**Recent Work on Higher-Order Evidence**

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1. **Introduction**

Humans are fallible: We make mistakes in thought, feeling, and deed. Some mistakes result from our having incomplete information. Others result from what we do with the information we have. As finite creatures, our capacity to acquire and retain information is limited; so too is our capacity to evaluate or process it.

The debate about higher-order evidence is in large part a debate about how to accommodate the second dimension of fallibility (Christensen 2010, 185–86). Should a person’s deliberations be responsive to the risk of implicit bias, say, or fallacious reasoning? If so, how?

Thinking about such matters has led philosophers to some surprising conclusions—that it can be rational for a person to be at odds with themselves, for example, or that rational mistakes about rationality are impossible. After unpacking the notion in more detail, I will give an overview of some of the debates concerning higher-order evidence. Along the way, I will raise preliminary problems for the views I consider with the aim of showing that there is no easy solution to the puzzles higher-order evidence raises.

While the label ‘higher-order evidence’ has its origins in debates in epistemology, there are related debates proceeding under different headings in other fields. In closing, I will explore some of those connections.

1. **What is higher-order evidence?**

Corresponding to the two dimensions of fallibility are two sorts of evidence. First-order evidence is evidence for or against the truth of a proposition. As a first pass, I will say that higher-order evidence is evidence for or against the truth of a proposition about the first-order evidence. Higher-order evidence, so understood, comes in different forms, including, but not limited to, evidence concerning:

1. what evidence one has available.
2. the strength and valence of one’s evidence.
3. the normative import of one’s evidence.
4. one’s capacity to assess one of more of (i-iii).

To illustrate, suppose that a butler is investigating a murder.[[1]](#footnote-1) The trail of blood leading under the door suggests that a clue is to be found in the ballroom (i). The detective’s assistant tells them that the evidence suggests that the butler did it (ii). The resident epistemologist says that, in that case, the detective is required to believe that the butler did it, not merely permitted to do so (iii). Finally, the detective is aware that the butler is their friend, which disposes them to think that the butler is innocent (iv).

There can evidence at higher and higher levels. The assistant’s track-record might suggest that their testimony about what the evidence suggests is weak. Also, one and the same consideration can be both first- and higher-order evidence. Perhaps the assistant would not have said that the evidence suggests that the butler did it had they not believed that the butler did it. So, their testimony about the evidence is indirect testimony about the truth of the matter.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The main interest in higher-order evidence concerns its bearing on a person’s beliefs at lower orders. Consider a version of the detective case in which the evidence the detective possesses—provided by the clues—suggests that the butler is innocent, but in which the detective’s assistant tells them that it is irrational for them to believe this. Given the higher-order evidence—the assistant’s testimony—is it rational for the detective to believe that the butler is innocent, as the clues suggest? Call this case, Murder.

I formulated the question in terms of *rationality*. But one might ask similar questions in other terms. Is the detective *justified* in believing that the butler is innocent? Are they in a position to *know* this? *Ought* they to believe it? The original question might itself be understood in different ways. First, given the assistant’s testimony, is it rational for the detective to believe that the butler is innocent, whether or not they do so? Alternatively: Is the belief *ex ante* rational? Second, if the detective maintains their belief in the butler’s innocence, the testimony notwithstanding, do they do so rationally? Alternatively: Is the belief *ex post* rational?[[3]](#footnote-3) Instead of asking what it is rational for a person to believe outright, one might ask what *degree of belief* it is rational for them to have. Consider a version of Murder in which the detective’s evidence supports a credence of 0.6 in the proposition that the butler is innocent, but their assistant says that it supports a lower credence. Finally, the relevant issues arise within epistemological frameworks in which the notion of evidence plays a less central role (Lasonen-Aarnio 2010). Suppose that the detective’s belief is the result of a reliable process, but they have evidence to the contrary. Given this, is it rational for them to maintain their belief?

To keep things manageable, I will focus on the question of what bearing higher-order evidence has on what it is ex ante rational for a person to believe outright given their first-order evidence. Answers to that question might not extend in a straightforward fashion to its counterparts.[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. **A brief history**

Debates concerning higher-order evidence in recent epistemology emerged from debates about *peer disagreement* (Christensen and Lackey 2013; Feldman and Warfield 2013).[[5]](#footnote-5) Suppose that the are two detectives, Alice and Benita, who have pooled their evidence. It is mutual knowledge that their capacities to retain information and to reason with it are on a par. Alice believes on the basis of the evidence that the butler is innocent, while Benita believes on the same basis that the butler is guilty. Insofar as Alice and Benita are peers, the fact that Benita thinks that the butler is guilty seems to be evidence that Alice has failed properly to assess her evidence. On learning of Benita’s belief, is it rational for Alice to maintain hers? More generally, what bearing does peer disagreement have on a person’s first-order beliefs?

The issue of higher-order evidence is one of many that peer disagreement raises. It has since taken on a life of its own, and epistemologists now reflect on the significance of different sorts of higher-order evidence in a wide variety of contexts.

Although the topic of higher-order evidence—theorized in those terms—emerged only recently as a focal point for research, it is as old as philosophy itself. Various forms of scepticism—ancient and modern—stem from a recognition that humans are imperfect when it comes to the possession and exercise of rational capacities. Descartes’ remarks are representative:

Because there are men who make mistakes in reasoning, even in the simplest matters in geometry, and who commit paralogisms, judging that I was as prone to err as any other, I rejected as false all the reasonings that I had previously taken as demonstrations. (1998, 18)

Descartes takes the considerations that suggest that he is liable to err as a reason to relinquish his beliefs. I return to this line of thought below.

1. **Substance versus structure**

It is helpful to organize the issues higher-order evidence raises around the distinction between *substantive* and *structural* rationality (Lasonen-Aarnio 2020; Littlejohn 2018; Worsnip 2018). Substantive rationality concerns the relations between individual attitudes and certain considerations, in the cases at hand, items of evidence. Structural rationality concern relations of coherence among attitudes.

Consider this substantive principle:[[6]](#footnote-6)

Evidentialism If a person’s evidence suggests that *p*, it is rational for them to believe that *p*.

Regarding Murder, Evidentialism seems to entail that, given their first-order evidence, it is rational for the detective to believe that the butler is innocent. Evidentialism seems also to entail that, given the higher-order evidence, it is rational for the detective to believe that it is irrational for them to believe that the butler is innocent. So, Evidentialism seems to entail that, given their *total* evidence, it is rational for the detective to believe that the butler is innocent and to believe that this is irrational. However, to be at odds within oneself in this way seems problematic. Consider:

Level-Bridging It is irrational for a person to believe that *p* and to believe that it is irrational for them to believe that *p*.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This is a principle of structural rationality.

Evidentialism and Level-Bridging appear to deliver conflicting verdicts in cases like Murder. More generally, one might think, cases of higher-order evidence reveal a clash between substantive and structural principles of rationality. I will now outline some prominent responses to this issue.[[8]](#footnote-8)

1. **Dilemmas**

One view is that the clash between Evidentialism and Level-Bridging is genuine. Situations like Murder are ones in which a person faces a *rational dilemma* (Christensen 2010; 2013; 2016). In Christensen’s words, they are ‘rationally toxic’.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This assumes that, as they occur in the relevant principles, ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ are equivalent to, respectively, *rationally required* and *rationally impermissible*. Some claim that there are no propositions that a person must believe, only propositions that they may believe (Nelson 2010). I set this complication aside—there are likely other ways of formulating the principles, or describing the cases, that sidestep it.

The view that there are rational dilemmas faces problems. First, it clashes with other widely-held principles. Suppose that the detective in Murder is required to believe that the butler is innocent, and required to believe that this is irrational, and required not to have both beliefs. According to the agglomeration principle from standard deontic logic, it follows that the detective is required to believe that the butler is innocent, to believe that this is irrational, and not to have both beliefs (Worsnip 2018, 37–38). According to the principle that *ought implies can*, if a person ought to do something, they can do it. Since it is not possible for the detective to have and to lack the relevant beliefs, they cannot be required to do so.

Second, ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ are terms of evaluation. As Parfit says, ‘We use the word “irrational” to express the kind of criticism that we express with words like “senseless”, “stupid”, “idiotic”, and “crazy”’ (2011, 33). This is hard to square with the view that there are rational dilemmas. If the detective in Murder cannot satisfy both the alleged principles, they are not criticisable. The situation is unfortunate, but not one that reflects badly on them.

These points are not decisive. Some reject agglomeration (B. Williams 1973, chap. 11). Others deny that ought implies can (King 2019). And the relationship between norm violation and critical reactions is a fraught one (Srinivasan 2015).

Rather than pursue these matters, I will introduce a related view, which might be described as *dualist*. According to it, while Evidentialism and Level-Bridging both use the term ‘rational’, that label in fact picks out two distinct statuses: rational1 and rational2 (Fogal Forthcoming; Worsnip 2018). On this view, cases involving misleading higher-order evidence do not generate genuine dilemmas.[[10]](#footnote-10) The situation in Murder is not like one in which morality tells a person to do something and tells them not to do it, such that, whatever they do, it is immoral; rather, the situation is like one in which morality tells a person to do something while prudence tells them not to do it. In such a case, the person might act either immorally or act imprudently, but there is no overarching standard that they fall short of whatever decision they make.[[11]](#footnote-11)

One might wonder how deep the difference between the dualist and dilemma views goes (Kiesewetter 2017, 251). Dualism retains the idea that cases involving misleading higher-order evidence are toxic, insofar as subjects in such cases are held to competing standards that they cannot jointly satisfy.[[12]](#footnote-12)

1. **Level-splitting**

Reflection on higher-order evidence leads some to reject Level-Bridging (Coates 2012; Hazlett 2012; Lasonen-Aarnio 2014; 2020; Wedgwood 2011; Weatherson 2019; Williamson 2011; 2014). Following Horowitz (2014), call this *level-splitting*. On this view, it is rational for the detective in Murder to believe that the butler is innocent and to believe that this is irrational.

Level-splitting strikes many as counterintuitive. An ideal rational being would not exhibit this sort of fragmentation; it would not be disassociated from its own beliefs in such a fashion.[[13]](#footnote-13) To bolster this thought, suppose that the detective forms both the first- and higher-order beliefs in the way level-splitting permits. They then conjoin them so as to arrive at a belief which they might express as follows:

The butler is innocent, but it is irrational for me to believe that the butler is innocent.

This is a Moorean belief (Feldman 2005; 2009; Horowitz 2014; Smithies 2012). Such beliefs are, by common consent, irrational.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In response, a level-splitter might reject the following:

Closure If it is rational for a person to believe that *p* and it is rational for them to believe that *q*, it is rational for them to believe that *p&q*.

If this is false, then from the fact that it is rational for the detective to believe that the butler is innocent and rational for them to believe that this is irrational, it does not follow that it is rational for them to believe the Moorean conjunction. However, this might seem only to make matters worse, insofar as Closure is independently plausible.

For another challenge to level-splitting, consider how the fragmented detective might act on their beliefs (Brown 2018, chap. 6; Horowitz 2014, 727–28; Horowitz and Sliwa 2015, 2843). Since they believe that the butler is innocent, they decide to let the butler walk. However, since they believe that it is irrational to believe this, they advise their colleagues to prevent them from releasing the butler. This looks senseless.

Those who reject Level-Bridging typically accept that there is something problematic about subjects who believe propositions while believing that so believing is irrational. However, they suggest that the principle which delivers this verdict is not a principle of rationality, but one concerning some other status, say, praiseworthiness. More generally, level-splitters suggest that, in addition to whatever standard positively evaluates the individual beliefs, there is a further standard which negatively evaluates their combination (Lasonen-Aarnio 2020; Forthcoming; Williamson Forthcoming). This moves the level-splitter in the direction of dualism.

1. **Infallibilism**

Another response to cases of misleading higher-order evidence is to retain the substantive and structural principles but deny that, in such cases, the *total* evidence supports the incoherent combination of beliefs. On this view, if the higher-order belief is rational, the lower-order belief is irrational, and vice versa:

Infallibilism If it is rational for a person to believe that it is irrational for them to believe that *p*, it is irrational for them to believe that *p*.[[15]](#footnote-15)

This claim is surprising. As Greco says (concerning justification, but the point generalizes):

Justiﬁed false beliefs are possible. This claim commands almost universal agreement among contemporary epistemologists. Most would go further, and claim that the possibility of justiﬁed false belief isn’t restricted to special subject matters. Rather, in no domain is justiﬁcation an infallible guide to truth. At the very least, if there *are* domains in which justiﬁcation entails truth, this requires some special explanation. (2014, 203)

There are two main versions of Infallibilism. I will discuss their ‘special explanations’ in turn.

According to what one might call *bottom-up* infallibilism, in cases of misleading higher-order evidence the first-order belief is rational, but the higher-order belief is not (Littlejohn 2018; Titelbaum 2015). It is rational for the detective in Murder to believe that the butler is innocent, and irrational for them to believe that this is irrational.

How might a bottom-up infallibilist explain this? One answer is that subjects always have sufficient a priori grounds for beliefs about the requirements of rationality (Jarvis and Ichikawa 2017, chap. 7; Smithies 2012; Titelbaum 2015). Regarding Murder, the suggestion is that, while the detective might have testimonial evidence in support of the belief that it is irrational for them to believe that the butler is innocent, the detective has a priori access to considerations that defeat that evidence.

This answer rests on very strong epistemological commitments. While the a priori grounds might be available to ideally rational subjects, one might wonder if they are always available to fallible subjects like us. And, when available, one might wonder if they are always sufficient to outweigh the a posteriori higher-order evidence (Field 2017).

Littlejohn (2018) suggests an alternative answer. To introduce it, consider an analogy from the moral domain: Carlos has evidence that Maria needs help, but decides not to go to her aid. In that case, Carlos is criticisable from a moral perspective—his decision manifests indifference to what matters morally, say, wellbeing. Now suppose that Carlos forms the belief that he should not help Maria. In this case too, Carlos is criticisable from a moral perspective—like his decision, his judgement manifests indifference to wellbeing.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In view of this, return to Murder. The detective has evidence that the butler is innocent. If they do not form the belief that the butler is innocent, they are criticisable from an epistemic perspective. Their lack of judgement manifests indifference to what matters epistemically, say, truth. Likewise, if the detective forms the belief that they must not believe that the butler is innocent, they are criticisable from an epistemic perspective. Their judgement manifests the same indifference to truth.

The idea is that, just as moral beliefs answer to the same concerns as decisions, so higher-order beliefs answer to the same concerns as their lower-order counterparts. However, in the epistemic case, this cuts both ways. The detective has evidence that it is irrational for them to believe that the butler is innocent. If they do not believe this, why are they not criticisable from an epistemic perspective? Why does their lack of higher-order judgement not manifest indifference to truth? While it is plausible that epistemic rationality involves responsiveness to truth—in the way that being moral involves responsiveness to wellbeing—it is not clear that this supports an asymmetric assessment of lower- and higher-order attitudes.

I turn now to *top-down* infallibilism. According to it, in cases of misleading higher-order evidence the higher-order belief is rational, but the lower-order belief is not (Feldman 2005; Neta 2018; 2019; Skipper 2019). It is rational for the detective in Murder to believe that it is irrational for them to believe that the butler is innocent, and irrational for them to believe that the butler is innocent.

Top-down infallibilists take the higher-order evidence to defeat the first-order evidence. Proponents of dilemma and level-splitting views can also allow that in some cases the total evidence does not support the first-order belief. Since a broad range of positions allow for defeat by higher-order evidence, it is worth considering in more detail how it might work.

1. **Defeat**

To return to an earlier theme, the view that higher-order evidence can defeat lower-order evidence threatens scepticism—concerning local domains of inquiry, including philosophy itself, and more globally.[[17]](#footnote-17) Evidence of peer disagreement, implicit bias, wishful thinking, and the like is widespread. If in a range of cases such evidence defeats the lower-order evidence, it makes belief irrational in those cases and, thereby, blocks knowledge.

How serious this threat is depends on how wide the range of cases is. More fundamentally, it depends on whether it is really true that higher-order evidence defeats. It turns out to be quite difficult to explain how it could do so.

To clarify the issue, recall the point that a consideration can be both first- and higher-order evidence. The present concern is whether higher-order evidence as such—independently of whatever first-order evidence it provides—has the capacity to defeat.

* 1. **Outweighing**

In what way might higher-order evidence defeat first-order evidence? In Murder, how might the testimony that it is irrational for the detective to think that the butler is innocent make it the case that it is irrational for them to think that the butler is innocent, the clues notwithstanding? One answer is that higher-order evidence is a reason against believing a proposition which, in the relevant cases, *outweighs* the reasons for believing it which the first-order evidence provides.

However, higher-order evidence need not be evidence against the truth of the relevant proposition.[[18]](#footnote-18) In Murder, the assistant’s testimony does not suggest that the butler is guilty. After all, they might go on to tell the detective that it is irrational for them to believe this too. So, higher-order evidence does not provide a reason against believing a proposition by providing a reason for *dis*believing it.

It is consistent with this, however, that higher-order evidence defeats by outweighing. One suggestion is that it provides ­*state-given* reasons against believing (DiPaolo 2018).[[19]](#footnote-19) Suppose that a dog is rabid. That is an object-given reason to fear the dog—a reason given by a feature of the object of fear, namely, the dog. Suppose next that fearing the dog improves one’s flight reflexes. That is a state-given reason to fear the dog—a reason given by the fear itself, not its object. To return to Murder, the assistant’s testimony does not indicate anything about the object of belief—that is, about the butler’s innocence—but it does indicate something about the belief itself—namely, that it is irrational. So, one might think, the assistant’s testimony is a state-given reason against believing, one which outweighs the object-given reasons for believing the clues provide.

This suggestion faces at least two challenges (Whiting 2019). First, how do state-given reasons against believing weigh against object-given reasons for believing? That the dog is rabid is an object-given reason to fear it. That it will make one’s hands shake, thereby attracting the dog’s attention, is a state-given not to fear the dog. It is unclear how to combine these reasons so as to yield an overall verdict about whether it is rational to fear the dog. Likewise, it is unclear how to combine object- and state-given reasons for and against believing so as to yield an overall verdict about whether it is rational to do so.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The second challenge is more fundamental. Many deny that state-given reasons are reasons in anything but name (Kelly 2002; Kolodny 2005; Parfit 2011; Raz 2011; Shah 2006; Skorupski 2010; Way 2012), often on the grounds that they do not satisfy the following constraint:

Motivation If that *p* is a reason for a person to *φ*, it is possible for them to *φ* for the reason that *p*.[[21]](#footnote-21)

A person can fear a dog for the reason that it is rabid, but not for the reason that it will improve their flight-reflexes. Nor can they refrain from fearing a dog for the reason that it will prevent their hands from shaking. So, a proponent of the view that higher-order evidence defeats by providing state-given reasons against believing will need to reject Motivation or show that it is satisfied in the relevant cases.[[22]](#footnote-22)

* 1. **Undercutting**

If not by outweighing the reasons for believing which the first-order evidence provides, how might higher-order evidence defeat? Perhaps by *undercutting* (Pollock 1986). Suppose that the detective’s assistant learns that the butler confessed to the murder. That is a reason for them to believe that the butler is guilty. The assistant then learns that the confession was forced. That is not a reason for them to believe that the butler is innocent, but it suggests that the confession is no longer grounds for believing that the butler is guilty. The information about coercion *undercuts* the reason given by the confession. To relate this to Murder, the idea is that the assistant’s testimony that it is irrational for the detective to believe that the butler is innocent undercuts the reasons given by the clues that would otherwise rationalize believing it.[[23]](#footnote-23)

However, cases involving higher-order evidence seem importantly different to paradigmatic cases of undercutting (Christensen 2010; DiPaolo 2018; Lasonen-Aarnio 2014). First, they differ retrospectively. If the assistant believes that the butler is guilty on the basis of the confession and then learns that the confession was forced, the new information does not suggest that the original belief was irrational. In contrast, if the detective in Murder believes that the butler is innocent and then receives testimony that this is irrational, the new information precisely suggests that the original belief was irrational.

Second, undercutting works by indicating a disconnect between the evidence and the truth. Given the use of force, that the butler confessed does not suggest that they did it. In contrast, in Murder the clues continue to suggest that the butler is innocent, the assistant’s testimony notwithstanding.

* 1. **Bracketing**

One might take reflection on cases involving higher-order evidence to reveal a hitherto neglected kind of defeat. An influential proposal is that higher-order evidence requires a person to *bracket* the first-order evidence when deliberating as to whether to believe a proposition (Christensen 2010; 2011; 2016; Elga 2007). In Murder, as a result of the assistant’s testimony, the detective must reason *independently* of the clues when arriving at a verdict as to whether the butler is innocent.[[24]](#footnote-24)

On one interpretation, the proposal is that higher-order evidence provides reasons for a person not to form their beliefs on the first-order evidence.[[25]](#footnote-25) This seems to clash with Motivation (Whiting 2017). In general, a person can do things for a reason, but they cannot do things *for a reason* for a reason. Suppose that Layla is offered £100 to raise her arm. She could do so for that reason. Suppose instead that Layla is offered £100 to raise her arm for non-financial reasons. Arguably, Layla could not respond to this further offer. That is, Layla could not (a) raise her arm for non-financial reasons for (b) the reason that she will get £100 by doing (a). Given Motivation, the offer of £100 is not a reason for (a). To return to Murder, the detective cannot (c) arrive at a view as to whether the detective is innocent on some basis other than the clues (d) on the basis of the assistant’s testimony. Given Motivation, the testimony is not a reason for (c).[[26]](#footnote-26)

The idea behind the bracketing view is that, given the higher-order evidence, the excluded considerations no longer rationally bear on whether to believe the proposition. There are ways to develop this idea which are not vulnerable to the objection from motivation. It is commonplace that evidence does not make a difference to what it is rational for a person to believe unless they *possess* it. It is almost as commonplace that a person does not possess evidence unless they satisfy some epistemic condition (Alston 1989, 176; Conee and Feldman 2004, 227; Goldman 2012, 51; Littlejohn 2012, chap. 3; Williamson 2000), for example:

Epistemic If it is irrational for a person to believe that *p*, they do not possess that *p* as evidence that *q*.

To illustrate, if it is irrational for the detective to believe that the chauffer’s prints are on the gun—say, because the forensic scientist told them that the prints belong to the gardener—then the fact that the chauffer’s prints are on the gun does not make it rational to any degree for the detective to believe that the chauffer did it. So, they do not possess that fact as evidence that the chauffer did it.

Arguably, there are further conditions on possession (Lord 2014; Sylvan 2016). Suppose that the detective knows that the chauffer’s prints are on the gun but falsely believes that the prints were planted. In that case, although the detective satisfies Epistemic with respect to the fact that the chauffeur’s prints are on the gun, it does not make it rational to any degree for the detective to believe that the chauffer did it. So, they do not possess that fact as evidence that the chauffer did it.

In this case, were the detective to treat the fact that the chauffer’s prints are on the gun as evidence that the butler did it when deliberating, they would not be reasoning well. This points to:

Competence If a person is not in a position to competently treat that *p* as evidence that *q*, they do not possess that *p* as evidence that *q*.

González de Prado (Forthcoming) appeals to Competence in an account of how higher-order evidence defeats. In Murder, given the assistant’s testimony, the detective is not in a position to competently treat the clues as evidence that the butler is innocent. Were they to conclude on the basis of the clues that the butler is innocent, despite the testimony, they would not be reasoning well. Given Competence, it follows that the detective does not possess those clues as evidence that the butler is innocent. In turn, it follows that those clues do not bear on whether it is rational for them to believe this. In this way, they are bracketed.

One might wonder, however, whether subjects need lose the relevant competence in the presence of higher-order evidence. Serena Williams might win a rally with a slice, and in doing so manifest her expertise at tennis, even if her (reliable) coach is shouting from the courtside that the situation calls for a lob. Similarly, the detective might process the clues with expertise and conclude that the butler is innocent, even if their (reliable) assistant tells them that that is not the rational conclusion to draw.

1. **Beyond epistemology**

I have surveyed some of the difficulties in explaining how higher-order evidence might defeat first-order evidence. There are no doubt responses to those difficulties. Rather than explore them, I will close by noting connections between the debate in epistemology and debates in other fields. I broached above the idea that higher-order evidence affects the rationality of a person’s actions. It is no surprise, then, that ethicists reflect on the significance of higher-order evidence, if not always in those terms.

There is a debate as to whether disagreement threatens the rational status of ethical beliefs (Fitz 2018; McGrath 2008; Nguyen 2010; Vavova 2014). To some extent, this is a special case of peer disagreement. But it brings into sharper focus the practical significance of higher-order evidence (Rowland 2017). Suppose that eating meat is wrong, but there is disagreement within Betty’s peer group as to whether that is true. What difference does that make to whether it is rational for Betty to eat meat?

This leads to the more general issue of how, if at all, evidence for ethical views bears on first-order deliberation.[[27]](#footnote-27) Suppose that Bobby is aware of the considerations that make it wrong to eat meat, but his ethics tutor tells him that it is right to eat it. Is it rational for Bobby to eat meat? Some defend answers to this question that map on to those in the epistemology. Arpaly (2000), for example, suggests that in some such cases it is rational for a person to act against their better judgement—a practical analogue of level-splitting.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Consider also reflection in ethics on the role of evolutionary forces in shaping a population’s ethical views. One issue this raises is whether, insofar as such forces align with reproductive advantage rather than truth, evidence of their operation defeats the rational status of a person’s ethical beliefs (Bogardus 2016; Mogensen 2016; Street 2006; Vavova Forthcoming; Wittwer 2019). Again, this is a special case of the more general issue of whether evidence of irrelevant influences on a person’s belief—that is, influences that are not truth-conducive—defeats whatever first-order support a person has for that belief (Schoenfield 2014; Vavova 2018; White 2010). In turn, this raises the issue of whether, given such evidence, it remains rational for a person to act on the relevant beliefs. Suppose that Beth believes that eating meat is right, but is aware that she was raised in a family of meat-lovers, which pre-disposed her to that opinion. Should this inform her deliberations as to whether to eat meat?

There are parallel debates in aesthetics.[[29]](#footnote-29) Recall the Kantian tradition according to which aesthetic judgement is in some important sense autonomous. This prompts aestheticians to ask what bearing disagreement has on a person’s aesthetic judgements (Gorodeisky and Marcus 2018; Hopkins 2001; McGonigal 2006; Robson 2014). If Charity thinks that the film is good, but her friends think it is bad, is there rational pressure on her to revise her estimation? If so, then a person’s aesthetic judgement is in some way answerable to others’, which seems to introduce an element of heteronomy.

This leads to a wider concern about irrelevant influences on aesthetic judgement (Dorsch 2014; Kieran 2011; Lopes 2014; Meskin et al. 2013). If Charlie acquires evidence that his judgement that the film is bad is subject to bias—say, a snobbish aversion to popular cinema—does that make it irrational for him to maintain his judgement? To return to an earlier theme, answering in the affirmative might be a step toward a form of aesthetic scepticism, since there is evidence that snobbishness is widespread (Kieran 2010).

As this non-exhaustive survey indicates, there are close connections between debates in epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics concerning higher-order evidence in its different forms. It is likely that future work in this area will explore those connections further and unearth new ones to pursue.[[30]](#footnote-30)

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1. For similar cases, see (Coates 2012; Horowitz 2014; Worsnip 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There is debate as to whether evidence of evidence for a proposition is always evidence for that proposition (Comesaña and Tal 2017; Eder and Brössel 2019; Feldman 2007; Fitelson 2012; Moretti 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For this distinction, see (Goldman 2012, chap. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Some argue that higher-order evidence affects ex post but not ex ante justification (Silva Jr. 2017; van Wietmarschen 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In this context, the label ‘higher-order evidence’ was introduced by Kelly (2005; 2010). Feldman (2005) talks of ‘second-order’ evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a commitment to it, within otherwise very different frameworks, see (Conee and Feldman 2004; Williamson 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For related principles, see (Greco 2014; Littlejohn 2018; Smithies 2012; Titelbaum 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cases of higher-order evidence threaten other structural principles, including closure (Schechter 2013; Lasonen-Aarnio 2008), conditionalization (Christensen 2010, 199–202; Steglich-Petersen 2019), and reflection (Elga 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For defence of the view that there are epistemic dilemmas, see (Hughes 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For a different version of dualism, see (Schoenfield 2015a; 2015b). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For this analogy, see (Worsnip 2018, 35–36). With Worsnip, I assume that morality and prudence are incomparable for illustrative purposes only. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For further discussion of these issues, see (Horowitz 2019, 113–17; Lasonen-Aarnio 2014, 336–38). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Greco (2019) suggests that appealing to fragmentation can resolve the puzzles surrounding higher-order evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For a survey of work on Moorean beliefs, see (J. N. Williams 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For related principles, see (Gibbons 2013; Greco 2014; Kiesewetter 2016; Littlejohn 2012; Smithies 2012; Titelbaum 2015; Way and Whiting 2016a). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Littlejohn draws on (Arpaly 2000; 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This threat is widely discussed in the disagreement literature (Fumerton 2010; Frances 2010; Goldberg 2013; Kornblith 2013; Lackey 2018). For general discussion, see (Feldman 2005; Saul 2013; White 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. It is not, then, a *rebutting* defeater (Pollock 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For an overview of debates surrounding the distinction, see (Gertken and Kiesewetter 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For relevant discussion, see (Berker 2018; Howard Forthcoming; Reisner 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For defence, see (Paakkunainen 2018; Way and Whiting 2016b). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For a version of the outweighing proposal that appeals to reasons for *withholding*, see (Lord and Sylvan Forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For versions of the undercutting proposal, see (Feldman 2005; Skipper 2019). Whiting (2019) argues against it by appeal to Motivation. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. A proponent of this view might in addition say that what the subject should reason from is any evidence they have as to how likely it is that the belief they would otherwise have formed on the first-order evidence would have been true. For discussion, see (Horowitz and Sliwa 2015; Schoenfield 2015a; White 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Compare Raz (1990) on second-order practical reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This is similar to Ross’s (1930, 4–5) argument against the view, which he attributes to Kant, that there is a moral duty to act from certain motives. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Compare the debate on ethical uncertainty. For an overview, see (Bykvist 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Compare the debate of how ethical evidence bears on whether a person is praiseworthy in acting (Arpaly 2002; Johnson King 2020; Sliwa 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Also political philosophy (see Peter 2016; van Wietmarschen 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant number AH/S006338/1). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)