both believing P and disbelieving P are warranted by a body of epistemic reasons, Consistency plays a distinct explanatory role.

An implication of my argument is that the problem surrounding the normativity of Consistency can affect any theory of epistemic rationality. Whether we think that rationality has to do with structural requirements or with substantive requirements, Consistency can play a distinct explanatory role in theories of epistemic rationality. The only way to deny this possibility is to argue against Extreme Reasons Permissiveness. Otherwise, Kolodny's teleological argument against the normativity of Consistency (discussed briefly in section 1.2) will also apply to substantive theories of epistemic rationality. Under the assumption that Extreme Reasons Permissiveness is true, responding to epistemic reasons one has "may as soon lead one away from, as toward, the true and the good" (Kolodny 2007b, p. 231).

#### **4. Permissiveness and Kolodny's Decision-Theoretic Argument**

Many philosophers will think that the argument of this paper is uninformative, notably because they are convinced that epistemic reasons never warrant the belief that P and the belief that  $\sim$ P simultaneously. For instance, it is often argued that one should not believe  $\sim$ P if one has sufficient epistemic reason to believe P, and that one should not believe P if one lacks sufficient epistemic reason to believe P. In such a context, since epistemic reasons for believing P are either sufficient or insufficient, it appears trivially true that one is never simultaneously permitted to believe P and to disbelieve P. Hence, it seems that Extreme Reasons Permissiveness is false (or that Elimination is correct).<sup>19</sup>

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19 Some authors take such a line of reasoning to be obvious. See notably Lord (2017, p. 9), Kiesewetter (2017, Chapter 7), Matheson (2011) or Sylvan (2015). See also Foley's (1987, Chapter 6.2) argument against the epistemic rationality of believing contradictory propositions.

In this section, I will argue that such claims about the sufficiency of epistemic reasons are ambiguous or misleading: they presuppose that the weight of epistemic reasons is objectively determined. In order to show this, I will offer an extended reconstruction of Kolodny's (2007b, pp. 232-37) decision-theoretic argument for the claim that a body of epistemic reasons never supports believing P and disbelieving P simultaneously.<sup>20</sup> Then, I will explain why such an argument misses the target and the significance of such a result in the debate surrounding the explanatory role of Consistency.

#### 4.1. Kolodny's Argument from Epistemic Decision Theory

According to a teleological perspective like Kolodny's, one ought to optimize the balance of wanted events and unwanted events. When making rational decisions under uncertainty, one ought to consider how various decisions might turn out and what the risk associated with each of these potential decisions is. In the epistemic realm, risk can be understood as the probability of forming an epistemically unwanted belief—that is, a false belief. Hence, to rationally believe P under uncertainty means that believing P is an *optimal* epistemic decision with respect to epistemic risk.

Following Kolodny, let's assume that epistemically rational agents ought to maximize *expected* epistemic utility.<sup>21</sup> In such a context, determining what one is rationally permitted to believe amounts to an optimization problem. Suppose that Z is the epistemic probability or the rational credence in P, for  $0 \leq Z \leq 1$ .<sup>22</sup> Suppose that F is the epistemic value of falsely believing

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20 There are two reasons why I here offer an extended version of the argument. First, Kolodny's original argument is stated very quickly. Second, since the publication of Kolodny's argument, Easwaran (2015), Pettigrew (2016c) and Dorst (2017) have developed similar frameworks that are much more comprehensive. In such a context, I prefer to develop an extended reconstruction of Kolodny's argument. This allows me to consider the strongest interpretation of his view.

21 The expected value is sometimes called the weighted mean value. For example, suppose that, in a fair lottery, 10 participants each have 1 chance in 10 of winning a single prize of \$20. In that lottery, 9 participants won't win anything, and 1 participant will win \$20. Since  $(9 \cdot 0 + 1 \cdot 20) / 10 = 2$ , the weighted mean value of this lottery is \$2. This means \$2 is the expected prize for each participant. See Buchak (2013) for alternatives to expected utility theory.

22 Kolodny's argument has to do with epistemic probabilities (2007b, p. 233). However, under the assumption that rational credences track epistemic probabilities, these two notions can be used nearly interchangeably.

that P, and that T is the epistemic value of truly believing that P.<sup>23</sup> Let's also assume the following constraints on the values of F and T:

- (i)  $T > 0$
- (ii)  $F < 0$

Finally, suppose that the epistemic value of not forming a belief about P is 0.<sup>24</sup> When an epistemically rational agent forms a belief about P, the following two rules must be satisfied:<sup>25</sup>

- (iii) If  $(0 < Z \cdot T + (1-Z) \cdot F)$ , then taking the epistemic risk of believing that P is permitted, since the expected epistemic value of believing P is uniquely optimal.
- (iv) If  $(0 > Z \cdot T + (1-Z) \cdot F)$ , then taking the epistemic risk of believing that P is not permitted, since the expected epistemic value of believing P is suboptimal.

An example might be helpful here. Suppose that an agent's rational credence in P is 0.4, that the epistemic value of forming a false belief about P is -5, and that the epistemic value of forming a true belief about P is 2. In such a case,  $Z \cdot T + (1-Z) \cdot F = (0.4 \cdot 2) + (0.6 \cdot -5) = -2.2$ . This means that the expected epistemic utility associated with believing P is -2.2. Since  $0 > -2.2$ , the epistemic value of not believing that P (0) is higher than the expected epistemic value of believing that P (-2.2). So far, this means that the agent should not believe P. Now, let's calculate the expected epistemic value of believing that  $\sim P$ . If an agent's rational credence in P is 0.4, then his or her rational credence in  $\sim P$  is 0.6. Again, let's assume that the epistemic value of forming a false belief about P is -5, and that the epistemic value of forming a true belief about P is 2. This means that  $Z \cdot T + (1-Z) \cdot F = (0.6 \cdot 2) + (0.4 \cdot -5) = -0.8$ . Since  $0 > -0.8$ , the expected epistemic value of not believing that  $\sim P$  (0) is higher than the expected epistemic value of believing that  $\sim P$  (-0.8). Therefore, in such a situation, the agent should not believe that P and not believe that  $\sim P$ , which

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23 Kolodny considers the epistemic value of truly believing P and the epistemic value of avoiding a false belief concerning P. Following Easwaran (2015), Pettigrew (2016c) and Dorst (2017), I take my framework to be more intuitive. In any case, nothing hinges on this small difference.

24 Zero is simply a reference point. Suppose that, in order to decide whether to believe P, an agent calculates the expected utility to believe that P. Suppose that the result is -10. Since the epistemic value of not believing that P is 0 *by reference*, this means that there are 10 utiles associated with not believing that P. When the expected value of forming a belief that P is under 0, this means that not believing that P is a better epistemic option *with reference to an epistemic value of 0*. Dorst (2017, 9-12) makes similar remarks.

25 It should be noted that similar principles have been developed elsewhere since the publication of Kolodny's argument. See, for instance, Easwaran (2015), Pettigrew (2016c) and Dorst (2017). Following Kolodny, I here assume that rational beliefs are determined by epistemic probabilities or rational credences. By contrast, Easwaran uses these principles to argue that rational credences are determined by rational beliefs.

amounts to suspending judgment on whether P. That is, the uniquely optimal option is to withhold judgment on whether P.

Now, are there cases where the expected epistemic value of believing P is equal to the expected epistemic value of believing  $\sim P$ ? If there were such cases, they would entail that Extreme Reasons Permissiveness is correct. Consider, for example, a case where the rational credence in P is 0.5 and the rational credence in  $\sim P$  is also 0.5. According to Kolodny, such cases vindicate Extreme Reasons Permissiveness insofar as we assume that  $-F=T$ . Under such an assumption, we get the following result:

- (i) If one is rationally permitted to believe P and to disbelieve P, this means that  $0 = T \cdot Z + F \cdot (1-Z) = T \cdot (1-Z) + F \cdot Z$
- (ii) Assume that the rational credence in P is 0.5 and that the rational credence in  $\sim P$  is 0.5. Following (i),  $0 = T \cdot 0.5 + F \cdot 0.5 = T \cdot 0.5 + F \cdot 0.5$ .
- (iii) Following (ii),  $0 = T + F$ . So,  $-F=T$ . Hence,  $-F=T$  if it can be equally optimal to believe P and to disbelieve P.

However, under the assumption that  $-F=T$ , one is *never* rationally required to suspend judgment on whether P.<sup>26</sup> That is, for any rational credence in P, either one is rationally permitted to believe P or one is rationally permitted to disbelieve P. However, such a conclusion is untenable. There are cases where withholding judgment on whether P is the only rational option. So, it seems perfectly plausible to assume that  $T < -F$ . This amounts to endorsing what Kolodny calls the “conservative” account of epistemic value (Kolodny 2007b, p. 234).

According to Kolodny, the constraint  $T < -F$  entails that Extreme Reasons Permissiveness is false. Indeed, relative to variables Z, F and T, it is never equally optimal to believe P and to disbelieve  $\sim P$ . Hence, Kolodny concludes that “in any given situation, either it will be the case that (one is required by reason not to believe p), or it will be the case that (one is required by reason not to believe not-p)” (Kolodny 2007b, p. 236). In other words, Elimination seems to be vindicated.

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<sup>26</sup> See notably Dorst (2017, p. 11). Easwaran (2015, p. 824) reaches a very similar conclusion.

#### 4.2. Why Kolodny's Argument Is Problematic

Along with Kolodny, I believe that the kind of decision-theoretic model discussed in the previous subsection is interesting. I also believe that  $T < -F$ , the constraint on the value of having true beliefs and the value of having false beliefs, is very plausible. We can even assume that the values of  $T$  and  $F$  are uniquely determined on an agent's body of epistemic reasons.<sup>27</sup> The fundamental problem with Kolodny's argument concerns the assumption that epistemic probabilities or rational credences, which represent the weight of one's epistemic reasons, are uniquely determined. It is far from obvious that epistemic probabilities are uniquely determined. Furthermore, without such an assumption, Kolodny's argument collapses (or holds only relative to a set of epistemic standards).

According to many philosophers, epistemic reasons are sufficient or insufficient to the extent that they have been mediated through a set of *epistemic standards*. An agent's epistemic standards are the rules, models or assumptions he or she relies on to evaluate epistemic reasons. Such a notion can be understood in a broad sense, so that it includes background beliefs, standards of reasoning, prior probability distributions and the like.

Now, there can be distinct incompatible epistemic standards one can entertain. Accordingly, this means that an agent can have sufficient epistemic reason to believe  $P$  *relative to standard A*, but he or she can also have sufficient epistemic reason to disbelieve  $P$  *relative to standard B*. If this is correct, Kolodny's decision-theoretic argument fails.

First, epistemic probabilities could be permissive, or there could be more than one rational credence in  $P$  an agent can entertain. Such a possibility would affect whether an agent has sufficient epistemic reason to believe  $P$ . Meacham (2014), for example, has argued that there is more than one rational credence function an epistemically rational agent can entertain. Thus, assuming that sufficiency has to do with rational credences, such a notion is not necessarily uniquely determined. Of course, one could revise Kolodny's framework in order to avoid representing epistemic reasons with epistemic probabilities or rational credences. However, any representation of epistemic reasons will eventually face the same difficulties. Titelbaum and

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<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that such a claim is not uncontroversial. For example, Jamesian pragmatists think that there is no uniquely rational epistemic value of true beliefs and epistemic disvalue of false beliefs. See Kelly (2014, sec. 2), Pettigrew (2016) and Dorst (2017) for discussion.

Kopec (forthcoming; m.s.), Goldman (2010), Meacham (2014), Schoenfield (2014) and Sharadin (2015) have argued that epistemically rational agents can entertain incompatible epistemic standards, regardless of how epistemic reasons are represented. According to them, there is no objective measure of the weight of epistemic reasons.

In summary, Kolodny thinks that Elimination is correct because he assumes that the weight of epistemic reasons is objectively determined. But such an assumption is far from trivial or unproblematic. More importantly, such an argument is unsuccessful against permissiveness, since it presupposes that the weight of epistemic reasons is uniquely determined.

#### *4.3. Refining the Modest Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis*

I will now explain how the possibility of permissiveness concerning epistemic standards sheds a new light on Elimination.

The possibility of permissive epistemic standards reveals that Consistency could play an unexpected explanatory role. Surely, relative to a body of evidence, a credence function and a set of epistemic standards, it is highly plausible that there is a unique rational attitude to hold towards P. Still, this does not vindicate Elimination. Consistency could have an explanatory power by imposing limits on the combinations of prior probabilities epistemically rational agents can entertain. Similarly, Consistency could have an explanatory power by prohibiting some combinations of epistemic standards or standards of reasoning an agent can entertain. In other words, as long as distinct incompatible credence functions or epistemic standards are rationally permitted, Consistency plays an explanatory role by prohibiting some combinations of prior credences, epistemic standards or standards of reasoning.

In view of the foregoing, here is how we can refine the Modest Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis. Rationality consists in part in responding to reasons one has. However, epistemic reasons support a doxastic attitude towards P only insofar as they have been subjectively mediated through an agent's epistemic standards. If an agent is rationally permitted to entertain distinct incompatible epistemic standards, Consistency plays a distinct explanatory role in governing the combinations of epistemic standards one can entertain. But in cases where epistemic standards

are uniquely determined, or in cases where epistemic reasons are impermissive, Consistency plays no distinct explanatory role.

Here is an example of how Consistency could play an explanatory role in the combinations of epistemic standards one can entertain. Suppose that an agent can make a choice between two sets of epistemic standards: A and B. For the sake of the argument, let's assume that standards A and B are equally good. For instance, we can presume that these sets of standards are equally reliable: relative to a body of evidence, satisfying A leads one to the right answer 90% of the time and satisfying B also leads one to the right answer 90% of the time.<sup>28</sup> We can also assume that the agent does not have the impression that one set is more plausible or commonsensical than the other. In such a situation, it seems plausible that it is rational for an agent to entertain standards A, but also to entertain standards B. However, since A and B are incompatible with each other, an agent cannot entertain both sets of standards A and B simultaneously (it would be inconsistent for him or her to entertain both sets of standards). In such a case, Consistency plays a distinct explanatory role: the reason why an epistemically rational agent should not entertain both standards A and B simultaneously is that such a combination of standards violates Consistency.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that the Modest Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis is correct. According to such a view, Consistency plays a distinct explanatory role in cases where both believing P and disbelieving P are warranted by a body of epistemic reasons. My approach is largely inspired by the recent literature on Evidential Permissiveness. While I haven't provided an argument in favour of Extreme Reasons Permissiveness, I argued that such a type of permissiveness is a live possibility when it comes to rational epistemic standards.

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<sup>28</sup> Two sets of standards can lead one to the right answer 90% of the time without being compatible. While they might warrant the same proportion of true propositions, they might not warrant the exact same propositions. See Titelbaum and Kopec (forthcoming). I raise an objection against Titelbaum and Kopec's argument in Daoust (2018a), but my strategy merely applies to *ideal* theories of epistemic rationality. So, even if my argument is correct, this leaves open the possibility that Titelbaum and Kopec's argument succeeds for *non-ideal* theories of epistemic rationality.

One thing I hope to have shown is that Elimination is not a consequence of the fact that epistemic rationality consists in responding to epistemic reasons one has. Rather, Elimination is true only if Extreme Reasons Permissiveness is false. Whether epistemic rationality has to do with responding to reasons and whether such reasons are impermissive are separate issues, and conflating these issues is mistaken. This is why we should reject the Strong Reasons-Responsiveness Thesis.

A collateral benefit of this paper is that it paves the way for a dialogue between research on the normativity of epistemic rationality and research on the (possibly) permissive nature of epistemic reasons such as evidence. In the last decade, research on each of these two questions has burgeoned separately from the other, but the connection between them hasn't been addressed. This paper supports the view that there is an essential connection between these two questions. But showing the kind of fruitful results we can get by making a connection between these research programmes is a task for another day.

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