

Anti-Exceptionalism about Requirements of Epistemic Rationality¹

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I argue for the unexceptionality of evidence about what rationality requires. Specifically, I argue that, as for other topics, one's total evidence can sometimes support false beliefs about this. Despite being prima facie innocuous, a number of philosophers have recently denied this. Some have argued that the facts about what rationality requires are highly dependent on the agent's situation, and change depending on what that situation is like (Bradley, 2019). Others have argued that a particular subset of normative truths, those concerning what epistemic rationality requires, have the special property of being 'fixed points' – it is impossible to have total evidence that supports false belief about them (Smithies, 2012; Titelbaum, 2015). Each of these kinds of exceptionality permit a solution to downstream theoretical problems that arise from the possibility of evidence supporting false belief about requirements of rationality. However, as I argue here, they incur heavy explanatory burdens that we should avoid.

Keywords: rational requirements; fixed point thesis; a priori; misleading evidence.

A natural thought is that evidence about what rationality requires behaves in roughly the same way as evidence about other topics. If so, then one's evidence can sometimes support false beliefs about what rationality requires. A number of philosophers have recently denied this. Some because they have thought that the facts about what rationality requires change depending on the agent's evidential situation (Bradley, 2019; Kvanvig, 2014; Way & Whiting, 2016). Others because they have thought that normative truths concerning what epistemic rationality requires have the special property of being 'fixed points', such that every evidential situation justifies true belief about them. (Smithies, 2012; Titelbaum, 2015). Here, I consider both kinds of defence of what I call the Impossibility Thesis.

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Impossibility Thesis: Evidential situations requiring false belief about what rationality requires are impossible.

One reason to like the Impossibility Thesis is that it rules out an awkward evidential situation that threatens the consistency of our theories of epistemic rationality. Suppose that rationality requires you to believe P. Then, suppose that you have some evidence supporting the false belief that, in fact, you are required to *not* believe P. Are you required to believe P, or not? On the one hand, you seem to be required to *not* believe P, because this is what your evidence about what rationality requires supports. On the other hand, you seem to be required to believe P, since this is what the true requirements in fact require. You are in a bind – you appear to be required to both believe and *not* believe P. The Impossibility Thesis offers a way out of this problem – it rules out the situations in which this inconsistency arises. However, I argue here that it creates more problems than it solves. I argue that we should prefer the following Simple View of evidential support.

Simple View: Evidential situations supporting false belief about what rationality requires are possible about all topics.

Following others in this debate, I understand requirements of rationality as necessary conditions of having rational epistemic attitudes, without taking much of a stand on what these are². However, I do assume that there are some necessary conditions of rationality, and that there is a fact of the matter about what these are.

Section 1 outlines possible situations in which an evidential situation appears to support false belief about what rationality requires, and shows how the Simple View can explain it easily. Section 2 examines Perspectival defences of the Impossibility Thesis, according to which evidence about what rationality requires changes the facts about what rationality requires. Section 3 examines Objectivist defences of the Impossibility Thesis, on which evidential situations can never support false beliefs about what rationality requires. Section 4 outlines some reasons for optimism about dealing with the problem of inconsistent requirements without the Impossibility Thesis.

² For example, Titelbaum describes them as “constraints on [...] reasoning arising from consistency requirements among an agent’s attitudes, evidence, and whatever else reasoning takes into account.” (2015: 254).

1. Misleading Evidence

Evidence can support false belief about all kinds of subject matters. The Simple View says that what rationality requires is a subject matter like any other, and so something that evidence can support false belief about. Studying philosophy is a good way to get evidence for false belief about what rationality requires. Consider:

Logic 101. It is a requirement of rationality to avoid contradictory belief (let us suppose). Suppose also that you are about to take your first introductory course in logic. Unfortunately, your instructor is an overzealous advocate of dialetheism, and believes that rationality sometimes requires contradictory belief, for example in response to instance of the Liar Paradox³. He well-meaningly introduces you to all the best arguments for dialetheism, some paraconsistent logic, and some unconvincing challenges to dialetheism. By the end of the course, you believe, falsely, that rationality sometimes requires contradictory belief.

A natural explanation of this situation is that your evidential situation supports a false belief about what rationality requires. For example, your instructor counts as an expert in this domain, which makes his testimony evidence. The philosophical arguments you study also give you evidence. You lack the capacity to refute any of this evidence. However, none of it changes the facts about what rationality requires – rationality still requires that you avoid contradictory belief.

Similar cases are possible for any other putative requirement of rationality. Epistemologists are in the business of making arguments for and against various requirements of rationality: requirements to believe/not believe lottery propositions⁴, requirements to conciliate⁵/remain steadfast⁶ in the face of peer disagreement, requirements to be level coherent⁷, or not⁸. The extent of apparently reasonable disagreement about what rationality requires suggests that false belief about what rationality requires is common, and that it is often evidentially supported.

³ As developed in Priest (1979, 1985, 2005)).

⁴ See (Hawthorne, 2003; Nelkin, 2000).

⁵ See (Christensen, 2009).

⁶ See (Elga, 2007).

⁷ See (Broome, 1999, 2013; Brunero, 2012; Kolodny, 2005; Way & Whiting, 2016).

⁸ See (Weatherson, 2019; Lasonen-Aarnio, 2014).

This simple explanation is ruled out by the Impossibility Thesis. As I argue in the following sections, neither of the ways of defending the Impossibility Thesis offers an adequate alternative explanation.

2. Perspectivism

Perspectivism holds that what rationality requires depends on the agent's evidential situation. For example, Bradley (2019) avoids the problem of inconsistent requirements by arguing that evidence against a putative requirement changes what is required⁹. If your situation includes evidence that a rule does not apply, then that rule does not apply – the rule is defeated. On this view, the Impossibility Thesis is true because if one's evidential situation indicates that rationality requires P, then rationality really does require P.

Bradley focuses on epistemic rules such as 'believe P if you have a perception that P', and 'believe P if you have testimony that P'. He argues that evidence that one of these rules does not apply in a particular case defeats that rule – it no longer applies in that case. Instead, what each agent is required to believe in a situation is specified by a complicated and indefeasible 'Uber-rule'. However, an important shared feature of the rules that Bradley discusses is that they seem to gain respectability from the more fundamental epistemic rule 'believe what the evidence supports'. If this is right, then it is not surprising that evidence against the reliability of one's perceptions can defeat the rule. The rule only ever had instrumental force – it was a good way of complying with the fundamental rule to believe what the evidence supports. Receiving evidence that trusting perception is not a way to believe what the evidence supports does defeat the perceptual epistemic rule, but it is less clear that more fundamental rules can be defeated so easily. Rational requirements are more fundamental than instrumental rules like 'believe P if you have a perception that P'¹⁰.

There are two options for interpreting how Bradley's position should respond to this point¹¹. Either he must concede that there are some fixed points that one cannot have misleading

⁹ He characterises it as the view that epistemic rules are defeasible. See also (Kvanvig, 2003, 2014; Way & Whiting, 2016).

¹⁰ The argument bears some resemblance to Weatherson's view that we ought to adjust our beliefs in light of higher-order evidence *only* when that higher-order evidence gives us information about what the evidence *actually* supports ((Weatherson, 2019: 120, Ch. 8).

¹¹ Bradley acknowledges that his position is consistent with either, though the comments he makes suggests he prefers the second (2019: 17).

evidence about, namely the more fundamental requirements of rationality, whatever those are¹². This would convert the view from Perspectivist view to an Objectivist view. Or, he could say that the more fundamental requirements of rationality are also defeasible – that is, affected by the agent’s evidence. On this interpretation, the only true requirement is a long and complicated ‘Uber-rule’ specifying very precisely what is required of each agent in each situation.

If this is the position, then it is not as good an explanation as the Simple View of cases such as Logic 101. There are three key reasons for this. First, it amounts to an error theory about the more familiar rational requirements – requirements such as the Law of Non-Contradiction were never universally applicable requirements applying to all rational agents, as we might have thought they were. The story this view tells about Logic 101 is that this is not a case in which you are misled by evidence for a false view, but rather it is a case in which, in fact, you are required to believe a contradiction. On this view, requirements of rationality are flimsier than we might have thought. They are also less as good guides as we might have hoped. Bradley accepts this (2019: 14), but it is nevertheless a cost that must be justified by robust theoretical gains¹³.

Second, this view is faces pressure to restrict what can count as rationally required for an agent in such a way that avoids collapsing into triviality, where any attitude at all being potentially rationally required. However, it is unclear whether this can be done while maintaining commitment to the view that one’s evidential situation determines what rationality requires. This is particularly true if one shares Bradley’s view that something’s seeming to be evidence is sufficient for it to be evidence – for example, he expresses incredulity at the view that “what seems like evidence doesn’t even count as evidence” (2019: 6). However, what our evidence is and what our evidence seems to be are very different

¹² This view would resemble Quine’s holism, on which everything is rationally revisable except for the fundamental truths of logic (Quine, 1970, 1960).

¹³ For one thing, it makes mysterious why we should comply with rational requirements at all, since a natural answer is that rationality’s function is to guide agents towards epistemically better beliefs (see Gibbons (2013: 24), Rinard (2018: 259), Wedgwood (2017: 182)).

matters. Something may appear to be evidence from one's perspective, even if it is not^{14,15}. However, as soon as one begins to introduce restrictions on which attitudes could be rationally required, one risks compromising the view's core commitments, and ruling out possible evidential situations. This is an Objectivist, not a Perspectivist strategy.

Third, the view that requirements are defeasible introduces these awkward theoretical features unnecessarily. Bradley is right to point out that there is something positively evaluable about agents who have evidence that a rule does not apply, and do not follow that rule. However, it does not follow from this that the rule ceases to apply to the agent in that case. Agents can break rules and be excused, and or even justified. Excuse and justification are positive evaluations in the sense that they remove blame that would have been deserved had the rule been broken without excuse or justification¹⁶. However, they do not imply that the rule ceases to apply. So, we can explain the case without postulating requirements of rationality that fluctuate in response to details of the agent's situation. This offers another way to describe the situation of the students of Logic 101: their misleading evidence gives them an excuse for disobeying the requirements of rationality, but it does not make it rational for them to disobey the requirements¹⁷. The following section examines Objectivist defences of the Impossibility Thesis.

3. Objectivism

Objectivism defends the Impossibility Thesis by making a claim about which evidential situations are possible. Specifically, it rules out the possibility of situations in which the total evidence supports false belief about what rationality requires.

One way that some philosophers have attempted to rule out these situations is by appeal to the agent's already having strong evidence supporting the truth about what rationality requires. For example, Titelbaum claims that: [E]very agent possesses a priori, propositional

¹⁴ For defenders of this view, see (Alvarez, 2010; Dancy, 2000; Parfit, 2011; Raz, 1975; Skorupski, 2010). Some accept this view while demanding an additional epistemic condition, for example Dancy's claim that for a fact to provide one with a reason, it must pass through an 'epistemic filter'. That is, it must be knowable (see Dancy 2000: 57-59).

¹⁵ Even if reasons are not facts, there will be a fact of the matter about which of the agent's mental items count as reasons.

¹⁶ See (Austin, 1961). This also applies to the legal concept of justification and excuse (see (Duff, 2007)).

¹⁷ For further discussion of excusable norm violation in epistemology see (Boult, 2019; Hawthorne & Srinivasan, 2013; Kelp, 2016; Littlejohn, forthcoming; Sutton, 2007; Williamson, forthcoming).

justification for true beliefs about the requirements of rationality in her current situation (2015: 276), and Smithies that “one always has a special kind of epistemic access to facts about which propositions one has justification to believe” (2012: 273). Call this claim *Assets*.

Assets: All agents, in all possible situations, have evidence that overwhelmingly supports the truth about what rationality requires.

Smithies and Titelbaum take *Assets* to support the Impossibility Thesis, because they take these claims about which evidential situations are possible to rule out situations in which the agent has total evidence that supports a false belief about what rationality requires.

One possible motivation for thinking that *Assets* is true is that it is a consequence of Bayesian commitments to logical omniscience. Logical omniscience says that for all agents in all situations, their evidence – whatever it is – supports all logical truths to credence 1. Some have thought that our a priori evidence is identical to that of the Bayesian ideally rational agent (Christensen (2004: 162), Smithies (2012: 8)). However, logical omniscience is often, if not usually, taken to be a bug rather than a feature of Bayesian epistemology¹⁸. Commitment to logical omniscience introduces the significant challenge of working out how to make intelligible the claim that non-ideal agents have this evidence supporting credence 1 in all logical truths, even when this is opaque to them¹⁹. Not only this, but we would need a good story about how logical truths are related to requirements of rationality²⁰.

Some have thought that *Assets* is implied by the unrestrictedness of a priori reasoning. As Titelbaum goes on to explain, “[a]n agent can reflect on her situation and come to recognize facts about what that situation rationally requires. Not only does this reflection provide her with justification to believe those facts; that justification is ultimately empirically infeasible.” (2015: 276). One might think that because the question of what rationality requires is a priori, so long as agents have the ability to reflect, then they can easily acquire evidence for the truth about what rationality requires. While there are physical limitations

¹⁸ In fact, on some views it is neither. Some attempts to weaken Bayesianism’s commitment to logical omniscience include (Easwaran, 2016; Gaifman, 2004; Garber, 1983; Hacking, 1967; Williams, 2018).

¹⁹ One approach is to emphasise a distinction between formal systems associated with rationality and good epistemic practices (Cohen (1981); Harman (1986); Russell (2017)), another, different, approach is offered by Stalnaker (1991). Some have nevertheless attempted the project of defending this unpopular logical omniscience requirement (see Smithies (2015), Wedgwood (2017)).

²⁰ Articulating this is an unresolved issue (see Besson (2010), Russell (2017), Harman (1986)). Often, it takes the form of a search for the correct ‘bridge principles’ between truths of logic and normative epistemic principles. Macfarlane (2004) offers 36 different ones to choose from, each with their own theoretical costs and benefits.

on, for example, where I can transport my body to gather empirical evidence, there are no such limitations on what I can think about²¹. However, it is not clear that the sense in which agents in some situations ‘could’ come to acquire evidence for normative truths about rationality is sufficient to establish Assets. For example, consider agents who have never considered the matter, who have apparent defeaters or rebutters that count against the normative truths, or who lack the intellectual competence to do the necessary reasoning. If there is a sense in which these *could* acquire evidence for the truth, it is not clear that this is not a sense of ‘could’ that affects what they are now justified in believing.

However, even if true, Assets cannot establish the Impossibility Thesis alone. Assets says that we always have evidence that overwhelmingly supports the truth about what rationality requires. To get from this to the Impossibility Thesis it must also be true that this evidence is not defeasible by other features of the agent’s situation, and that this evidence plays a meaningful role in determining what the agent ought to believe. In other words, Assets needs help from the following two claims:

*Indefeasibility*²²: All agents, in all situations have evidence for the truth about what rationality requires that is indefeasible.

Sufficiency: All agents, in all situations, have evidence for the truth about what rationality requires that is sufficient to rule out the possibility that the agent’s evidential situation requires false beliefs about what rationality requires.

If all three of these were true then the Impossibility Thesis would be true, because our total evidence would always require believing the truth about what rationality requires. However, all three claims are contentious. Even worse, this strategy rules out the simple explanation of cases of apparent misleading evidence about what rationality requires.

²¹ Wedgwood (2017), for example, motivates a commitment to Assets in this way. Although he concedes that our access to these assets is restricted in such a way that respects human limitations, even with this restriction this implies that we have access to significantly more a priori evidence than empirical evidence.

²² Indefeasibility about a priori justification is defended by Field ((2000); Ichikawa & Jarvis (2013); Kitcher (1980); Smithies (2015); Titelbaum (2015). In so far as the truths about what rationality requires are a priori, these views would also be committed to indefeasibility about justification for truths about what rationality requires.

3.1 *Indefeasibility*

To get from the Assets claim to the Impossibility Thesis, our putative evidence for the truth about what rationality requires would need to be indefeasible. However, cases such as Logic 101 look like cases in which if there were any Assets, they are defeated. So, if we do have evidence that justifies true beliefs about what rationality requires, it is not clear that this justification is *indefeasible*²³.

For example, suppose, as some have thought, that we have default justification for basic laws of logic such as the Law of Non-Contradiction²⁴. In some sense, they are such that they are impossible to rationally doubt. If this is right, then one might be tempted to think that in Logic 101 your evidence could not really support believing that rationality sometimes requires contradictory belief – you must be confused. However, you are a beginner. Although you may start out with default justification for the truth about what rationality requires, it is much less clear that this justification remains undefeated in the face of all the testimonial and argumentative evidence you get against it. It is not at all clear that your default justification can ensure that your evidential situation decisively supports believing the truth about what rationality requires. It may do this in ordinary circumstances, but in ordinary circumstances you are not given arguments against it. As a beginner, you have nothing to back it up with. This means that when you begin to acquire more and more evidence in favour of the false beliefs about what rationality requires, your evidence begins to tilt in their direction.

According to standard accounts of defeat, justification can be defeated by both undermining and rebutting evidence, regardless of the strength of the justification (Brown, 2018; J. L. Pollock, 1986). So, not only are you justified in believing the false view about what rationality requires, but this justification also defeats any other justification you could have been presumed to have for the truth about what rationality requires²⁵. If this standard view is right, then it cannot be true that our putative justification for the truth about what rationality requires is indefeasible

Indefeasibility does not simply fall out of the a priority of the Assets, as some have thought. At least, not without further work. Justification for beliefs about what rationality requires is

²³ For example, Wright explicitly denies this (Wright, 2004b, 2004a, 2014).

²⁴ See (Boghossian, 2003; Dummett, 1974; Ichikawa & Jarvis, 2013; Lewis, 2004a; Peregrin, 2014; Wright, 2004a).

²⁵ This is consistent with views that take us to have defeasible entitlement to believe the truth about what rationality requires (see Wright (2004a; 2004b; 2014)).

sometimes thought to be indefeasible in virtue of being a priori. A priori justification is, by definition, justified independent of experience. Some have taken this to imply that any misleading evidence one could acquire for a priori claims must be, in some sense, experiential. For example, Smithies makes the claim that “a priori justification for beliefs about logic has its source in logical facts, rather than psychological facts about experience, reasoning, or understanding.” (2015: 2270). Since misleading evidence about logic cannot be a ‘logical fact’, its source must, on this view, be a ‘psychological fact about experience, reasoning, or understanding’²⁶. If this were true, it would permit the following argument for the Indefeasibility claim:

1. If P is justified a priori, then it is justified independent of any experience.
2. If justification is independent of experience, then it cannot be defeated by experience.
3. The misleading evidence in the cases is derived from experience.
4. So, misleading evidence cannot defeat our propositional justification for the truth about what rationality requires (Indefeasibility).

However, both Premises 2 and 3 are contentious. While you may have been justified in believing that rationality prohibits contradictions before you took Logic 101²⁷, it is implausible that you are still justified in believing this after you have had heard the professor’s testimony. The fact that hearing the testimony is an experience is irrelevant to whether it is defeated²⁸. For Premise 3 to be true, we need to assume a contentious understanding of ‘experience’, on which thinking through philosophical arguments is a (non-a priori) experience. On this view, propositions rather than processes are a priori. Episodes of thinking that stray from logical and philosophical truth are not a priori, but rather experiential²⁹. There are two problems with assuming this contentious understanding of experience. Firstly, drawing a line between the a priori and the a posteriori is notoriously difficult. A prima facie plausible alternative view says that processes can be a priori, so that any evidence one acquires through a priori reasoning is itself a priori, and beliefs supported by that a priori evidence can be justified a

²⁶ This view dates back to Frege (see particularly his essay, “Logic” (1897). Ichikawa and Jarvis (2013) defend a more general version of this view for all a priori truths.

²⁷ See Wright (2004b, 2014) on defeasible entitlements, as well as Bonjour on a priori justification (1998).

²⁸ Defenders of Indefeasibility typically explain away apparent cases of defeat such as this by appeal to a distinction between defeat and some weaker defeat-like status. The previous section argued that we should resist this strategy.

²⁹ This view is held by, for example, H. Field (2000); Ichikawa and Jarvis (2013); Kitcher (1980); Smithies (2015)).

priori³⁰. So, defending Indefeasibility by citing that the justification is a priori would mean arguing for one way of drawing the a priori/a posteriori distinction.

Not only this, but the view of the distinction that gives us Indefeasibility means taking a disjunctive view of abstract thinking – particular instances of abstract thinking will have very different epistemic statuses depending on their truth value. When abstract reasoning results in truth, one is a priori justified. When it goes wrong, the reasoning was not a priori at all, merely empirical or experiential. Sturgeon argues against disjunctivism about visual experience. He points out that veridical, illusory, and hallucinatory experiences have various features in common, and we should want a theory that can explain these common features. However, disjunctivism precludes an explanation of these common features – it maintains that they are distinct in nature. I am inclined to agree with Sturgeon that a view that can explain common features is preferable, *ceteris paribus*, to a view that cannot (1998: 182).

However, these points may turn out to be irrelevant. Theories of what rationality requires may not, in fact, be justified a priori. Anti-exceptionalist accounts of logic deny that logical theories are not justified a priori³¹. Instead, they are justified abductively. If this is right, then agents do not need *a priori* justification to be justified in their beliefs about logic. If this is true of logic, then it may well also be true for theories of what rationality requires³².

More importantly, Indefeasibility leaves us without a good explanation for cases in which our putative Assets appear to be defeated. Some have attempted to explain cases of apparent defeat using a distinction between defeat and some weaker defeat-like status. They have argued that although our assets cannot be defeated, they can be ‘disabled’ (Smithies, 2015), or the agent can be ‘rationally compromised’ (Ichikawa & Jarvis, 2013). Such views say that when *S*’s justification for *P* is disabled, *S* is unable to use that justification in reasoning, and unable to justified belief that *P* on the basis of that justification. Nevertheless, *S*’s justification for *P* is not defeated. Unfortunately, this strategy permits only implausible explanations of the target cases³³.

³⁰ For example, see Casullo (1988); Jeshion (2000); Summerfield (1991).

³¹ See (Hjortland, 2017; Lewis, 2004b; Maddy, 2002; Priest, 2016; Quine, 1951; Russell, 2015, 2014; Williamson, 2007, 2013a, 2013b; Williamson & Armour-Garb, 2017).

³² Even if anti-exceptionalist accounts of logic turn out to be incorrect in claiming that logic theories can be justified abductively, it may still be that abductive arguments are good enough evidence for non-experts.

³³ It is worth noting that an appeal to ‘disabling’ is not obviously dialectically helpful in an argument from Assets to the Impossibility Thesis. Disabling offers a way to make possible rational false belief about what rationality

Views that make use of disabling typically recognise only two ways that a priori propositional justification can be disabled. Either the agent makes an error due to cognitive incapacity akin to Chomskian ‘performance limitations’, or the agent has empirical evidence that she currently lacks the cognitive capacity to reason successfully. Limitation in cognitive processing capacity is an example of genuine cognitive incapacity. Some logical truths are too complicated to be deduced by ordinary human agents, even though they are entailed by their evidence, and propositions they already believe³⁴. Cognitive biases are another example. They can cause performance error in reasoning by distracting agents from the facts they know to be true or would assert on reflection. Typical errors such as the conjunction fallacy are often like this. Distracted by irrelevant information, many people who should know better will claim that a conjunction is more likely than one of its conjuncts alone³⁵. Disabling allows the agent to retain her propositional justification, even while it is disabled by cognitive performance limitations that prevent her at that moment from drawing the correct conclusion.

However, this cannot offer explain cases like Logic 101. Here, your evidential situation supports the false belief about rationality because you are exercising your cognitive faculties *well*. Had you exercised them less well, you may not have followed the arguments, and so likely would have avoided acquiring evidence for the false belief about rationality. A possible line of response to this is that in Logic 101 your faculties are limited in one sense – your capacities for abstract philosophical reasoning are those of a beginner. Not only this, but you are being taught incorrect rules about how to reason rationally. There are, perhaps, many other good things to say about your reasoning capacities, but they are limited in some important respects. However, this response does not easily transfer to cases involving non-logical requirements of rationality, such as requirements to conciliate (or not) in response to peer disagreement. When the false beliefs are about these, it is much less plausible that the mere fact that they endorse a false view compromises their general capacities for reasoning. If it did, this would overgeneralize. The point would also apply to experienced philosophers

requires. If Assets can be disabled, this offers a sense in which it could be rational to believe falsely about what rationality requires – without those Assets being defeated. However, those who defend the Impossibility Thesis typically do so as a way of denying the possibility of rational false belief about what rationality requires.

³⁴ Assuming a Bayesian framework, according to which all logical truths are entailed by any evidence set.

³⁵ For discussion, see Kahneman (2011); Kahneman et al. (1982); Tversky & Kahneman (1993).

who hold false views about what rationality requires, but no plausible standard would say that their reasoning capacities are limited³⁶.

One might reply that ideal agents would nevertheless have no false beliefs about what rationality requires. However, using the ideal to define what counts as a cognitive limitation risks generating a theory that is irrefutable. If every false belief about what rationality requires were an instance of limited capacity in which the agent *really* had (disabled) propositional justification for the truth, then the claim that an agent has propositional justification for P is would be irrefutable, and ultimately trivial.

Nor can *evidence of* cognitive incapacity explain the cases. This is the remaining option on offer for how Assets could be disabled, as in the following example:

Coffee. Suppose that I work out my proof of T after having coffee with my friend Jocko. Palms sweaty with the excitement of logical progress, I check my work several times, and decide that the proof is good. But then a trusted colleague walks in and tells me that Jocko has been surreptitiously slipping a reason-distorting drug into people's coffee--a drug whose effects include a strong propensity to reasoning errors in 99% of those who have been dosed (1% of the population happen to be immune). He tells me that those who have been impaired do not notice any difficulties with their own cognition--they just make mistakes; indeed, the only change most of them notice is unusually sweaty palms. (Christensen 2007: 3).

According to disabling views, evidence that my cognitive abilities are impaired prevents me making the logical inferences licensed by my propositional justification. It does this without affecting my propositional justification. Were this justification not disabled, I could use it to draw the correct inferences.

There are important differences between Coffee and Logic 101. In Coffee, I receive empirical evidence about my logical reasoning capacities are impaired. Responding appropriately to this means giving appropriate (i.e. significantly less, or no) weight to evidence gathered using those capacities. Dealing properly with the evidence gathered from my capacities prevents me from forming justified beliefs based on my propositional justification for the logical facts. This is true for any other piece of logical reasoning I might undertake while I have evidence

³⁶ For example, this would mean that Frege's mistake about Basic Law V implies a limitation in his reasoning capacities.

that I am under the influence of the drug. In contrast, in Logic 101, your evidence directly concerns what rationality requires. Responding appropriately to it means weighing it in your deliberation about the truth of what rationality requires, against other evidence that you have about this topic. This is quite different, and suggests that Logic 101 is not a case of disabling via evidence of cognitive capacity.

So, Logic 101 does not seem to be a case of disabling. However, we might think there is another explanation of it available to Objectivists, namely that your evidence does not support the false belief about what rationality requires because the very process of weighing up what your evidence supports relies upon classical reasoning principles, and by extension the Law of Non-Contradiction. One might worry that this dependence undermines the evidence that you seem to have for the false belief that rationality sometimes requires contradictory belief³⁷. If this evidence really depends implicitly on classical logic³⁸, including the Law of Non-Contradiction, one might think that this just provides more evidence for the Law of Non-Contradiction and against the false view that rationality sometimes requires contradictory belief.

It is worth pointing out that this explanation, even if correct, would only rule out cases of misleading evidence about requirements of rationality that are sufficiently close to principles of logic. This will not work for requirements to conciliate in response to peer disagreement, or avoid believing lottery propositions. There is also some distance between the claim that one's evidence supports or relies upon some logical principle, and the claim that it supports or relies a requirement of rationality based on that logical principle. We cannot assume a straightforward relationship between the truths of logic and truths about what rationality requires. For example, while $(P \ \& \ (P \rightarrow Q)) \rightarrow Q$ is a logical truth, it is not a demand of rationality that if one believes P , and believes that (if P , then Q), then one also believes Q . Furthermore, even if there were a straightforward relationship between these, it is not clear that this would tip the evidential scales in favour of believing the true rational requirements, because it is not clear that the logical or rational principles we depend upon to acquire evidence themselves count as part of our evidence. This is uncontroversial in other domains – compare our beliefs about the physics of middle sized objects. I believe that if I drop my coffee mug it will fall to the ground. My evidence for this consists in past observations of

³⁷ See (Woods, 2019a, 2019b) for an articulation of this worry.

³⁸ Whether it does is complicated, for discussion see (Hjortland, 2017; Woods, 2019a).

dropping mugs, and some elementary and incomplete understanding of gravitational laws. However, its truth is underpinned by various more complicated principles of physics that I have never considered, and would not understand if I did. These more complicated principles of physics do not form part of my evidence, but we might think that my reasoning about the physics of middle sized objects implicates them in an analogous way that your reasoning in Logic 101 implicates principles of classical logic. However, my evidence about whether mugs will fall does not support the complicated principles of physics, and I do not have evidence that supports believing these principles – at least not unless I learn much more about physics. The situation in Logic 101 is similar. So, even if it is true that ordinary reasoning about evidence is underpinned by principles of classical logic, these principles are not part of your evidence in Logic 101, at least in the absence of further arguments, evidence, and understanding of logic. This is true even assuming that you exhibit tendencies to avoid contradictory belief. Once you have fully absorbed the arguments you study for dialetheism, you have evidence that this tendency is *only* a tendency, and not supported by any requirement of rationality.

So, Indefeasibility does not seem to be true. Moreover, the explanations of cases like Logic 101 that are compatible with Assets are inadequate. We should thus prefer the Simple View's account. However, even if we did not prefer the Simple View, there is a further problem with Assets – it needs Sufficiency. As the next subsection argues, Sufficiency is false.

3.2 Sufficiency

In addition to Indefeasibility, defending the Impossibility Thesis via Assets requires Sufficiency.

Sufficiency: All agents, in all situations, have evidence for the truth about what rationality requires that is sufficient to rule out the possibility that the agent's evidential situation requires false beliefs about what rationality requires.

Sufficiency is importantly distinct from Indefeasibility. Indefeasibility is a claim about the *strength* of evidence. It says that the evidence postulated by Assets is maximally strong, such that it cannot be defeated. Sufficiency is a claim about how evidence, whatever its strength, can be used in deliberation. It says that the evidence postulated by Assets *rules out* other beliefs. The claims may appear similar because when indefeasible evidence for P does bear

on what S ought to believe, it will, in fact, typically rule out beliefs that not-P. However, indefeasibility does not by itself imply the ability to rule out the possibility that what capacity to that the evidence bears on what S ought to believe is a claim strictly independent of Indefeasibility. Without sufficiency, even if it were true that all agents have evidence supporting the truth about what rationality requires, and that this was indefeasible, further argument would be required to establish how and why our having this evidence rules out the possibility of one's total evidence supporting false beliefs about rationality, as the Impossibility Thesis claims.

For evidence to be able to rule out the possibility of one's situation requiring false belief about what rationality requires, it would need to play a role in determining what the agent ought to believe. However, it does not seem that it does.

The problem is that the justification that the Assets provide is propositional, but not necessarily doxastic. Assets says that justification for the requirements of rationality is available to all rational agents in all situations, but this implies only that were they to reflect properly, then they would be rational to believe the truth about what rationality requires. a point on which Objectivist theories that postulate Assets agree. Here is Titelbaum again:

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.⁴⁸ 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 (2015: 276).

Smithies qualifies Assets as follows:

[It] is not a doxastic thesis about which of one's beliefs are justified, but is rather an epistemic thesis about which propositions one has justification to believe. Justified belief requires not only having justification to believe a proposition, but also using it in believing that proposition on the basis of one's justification to believe it. By contrast, having justification to believe a proposition does not require using it in forming a justified belief. As we shall

see, this distinction between epistemic and doxastic versions of the accessibility thesis is crucial for avoiding the problems of over-intellectualization and vicious regress (2012: 276)

Restricting Assets to a claim about propositional justification can seem to remove some of the pressure to accommodate or explain cases like Logic 101. The idea is that in such cases the agent is propositionally justified in the truth in spite of their misleading evidential situation. This can then be used to deny the claim that agents in such cases would be rational to believe falsely about rationality, and so avoid the problem of inconsistent requirements. However, this claim is silent on what agents are doxastically justified in believing, and this silence threatens the legitimacy of the restriction.

There are three options for what you are doxastically justified in believing in Logic 101. Perhaps the most natural option is that you are doxastically justified in believing falsely about what rationality requires. This is, after all, what your evidence appears to support. However, if this is right then it is less plausible that you are propositionally justified in believing the truth about what rationality requires. Traditionally, P is propositionally justified for S if and only if S has justifiers (reasons or evidence) J sufficient to justify P ³⁹. Standardly, S is doxastically justified in believing P when the following three conditions hold:

- a) P is propositionally justified for S .
- b) S believes P .
- c) S believes P on the basis of her propositional justification.

On this view, doxastic justification implies propositional justification. So, if you are doxastically justified in believing some false claim about what rationality requires, P , and you are propositionally justified in believing the true claim about rationality, $\text{not-}P$, then it is not true that the evidence postulated in Assets rules out evidential situations that require false beliefs about what rationality requires.

This seems to be the situation in Logic 101. The proposition that rationality sometimes requires contradictory belief is supported by justifiers that you have - the evidence you acquire by taking Logic 101, albeit not to a maximal degree. So, in Logic 101, you meet all of (a) – (c). You believe it, you believe it on the basis of justifiers, and your justifiers support the

³⁹ Turri identifies this as the 'Orthodox view' (2010: 314). Proponents of it include: Kvanvig (2003: §B1); Pollock (1986: 36-7); Swain (1979: 25)).

truth of the claim. So, given the 'orthodox view' of the relationship between doxastic and propositional justification, you are both doxastically and propositionally justified in the false belief about what rationality requires. On this first option, Sufficiency is false.

The other options are compatible with Sufficiency, but they are implausible. A second option is that you are doxastically justified in believing the truth about what rationality requires. This cannot be right, because even assuming you have propositional justification for the truth, in this situation you have apparent defeaters for the true propositions, meaning that you lack a sound deliberative route from that justification to justified beliefs based on that justification. A third option is that you are doxastically justified in suspending judgment on the matter of what rationality requires. This is also implausible. Suspension would be appropriate if you have roughly equal amounts of evidence on either side – but this is not what you have. You have apparently very strong evidence for a false belief about what is required, and you have propositional justification that you are unable to make use of in your deliberation.

A final option, perhaps, is that you cannot be doxastically justified in believing anything in the neighbourhood of what rationality requires. However, this is a restatement of the Impossibility Thesis. The only plausible option seems to be the first one, but if this is right then Sufficiency is false.

Even worse, regardless of which option is correct, the propositional justification that Assets says we have plays very little role in determining what the agents should believe, given their situation. This suggests that Sufficiency is false – Assets cannot rule out evidential situations that require false beliefs in what rationality requires. We can illustrate the inertia of Assets by comparing agents in good and bad epistemic situations, but who, according to Assets, have the same propositional justification. Consider a student who takes Logic 101, and receives misleading evidence. Call her Anita. She studies well, follows the arguments where they lead, and acquires the false belief that rationality requires contradictory belief. Bertha is luckier – she takes a different class that teaches the true theory of what rationality requires. She also studies well, and follows the arguments where they lead, acquiring true beliefs about what rationality requires.

Assets says that they both have the same propositional justification regarding what rationality requires. If this is true, it does not seem to make much of a difference between to their epistemic situations. This propositional justification, in so far as they have it, is epistemically

inert. This inertia prevents it from playing the role it would need to play in their deliberation if it was to rule out evidential situations supporting false belief about what rationality requires.

Anita's alleged propositional justification for the truth about what rationality requires is of no help to her deliberation – she lacks a viable deliberative route to doxastically justified belief in this true view. To reason her way out of her situation and towards the truth, Anita would need to rationally dismiss the misleading evidence for the false view. It is not reasonable to expect her to do this. Anita's infeasible propositional justification plays no role in determining what she should believe, given her evidence. Nor is it of any help to Bertha.

Bertha studies the true theory of what rationality requires. Assets says that Bertha also has infeasible propositional justification for the truth about what rationality requires. She also believes the truth about what rationality requires. However, it is unlikely that her belief is based on the evidence that Assets postulates. This evidence, we are told, supports the truth about what rationality requires to a maximal degree, in a way that is immune from the arguments of dialetheists. It is not clear that this would be comprehensible by a beginner. So, even though Gertrude believes what is supported by her propositional justification, it is not clear that she does so on the basis of them. So, these Assets would seem to be inert even in the good cases – even here they are irrelevant to what the agent ought to believe given her evidential situation⁴⁰. Without something that connects us epistemically to our allegedly vast store of propositional justification, the evidence that Assets postulates can play no epistemic role in either good or bad cases – it is epistemically inert. This makes it insufficient to rule out the possibility of total evidence supporting false belief about what rationality requires.

4. Theoretical Upshots

Rejecting the Impossibility Thesis means incurring the burden of tackling head on the problem of inconsistent requirements of rationality. In this section I briefly mention three avenues for resolving the inconsistency without resorting to the Impossibility Thesis.

⁴⁰ Consider also that most views that accept Assets take it to include not just what rationality requires, but also many other a priori truths of logic – both the very simple and the very complicated. However, there is a clear difference between our epistemic situation with respect to the simpler and the more complicated logical truths, but the distinction cannot be made by appeal to the propositional justification that Assets gives us. This suggests that this justification is inert – it makes no difference to what we ought to believe.

One option is to simply accept the inconsistency as an epistemic dilemma⁴¹. Another is to make distinctions. For example, we might think that the apparent inconsistency arises from a failure to disambiguate two distinct sources of requirements, perhaps requirements of subjective and an objective rationality⁴². Disambiguating these, we can understand agents in Logic 101 as objectively required to avoid believing contradictions, while also subjectively required to believe some contradictions. We might further flesh this out by arguing that ‘rationality requires’ is context-dependent, such that its usage requires reference to a context in order to be meaningful (Björnsson & Finlay 2010; Pittard & Worsnip 2017; Worsnip, forthcoming)⁴³. This avoids the inconsistency because no single sense of rationality issues inconsistent requirements.

Alternatively, we might see the possibility of situations such as Logic 101 as support for denying that rationality requires enkratic coherence (see (Lasonen-Aarnio 2014, 2020; Weatherson 2019)). On this view, you would be required to follow your evidence in believing that rationality sometimes requires contradictory belief, but also required to avoid contradictory belief. This puts you in a tricky position, but it has the advantage of not threatening the consistency of our theories of epistemic rationality. None of these, perhaps, offers as easy an escape from the problem as that offered by the Impossibility Thesis, which simply nips it in the bud. However, they have the advantage of being compatible with the Simple View of cases like Logic 101, as well as of avoiding taking premature stances on what our evidence can support.

5. Conclusion

The Simple View says that cases of apparently misleading evidence about what rationality requires are just ordinary cases of one’s evidence supporting a false belief. The Impossibility Thesis avoids the problem of inconsistent requirements, but comes with its own problems. I

⁴¹ See (Hughes, forthcoming; Christensen, 2010; Alexander, 2013).

⁴² See Alston (1985); Feldman (1988a); Gibbard (2005); Gibbons (2013); Goldman (1986); Kvanvig (1984); Pollock (1979); Schroeder (2009); Unger (1986).

⁴³ Alternatively, we might follow Worsnip (2018) in thinking that think that the relevant disambiguation is between evidential and coherence-based senses of ‘rationality requires’. See also Williamson (2017), who argues that epistemic rationality is ambiguous between a ‘content-orientated’ sense, according to which it is rational to believe p if and only if one’s evidence supports p; and a ‘disposition-orientated’ sense, according to which it is rational to believe p if and only if ‘in the same circumstances with the same evidence someone disposed to conform their beliefs to what their evidence supports would believe p. In other work, Williamson identifies this sense with epistemic blamelessness (forthcoming).

argued here that we should reject the Impossibility Thesis. I argued that the routes for defending it face serious difficulties, and neither can offer as satisfactory an explanation of cases like Logic 101 as the Simple View that they rule out. This means that the problem of inconsistent requirements remains, but there are reasons to think it is manageable.

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