

# Dipossessing Defeat

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Higher-order evidence can make an agent doubt the reliability of her reasoning. When this happens, it seems rational for the agent to adopt a cautious attitude towards her original conclusion, even in cases where the higher-order evidence is misleading and the agent's original reasons were actually perfectly good. One may think that recoiling to a cautious attitude in the face of misleading self-doubt involves a failure to properly respond to one's reasons. My aim is to show that this is not so. My proposal is that (misleading) higher-order evidence can undermine the agent's possession of her first-order reasons, constituting what I call a *dipossessing defeater*. After acquiring the higher-order evidence, the agent is no longer in a position to rely competently on the relevant first-order considerations as reasons for her original conclusion, so that such reasons stop being available to her (even if they remain as strong as in the absence of the higher-order evidence). In this way, an agent with misleading higher-order evidence can adopt a cautious stance towards her original conclusion, while properly responding to the set of reasons that she possesses—a set that is reduced due to the acquisition of higher-order dipossessing defeaters.

## 1. Introduction

Sometimes we have good reasons to doubt ourselves. In particular, we may acquire higher-order evidence questioning the reliability of our reasoning abilities or our assessment of the evidence (Christensen 2007, 2010). For instance, an agent can realize that she lacks sleep, that she is drunk or that she might be somehow biased. When this happens, it seems that the agent should be cautious and reduce her confidence in the original conclusion of her reasoning. Arguably, such self-doubt may be rational even if the higher-order evidence is misleading and the relevant piece of reasoning was actually impeccable. However, when the higher-order evidence is misleading, the agent's original first-order reasons do not need to be undercut or weakened: those reasons may remain as strong as in the absence of the higher-order evidence. If this is so, it would seem that, by

refraining from endorsing her original conclusion, the agent is failing to properly respond to all her reasons. Does proper responsiveness to reasons require disregarding misleading higher-order evidence, even when the agent is not aware of its misleading nature?

My aim is to argue that it is possible to stick to the idea that agents ought to adopt those attitudes that are decisively supported by their possessed reasons, while granting that in the relevant cases of misleading self-doubt it may be permissible for the agent to heed the higher-order evidence and refrain from endorsing her original conclusion (without ending up with incoherent attitudes). My proposal is that (misleading) higher-order evidence can undermine the agent's possession of some of her original first-order reasons, constituting what I call a *dispossessing defeater*. After acquiring the higher-order evidence, the agent is no longer in a position to rely competently on the relevant first-order considerations as reasons for the attitude recommended by her original reasoning. As a result, such considerations stop being available to the agent as reasons for the attitude in question (even if the strength of those reasons is not attenuated). So, an agent with misleading higher-order evidence can adopt a cautious stance towards her original conclusion, while properly responding to the set of reasons that she *possesses*—a set that is reduced due to the acquisition of higher-order dispossessing defeaters.

The structure of the article is as follows. In § 2, I introduce the puzzle created by cases of misleading self-doubt. I explain how what I take to be the intuitive (calibrationist) reading of these cases seems to be in conflict with the plausible idea that appropriate attitudes are responsive to the agent's possessed reasons. Next, in § 3, I argue that standard forms of defeat do not account satisfactorily for the relevant cases of misleading self-doubt. After that, I go on to suggest that what is defeated in these cases is the agent's possession of some of her original reasons. First, in § 4, I discuss what it takes for an agent to possess a reason. Then, in § 5, I introduce the notion of dispossessing defeaters, which are conditions that undermine the agent's access to some reason. Finally, in § 6, I show how the intuitive interpretation of cases of misleading self-doubt can be vindicated by appeal to dispossessing defeat, without having to reject the idea that appropriate attitudes are responsive to possessed reasons, and without attributing incoherent attitudes to the agent. I conclude the paper summarizing its main claims.

## **2. Misleading Self-Doubt, Reasons Responsiveness and Coherence**

Consider the following example, adapted from similar cases discussed among others by Christensen (2010), Elga (2013), Horowitz (2014), Lasonen-Aarnio (2014), Schoenfield (2018) and Worsnip (2018):

**Mathematics:** Jane engages in mathematical deductive reasoning in order to determine how much money she owes her friend Olga. She concludes that she owes her 55\$. However, Jane learns that she has taken a pill that is very likely to make her arithmetical abilities unreliable, without her being in a position to notice whether this is so. As it happens, the pill has not actually been effective and Jane's abilities were not impaired: her mathematical reasoning was deductively good and she reached the right conclusion.

According to what I will call *calibrationist* interpretations of these types of cases,<sup>1</sup> Jane ought to withhold belief about whether she owes Olga 55\$, even if the pill has not actually been effective and her arithmetical abilities were not impaired, so that her original conclusion was correct. As long as the higher-order evidence makes self-doubt sufficiently reasonable, it seems that Jane ought to adopt a cautious attitude towards her original conclusion (see Christensen 2010; Horowitz 2014; Schoenfield 2018; Steel 2018). I will assume that this is the intuitively appealing verdict about cases like Mathematics. So, a central desideratum for my account of misleading self-doubt will be to vindicate this calibrationist verdict.

The puzzling feature of cases like Mathematics is that the (misleading) higher-order evidence does not weaken or undermine the agent's original first-order reasons. In particular, the premises of Jane's mathematical calculation keep entailing deductively her original conclusion: these premises are still as good reasons for believing the conclusion as one could have. Thus, it seems that Jane's reasons still offer decisive support for believing that she owes Olga 55\$, despite the presence of the higher-order evidence. Yet this goes against the intuitive calibrationist reading of the example, according to which Jane ought to withhold belief. Therefore, the calibrationist interpretation of cases of misleading self-doubt seems to conflict with the attractive view that appropriate attitudes are responsive to the agent's reasons. This view, which I will call Reasons Responsiveness, can be expressed as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> I take the label 'calibrationism' from Schoenfield (2015).

**Reasons Responsiveness (Ought):** S ought to  $\varphi$  if and only if, on balance, S's possessed normative reasons decisively support  $\varphi$ -ing.

The idea captured by Reasons Responsiveness is that whether an agent ought to adopt an attitude is determined by the agent's possessed reasons.<sup>2</sup> This principle concerns normative reasons, which I will regard as facts in favor (or against) some attitude. I will say that an attitude is decisively supported by one's reasons if the reasons one possesses in favor of the attitude are weightier than the combined possessed reasons against it or in favor of alternative attitudes. An analogous principle can be spelled out for permissible attitudes, in terms of sufficient rather than decisive support—where sufficient support requires that one's reasons in favor of the attitude are at least as weighty as the combined reasons against it or in favor of alternatives.

**Reasons Responsiveness (Permission):** It is permissible for S to  $\varphi$  if and only if, on balance, S's possessed normative reasons sufficiently support  $\varphi$ -ing.

Both versions of Reasons Responsiveness have to do with the *ex ante* normative status of attitudes, that is about whether the attitude is permissible or obligatory, rather than about whether the agent adopts the attitude permissibly or in a way that discharges her obligation (i.e. rather than about the *ex post* normative status of the agent's adoption of the attitude). So, Reasons Responsiveness may be about an attitude that the agent never gets to adopt. If we understand justification in terms of permission, the idea is that Reasons Responsiveness, as presented here, deals with propositional, rather than doxastic, justification (for discussion of the relevance of this distinction in the present context, see Wietmarschen 2013; Smithies 2015; Silva 2017).

As the discussion below will show, it is also important to note that Reasons Responsiveness is restricted to *possessed* reasons (see Lord 2018; also Kiesewetter

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<sup>2</sup> Similar principles can be formulated in terms of what attitudes are rationally required (see Worsnip 2018). I prefer to remain neutral about whether rational attitudes need to be supported by the agent's actual reasons or rather by her *apparent* reasons (Way 2009; Parfit 2011; Schroeder 2007; Whiting 2014; Sylvan 2015). Thus, I focus on the relation between reasons and what the agent ought to do, which I take to be less controversial. The proposal I want to defend here has an obvious counterpart at the level of rationality (understood as support by apparent reasons), but I leave that issue for another occasion.

2017). These are reasons to which the agent has some relevant form of access, that is reasons that are available to the agent in her deliberation. Arguably, not all reasons are possessed by a given agent. For instance, facts about which the agent has no way of getting knowledge are not available to her as reasons for some attitude (e.g. the fact that the pill has not been effective is not a reason accessible to Jane in Mathematics). In the following sections I will discuss at length what it takes for a reason to be possessed or accessible, and I will motivate the restriction of Reasons Responsiveness to possessed reasons. For now, it is enough to keep in mind that such a restriction is in place.

We can formulate a version of Reasons Responsiveness applied specifically to doxastic attitudes, which are the ones involved in examples like Mathematics.<sup>3</sup> I will be mainly concerned with coarse-grained doxastic attitudes, namely outright believing, outright disbelieving and withholding belief. Following Worsnip (2018), I will use the expression  $D(p)$  to represent any such attitude towards the proposition  $p$ . For the sake of succinctness, I only present the ought version of the principle:

**Doxastic Reasons Responsiveness (Ought):**  $S$  ought to  $D(p)$  if and only if, on balance,  $S$ 's possessed normative reasons decisively support  $D(p)$ -ing.

If one takes reasons in favor and against doxastic attitudes to be constituted by one's evidence (and facts about one's evidence), Doxastic Reasons Responsiveness would capture a form of evidentialism. But I will remain neutral about this—for example, I will allow for the possibility that practical facts may provide reasons to withhold belief (Schroeder 2012).

As observed above, Reasons Responsiveness seems to clash with the calibrationist intuition that agents should recoil to a cautious attitude in cases of misleading self-doubt. Despite the presence of the higher-order evidence, the premises of Jane's reasoning keep constituting decisive, deductive reasons to believe her original conclusion. Thus, Reasons Responsiveness seems to dictate that Jane ought to stick to her original conclusion, instead of adopting a more cautious attitude in line with calibrationsim.

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<sup>3</sup> We can find structurally analogous cases of misleading self-doubt regarding practical reasoning. However, I will focus mostly on epistemic cases, for the sake of concreteness and because these have been the examples typically discussed in the literature.

Moreover, one may think that cases of misleading self-doubt give rise to frictions between Reasons Responsiveness and the requirement that agents avoid incoherence between their first-order and higher-order attitudes. It is *prima facie* plausible that if an agent adopts only permissible attitudes, she will keep her first-order and higher-order attitudes aligned. In particular, if one permissibly believes that one's reasons do not sufficiently support believing  $p$ , then one ought not to believe  $p$  (i.e. one should avoid being doxastically akratic). Likewise, if one permissibly believes that one's reasons decisively support believing  $p$ , then one ought to believe  $p$  (i.e. one should be doxastically enkratic). This leads to the following attractive principle, which I adapt from Worsnip (2018):<sup>4</sup>

**Interlevel Coherence:**

It is impermissible to:

D( $p$ ) and believe that your reasons do not sufficiently support D( $p$ )

Not D( $p$ ) and believe that your reasons decisively support D( $p$ )

Indeed, as examples like Mathematics show, it seems that if  $S$  ought to be *highly confident* that  $S$ 's reasons do not sufficiently support outright believing  $p$ , then it is impermissible for her to believe  $p$ . In Mathematics, Jane ought to be very confident that the premises of her reasoning do not support her original first-order belief, and (according to the calibrationist intuition) this is enough to make it impermissible for her to maintain that first-order belief—she should withhold belief instead. So, according to a weakened, but still plausible version of Interlevel Coherence, it is impermissible for an agent to D( $p$ ) if she ought to be very confident that the reasons she is relying on do not support D( $p$ ) (or if she ought to believe that it is very likely that such reasons do not support D( $p$ )).

In cases of misleading self-doubt, we seem to find that the agent's non-attenuated first-order reasons recommend endorsing a certain first-order attitude, whereas her higher-order reasons recommend believing that such an attitude is not supported by her reasons. On the face of it, Jane's reasons decisively support outright believing that she owes Olga 55\$, whereas the higher-order evidence gives her reasons

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<sup>4</sup> See also Christensen 2007; Horowitz 2014; Titelbaum 2015.

to be highly confident that the premises of her calculation do not support that conclusion. One may think that in these situations agents cannot properly respond to all their reasons while at the same time keeping their first-order and higher-order attitudes aligned in a coherent way (Christensen 2010; Coates 2012; Hazlett 2012; Horowitz 2014; Lasonen-Aarnio 2014; Worsnip 2018). Worsnip (2018) takes this to show that there are two different, sometimes conflicting normative domains, one related to responsiveness to reasons and another one related to coherence. An alternative, but related view is that of Christensen (2010), according to which misleading self-doubt leads to conflicts between two epistemic ideals that cannot always be simultaneously attained. A further possibility is to appeal to these cases to reject either Reasons Responsiveness or Interlevel Coherence (for the second option, see Coates 2012; Wedgwood 2012; Lasonen-Aarnio 2014, forthcoming; Pryor 2018, also Christensen 2016).

I want to argue that the conflict between Interlevel Coherence and Reasons Responsiveness is merely apparent, at least if we focus on responsiveness to *possessed* reasons. My goal is to show that, in cases of misleading self-doubt, the agent's possessed reasons actually support adopting the sort of cautious first-order attitude advocated by calibrationism. The most obvious strategy for doing so is to claim that the agent's original first-order reasons are somehow defeated or undermined by the acquisition of the higher-order evidence. However, in the next section I will argue that the standard forms of defeat cannot account for cases of self-doubt like Mathematics. After that, I will explore a further form of defeat in which what is undermined is not the overall strength of the agent's original first-order reasons, but her access to such reasons. I will call this dispossessing defeat. My proposal is that this is the type of defeat that takes place in Mathematics and other cases of misleading self-doubt.

### **3. Self-Doubt and Defeat**

In cases like Mathematics, the acquisition of (misleading) higher-order evidence seems to worsen the agent's epistemic position with respect to her original conclusion. This suggests that the agent's original reasons to endorse such a conclusion have been somehow defeated or undermined. Yet it is not clear how this defeat would work. The standard forms of reasons defeat do not seem to apply generally to these types of cases (Christensen 2010: 193-195; Lasonen-Aarnio 2014: 317; DiPaolo 2018; Worsnip 2018).

Note first that in Mathematics Jane does not acquire counter-evidence against her original conclusion. The fact that Jane has taken the pill, which constitutes the higher-order evidence making Jane doubt, does not bear on the truth or falsity of the proposition that she owes Olga 55\$. Thus, this is not a case in which Jane's epistemic position in relation to that proposition has weakened as a result of the acquisition of rebutting, countervailing evidence.

Moreover, after the acquisition of the higher-order evidence, Jane's original reasons remain as strong as before. It is not a case of attenuation or undercutting defeat, in which the weight or strength of the agent's reasons becomes reduced (for the notion of attenuation, see Dancy 2004; Schroeder 2007). This is particularly clear in Jane's example, because the premises of her original reasoning entail *deductively* the conclusion. Regardless of whether Jane has taken the distorting pill, the premises of her reasoning are as good reasons for endorsing the conclusion as one may wish for. So, there is no obvious sense in which Jane's original reasons are undermined or weakened by the higher-order evidence.

There remains the possibility that Jane's position changes after the acquisition of the higher-order evidence because she gets further reasons to *withhold*, even if her original reasons to believe the conclusion are not attenuated or rebutted by counter-evidence. If such further reasons to withhold are strong enough, they could outweigh Jane's original reasons to believe, making withholding permissible as a result (see Lord 2018: 59-60). The idea, therefore, is that withholding would become permissible because the agent gains new reasons to withhold, not because her overall reasons to believe have got weaker (they would remain as weighty as in the absence of the higher-order evidence).

The situation would be analogous to cases where the agent acquires pragmatic reasons to withhold, without there being any attenuation of her reasons for believing. Defenders of pragmatic encroachment may think that this is what happens when practical stakes raise, so that the costs of forming a false belief increase and the evidential standards required for the permissibility of outright belief become higher (see Schroeder 2012). According to the view that there is pragmatic encroachment on permissible belief, the same evidence may be enough to make it permissible for an agent to adopt a certain outright belief when the potential practical costs of believing falsely are low, but not when such practical costs are high (for discussion about these cases, see among others Stanley 2005; Fantl and McGrath 2009). On a plausible interpretation of these cases, the



evidential position of the agent does not change, but due to the rise in practical stakes she acquires further reasons to withhold.

I agree that the ultimate effect of the higher-order evidence in Mathematics is to make Jane gain reasons to withhold. However, cases of self-doubt seem to work differently from alleged cases of pragmatic encroachment—and in general from cases in which the agent's epistemic position regarding her initial conclusion does not become weaker. First, in cases of self-doubt the practical stakes need not be more demanding than in the absence of the higher-order evidence. Indeed, there is no clear shift in practical stakes in Jane's example. Furthermore, in the relevant cases of self-doubt the agent's positive epistemic position with respect to her original conclusion becomes worse after the acquisition of the higher-order evidence. There is the intuition that the agent's reasons in favor of the original conclusion should exert a weaker normative pull in her deliberation after the introduction of the misleading higher-order evidence. It is not just that Jane has acquired new reasons for alternatives to believing (in particular, for withholding): it seems that her positive case for believing has itself been somehow undermined. Yet, remember that it also seems that the strength of the original first-order reasons in favor of the conclusion has not been attenuated (the premises of Jane's reasoning still entail deductively the conclusion). Can we combine these two insights in a coherent view?

In what follows I propose that the most promising account of cases of rational self-doubt hinges on noting that the agent's position in relation to some conclusion is undermined not only if her original reasons supporting the conclusion get weaker, but also when her access to such reasons becomes precarious or is somehow blocked. This proposal has similarities with Christensen's suggestion that, in cases of self-doubt, the reasons given by the agent's first-order evidence get 'bracketed', so that they cannot play an active role in her deliberation (Christensen 2010: 195-196). I intend to explain why this bracketing happens, appealing to plausible claims about our responsiveness to reasons, and to show that, pace Christensen, this explanation does not involve any conflict among rational ideals or normative principles.

#### **4. Possessed Reasons**

Reasons Responsiveness is a perspectival principle, in that it only concerns reasons *possessed* by the agent. In this way, whether an agent ought to react in some way is only determined by the reasons she has access to, not by all existing reasons. This sort of view is particularly plausible in relation to reasons for belief. Standard evidentialism requires that the agent adjusts her beliefs to the evidence available to her, but not to pieces of evidence beyond her epistemic ken. If I have no way of knowing that it is raining, it is not the case that I ought to believe that it is raining – I may suspend judgment about the matter.

Lord (2018) and Kieseewetter (2017) offer a general defense of a perspectival account of how agents ought to respond, extending it to attitudes other than belief, along the lines of Reasons Responsiveness. This type of view can be motivated in several ways. First, it may be argued that the reasons that determine permissions and obligations should be able to play an action-guiding role (Kolodny 2007: 372; Kieseewetter 2017: 301-308; Lord 2018: ch. 8; for discussion, see Way and Whiting 2017). Arguably, considerations beyond the agent's epistemic reach cannot offer any effective guidance. Second, it is easy to think of cases where an agent ought to  $\phi$ , despite her being aware that there are facts beyond her epistemic ken such that, if she knew them,  $\phi$ -ing would become impermissible. Examples of this type have been discussed by several authors (Jackson 1991; Zimmerman 2008; Kolodny and MacFarlane 2010; Kieseewetter 2011; Parfit 2011; Lord 2018: 225-232; Schroeder 2018). For instance, imagine that Mary knows that envelope  $E_1$  contains 100\$, and also that one envelope among  $E_2, E_3 \dots E_{1000}$  contains 1000\$, while the other 998 are empty, but she does not know which specific envelope is the one with 1000\$. If Mary can only choose one envelope, it seems that given her knowledge she ought to pick  $E_1$ . However, if she had access to the fact that  $E_5$  is the envelope containing 1000\$, then that one would be the envelope she ought to choose. This suggests that the fact that envelope  $E_5$  contains 1000\$ only behaves as a reason determining what Mary ought to do if she has access to such a fact. Analogous examples arise naturally in the doxastic domain in relation to withholding. It may be that an agent ought to withhold belief about whether  $p$ , despite her being aware that there exists decisive evidence either for  $p$  or for  $\neg p$  (although she does not know for which, as she has no access to the relevant evidence).

It is not my purpose here to vindicate a perspectival rendering of Reasons Responsiveness. I will just assume that the considerations above make such an

interpretation plausible, and I will explore its implications in relation to the problem of misleading higher-order evidence.

What conditions does an agent have to meet in order to possess a reason? It is quite uncontroversial that the agent needs to have some relevant form of epistemic access to the fact constituting the reason. Lord calls this the *epistemic condition* (2018: ch. 3). If an agent is completely ignorant about fact R, then it seems clear that she does not possess the reason constituted by R—it is not a reason available to her when deliberating. There are different ways of fleshing out this condition, in terms of different types of epistemic access required for an agent to possess some reason (see, for instance, Williamson 2000; Hawthorne and Stanley 2008; Neta 2008; Schroeder 2011; Lord 2018: ch. 3). I can remain largely neutral about the specific way of constructing the epistemic condition. For ease of exposition, I will assume that the agent needs to be in a position to know the facts constituting the reasons possessed by her (this view is defended by Lord 2018: ch. 3).

In the relevant examples of misleading higher-order evidence we can stipulate that the agent satisfies any epistemic condition we consider suitable. For instance, in Mathematics Jane knows the facts constituting the premises of her reasoning. However, this is not the only condition that the agent needs to meet in order to possess a reason. Plausibly, the agent also has to (be in a position to) be suitably sensitive to the favoring relation between the reason-constituting fact and the relevant attitude (see Whiting 2014; Sylvan 2015; Lord 2018: ch. 4). If the agent has no way of realizing that fact R favors  $\varphi$ -ing, then it seems that she does not possess R as a reason to  $\varphi$ . In this way, if you have no inkling that Tom is allergic to apples, the fact that he is eating an apple is not a reason you possess to call an ambulance.

Again, my aim is not to provide a detailed argument for the inclusion of this further condition, but rather to examine whether it allows for a satisfactory solution to the puzzle of misleading higher-order evidence. Having said this, similar considerations to those supporting a perspectival reading of Reasons Responsiveness also offer motivation for this condition on possession. On the one hand, it seems that R can only guide you properly in  $\varphi$ -ing if you somehow recognize that R favors  $\varphi$ -ing. On the other hand, we can find cases analogous to the envelopes example discussed above, but concerning this second condition on possession. There may be situations where the agent knows that R, and that R either decisively favors  $\varphi$ -ing or  $\psi$ -ing, but she is not in a position to know which. In this type of case, it may be that the agent ought to choose a third option  $\chi$ , even

if  $\chi$ -ing would be impermissible were she in a position to recognize that R decisively favors, say,  $\varphi$ -ing. For instance, it may be that I know both that  $p$  and that  $p$  entails either  $q$  or  $\neg q$ , but given my limited deductive abilities I am not sure which. Assume that  $p$  actually entails  $q$ , although perceiving the entailment is not obvious and requires sophisticated logical skills far beyond my competences. It seems that in this case I ought to suspend judgment about whether  $q$ . Thus, my knowledge of  $p$  is not enough to make me possess  $p$  as a deductive reason to believe  $q$ , insofar as knowing  $p$  does not make it the case that I ought to believe  $q$  rather than suspend judgment about it. The natural interpretation of this type of example is that, in order to possess  $p$  as a reason to believe  $q$ , it is not enough for me to know  $p$ —I also have to be in a position to properly recognize the relation of support between  $p$  and  $q$ .

Now, one may wonder what it takes for an agent to be properly sensitive to the favoring relation between a fact R and an attitude  $\varphi$ . A first possibility is that the agent must believe that R favors  $\varphi$ -ing (and we may further require that this belief is justified, or that it amounts to knowledge). This proposal is not too attractive, though. On the one hand, it seems to lead to undesirable overintellectualization (Sylvan 2015; Lord 2018: 102-112). It would be nice to leave open the possibility that agents that do not have the explicit concept of favoring or reason can nonetheless adopt attitudes guided by reasons. Furthermore, it is not clear that having a justified (or even knowledgeable) belief that R favors  $\varphi$ -ing is incompatible with failing to be properly sensitive to the favoring relation between R and  $\varphi$ -ing. For example, one may acquire justification for that belief via authoritative testimony, but combine it with mistaken views about what it means for a fact to favor an attitude, so that one actually fails to properly appreciate the favoring relation between R and  $\varphi$ -ing.

Following Sylvan (2015), I will endorse the view that being properly sensitive to the favoring relation between R and  $\varphi$ -ing is at bottom a matter of manifesting a suitable competence, more specifically a matter of competently treating R as a reason to  $\varphi$ . This competence can be seen as an instance of a general competence to rely only on actual reasons. In this case, it would be the competence to rely on R-like considerations as reasons to adopt  $\varphi$ -like attitudes just in case they are such reasons. Thus, I will consider that possessing reason R to  $\varphi$  requires being in a position to competently treat R as such a reason.

Lord (2018: ch. 4) puts forward a similar proposal in terms of knowledge-how. According to Lord, possessing reason R to  $\varphi$  amounts to being in a position to manifest knowledge about how to use R as a reason to  $\varphi$  (Lord 2018: 117-124). Lord calls this type of requirement for possession the *practical condition*. By appealing to knowledge-how and competences, both Lord and Sylvan manage to avoid the problem of overintellectualization (they do not demand that the agent is able to form explicit beliefs about normative notions). Depending on how we think about the relations between knowledge-how and competences, Lord's proposal can be seen as more or less close to the sort of view advanced by Sylvan (2015). I will account for reasons possession directly in terms of competences, remaining neutral about the connections with knowledge-how.<sup>5</sup>

Competences, as I will understand them, are special types of reliable dispositions (Sosa 2015: 96; Sylvan 2015). In this way, competently treating R as a reason to  $\varphi$  involves manifesting a reliable disposition to treat R-like considerations as reasons to adopt  $\varphi$ -like attitudes *just in case* they are such reasons (which is an instance of a more general disposition to rely only on actual reasons). Note that the dispositions associated with competences have to be reliable, but they do not need to be infallible (and in general are not). A competent performance may fail to be successful due to external interferences or because conditions are not normal. In Sosa's virtue-theoretic terminology, when the agent's performance is successful in a way that manifests her competence, such a performance is said to be *apt*, not just competent (Sosa 2010). Actually possessing reason R does not only require being in a position to manifest a competence to treat R as a reason, but also that R is in fact a reason and that the agent is in a position to treat it as such by virtue of the manifestation of her competence. In other words, the agent needs to be in a position to *aptly* treat R as a reason to  $\varphi$ .<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, an agent knowing the fact that R may fail to be in a position to treat R aptly (thereby, competently) as a reason to  $\varphi$ . For instance, a layperson cannot

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<sup>5</sup> For an interesting discussion of the interaction between knowledge-how and misleading higher-order evidence about one's abilities, see Carter and Navarro (2017).

<sup>6</sup> As I will understand the notion, being in a position to manifest some competence involves being in a friendly environment where the relevant dispositions can be manifested (Sosa 2015; Lord 2018: 91-94). So, an archer is not in a position to manifest her competence when she is underwater.

competently treat the premises of a sophisticated mathematical deduction as reasons for its conclusion, while a mathematical expert may be in a position to do so. Thus, such premises are possessed reasons to believe the conclusion of the deduction for the expert but not the layperson. Something similar can be said about a layperson who observes certain trajectories in a bubble chamber. The expert physicist, but not the layperson, is in a position to competently treat the fact that such trajectories have been observed as a reason to conclude that a certain subatomic interaction has taken place.

It can even happen that no agent is in a position to treat R competently as a reason to  $\varphi$  (not even experts). Imagine that the results of David's medical tests actually indicate that he does not suffer from the condition that his doctors were trying to discard. However, if current medical science has not discovered yet that this reliable indication relation obtains, then David's doctors will not be in a position to competently treat the results of the tests as a reason to discard that David suffers from the condition in question. In this way, in line with perspectival Reasons Responsiveness, it is not the case that the doctors ought to discard that David suffers from the condition, given their current evidence. Rather, they ought to perform further tests to rule out such a possibility. Otherwise, they would be acting in a reckless way that is not creditworthy and fails to manifest the relevant rational competence.

One may think that a perspectival version of Reasons Responsiveness, restricted to possessed reasons, makes it too easy for agents to get off the hook. The thought is that the agent could make it the case that some consideration stops being among her possessed reasons merely by disregarding it. However, if we work with a suitable notion of possession, this does not need to be so. Note that I am not claiming that possession requires actually responding to the relevant reason, but just being in a position to do so competently. In principle, it is possible that an agent is in a position to treat competently a consideration as a reason but fails to do so, for instance because of the interference of vicious dispositions. In this case, the relevant reason may still figure among the agent's possessed reasons, and therefore would influence what attitudes she ought to adopt.

## **5. Dispossessing Defeat**

To my mind, the best strategy for vindicating calibrationism is to argue that misleading self-doubt can make the agent stop meeting some of the conditions for possessing her

original first-order reasons. My proposal, therefore, is that, in the relevant cases of rational self-doubt, the higher-order evidence does not necessarily weaken the agent's original first-order reasons, but rather undermines her possessions of such reasons as reasons for her initial first-order attitude. The idea is that the agent's position with respect to the adoption of an attitude  $\varphi$  can be defeated not only because her overall original reasons to  $\varphi$  become weaker, but also because her access to such reasons is lost or gets hampered, with the result that such reasons stop being available to her (at least as reasons with the weight they originally had). I call this type of defeat *dispossessing defeat*.<sup>7</sup>

There are two ways in which dispossessing defeat may work. On the one hand, it may attack the epistemic condition, by defeating the agent's epistemic access to the fact R constituting the reason (say, by defeating the agent's knowledge that R). On the other hand, the practical condition for possession may be undermined, so that the agent is no longer in a position to properly recognize the favoring relation between the reasons and the relevant attitude. I will focus on this second form of disposing defeat, since I take it to be the one operative in the sorts of examples I am discussing (although, arguably, there will be cases in which misleading evidence defeats the epistemic condition for possession).

I submit that in cases of self-doubt like Mathematics the misleading higher-order evidence acts as a dispossessing defeater, undermining the agent's grip on her original first-order reasons. After acquiring the higher-order evidence, some of the agent's original first-order reasons are not available to her anymore, at least as reasons with the weight originally attributed to them. This is so because the agent is no longer in a position to treat competently such considerations as reasons for the initial conclusion (again, at least as reasons with their original weight). If, despite the acquisition of the higher-order evidence, the agent kept treating the relevant considerations as reasons for the original conclusion (with the same weight as before), she would not be manifesting a competence in relying only on actual reasons.

Consider again Jane's situation in Mathematics. Imagine her deliberation after finding out that she has taken the pill. What doxastic attitude should she adopt, after this

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<sup>7</sup> In the same way that dispossessing defeaters undermine the agent's access to some reason, there may be considerations that (re-)enable the agent to access the relevant reason (e.g. the fact that Jane knows that she is immune to the effects of the pill).

discovery? My claim is that, in this new deliberation, Jane cannot properly rely anymore on the premises of her calculation as sufficient, deductive reasons for her original conclusion. If she insisted on doing so, despite having learned that it is very probable that her mathematical abilities are impaired, Jane would be displaying a very unreliable disposition to be guided only by reasons.<sup>8</sup> Jane knows that, in these conditions, it is likely that by sticking to the verdicts of her mathematical calculations she will end up treating as reasons considerations that are not such reasons. In this way, by sticking to her original conclusion, she would be manifesting an unreliable reasoning disposition that does not ground a competence to rely only on actual reasons—more specifically, a competence to treat considerations of the type of those in the premises of her calculation as sufficient reasons for attitudes of the type of the one recommended in the conclusion just in case they actually are such reasons.<sup>9</sup> The disposition that Jane would reveal by engaging in such reckless, risky behavior would certainly not be the sort of disposition that characterizes competent, virtuous followers of reasons (see Lasonen-Aarnio forthcoming). In this way, Jane's possession of her original first-order reasons has been undermined by the higher-order evidence, despite its misleading nature.

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<sup>8</sup> It may be argued that Jane does not need to rely anymore on the premises of her original calculation: it is enough for her to rely on her original conclusion. After all, we do not always replay the reasoning that led us originally to accept  $p$  whenever we consider whether  $p$  (say, because we momentarily forget whether  $p$  is part of the things we accept). Arguably, we often just remember that in the past we concluded that  $p$  and trust our past verdict without going again through the specific piece of reasoning supporting it. However, this reliance is not indefeasible and, very plausibly, it is not appropriate if we are aware that it is likely that these past conclusions were reached in unreliable ways. This is precisely what happens when Jane deliberates after acquiring the higher-order evidence: she is not anymore in a position to competently trust the conclusions of pieces of mathematical reasoning performed after taking the pill.

<sup>9</sup> See Smithies (2015) for considerations along similar lines, although he argues that what is defeated is the agent's doxastic or ex post justification, whereas the ex ante normative status of her attitude remains unaffected. I discuss below the differences between this type of view and my proposal.



A helpful way of thinking about these cases is to note that the competence associated with reasons possession has a precautionary or protective dimension, insofar as it is a competence to rely *only* on actual reasons. Precautionary competences aim to prevent the agent from producing performances in circumstances where they are likely to fail (see Broncano-Berrocal 2018; also Sosa 2015: ch. 3). Thus, if an agent produces some aim-directed performance, despite recognizing that she is in a situation where the chances of success are very low, she will fail to manifest a precautionary competence regarding that performance. Think of a basketball player who is very skillful in scoring from different positions, but shows very poor shot selection – she just shoots every time she gets the ball, even when the shot is very likely to be blocked by the defender. This player would not manifest a precautionary competence to shoot only when the chances of scoring are high enough, despite perhaps displaying high competence as an accurate shooter (Sosa 2015: 68-73). The idea is that being competent in relying only on actual reasons involves a precautionary competence to avoid treating a consideration as a reason when one is aware that the circumstances are such that one is likely to be mistaken in doing so.

I am suggesting, therefore, that an agent is not in a position to treat R competently as a reason to  $\varphi$  if she knows that she is in circumstances where it is very likely that she will not rely on actual reasons if she treats R-like considerations as reasons to adopt  $\varphi$ -like attitudes.<sup>10</sup> In such circumstances, treating R as a reason to  $\varphi$  would be incompatible with the manifestation of a competence to avoid relying on considerations that are not actually reasons. Imagine, for instance, a coroner who finds blood of type O negative in some samples taken from a crime scene. This makes her initially conclude that there were traces of O negative blood in the crime scene. However, the coroner is later informed that

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, if R is a sufficient, deductive reason to  $\varphi$ , then there is no world in which one is mistaken in treating it as such. Yet if one does so not by virtue of exercising one's deductive competences but, say, out of superstition, it may very well be that one displays an unreliable disposition to treat R-like considerations as such reasons. There may be near worlds where, as a result of manifesting this disposition, one mistakenly treats a consideration similar to R (e.g. the premise of a slightly different mathematical calculation) as a reason to  $\varphi$ , or where one treats R as a reason for a different conclusion (e.g. an incorrect result for the calculation). In this way, the disposition manifested may be very unsafe and fail to underpin a competence to rely only on actual reasons.

95% of the samples in her laboratory have been contaminated with O negative blood (and she has no way of knowing whether the particular samples she has analyzed are among them). Even if the samples the coroner worked with have not been contaminated, and her tests followed all standard procedures, it seems that she is not in a position to competently treat the results of such tests as giving her reasons to conclude that there was O negative blood in the crime scene. She should instead retract her initial verdict and adopt a more cautious attitude. If the coroner keeps relying on her original reasons, she will be displaying an unreliable forensic disposition, which is likely to make her misrepresent crime scenes. In other words, she will not behave as a competent detector of forensic reasons. Thus, the higher-order evidence about the samples tested undermines the coroner's possession of the reasons that supported her initial conclusion.

To be sure, the acquisition of higher-order evidence raising self-doubts does not always deprive the agent of all reasons to adopt a favorable attitude towards the conclusion of her original reasoning (e.g. the belief that Jane owes Olga 55\$). It may be that the agent still possesses some (weaker) reasons in favor of endorsing her initial conclusion, even if she should remain more cautious than in the absence of the higher-order evidence. A plausible idea is that, when the agent acquires undefeated higher-order evidence to the effect that she may have engaged in a somewhat unreliable reasoning process, higher-order facts about the reasoning process and its expected reliability can still provide reasons in favor of endorsing the conclusion of that reasoning process. More specifically, the reason would be constituted by the fact that a certain conclusion was reached via a reasoning process with such-and-such expected degree of reliability in that type of situation.<sup>11</sup> If there is 80% probability that a given reasoning process delivers correct verdicts, then the fact that it delivered the verdict  $p$  is a reason to have a favorable attitude towards  $p$ , say, to have high credence in it. How exactly one should update one's credences in the face of this type of higher-order evidence is of course a subtle question, and I will not be able to tackle it here (Schoenfield 2018 offers a proposal sympathetic to calibrationist intuitions; for further discussion, see Elga 2013; Lasonen-Aarnio 2015; Schoenfield 2015; Sliwa and Horowitz 2015; Steel 2018).

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<sup>11</sup> This type of view is sometimes called the 'thermometer model', given that we would treat our reasoning process as a reliable indicator, like we do with thermometers and other instruments (see White 2009; Schoenfield 2015; Christensen 2016).

It is important to stress that I am not suggesting that doxastic deliberation should always, or even typically, be carried out at the level of higher-order reasons about the expected reliability of the agent's reasoning processes (this worry is pressed by Schoenfield 2015). In ordinary deliberations, it may be perfectly fine to attend just to first-order reasons about the matter considered. It is only when there is specific higher-order evidence questioning the reliability of one's reasoning that one needs to move to a higher-order level. I am just assuming that in some situations we have good reasons to doubt ourselves and our reasoning process, not that we always do. Even granting that our rational capacities are generally fallible, it can be argued that in most cases the possibility that our basic reasoning processes are unreliable may be *properly ignored*, so that such a possibility is not considered in our deliberations (I am adopting the notion of properly ignoring from Lewis 1996). Unless we have some special reason to doubt ourselves, by default we may rely on our basic reasoning capacities in a transparent way, without needing to engage in any higher-order, self-reflective examination of the reliability of such capacities (see Sliwa and Horowitz 2015: 2855-2856).

It is also worth noting that the view I am proposing only works smoothly when self-doubt is sufficiently local. If reasonable self-doubt becomes generalized, questioning even the most basic ways of responding to reasons and uncertainty, the agent will find herself without any competence to rely on reasons—in this sense, her responses will become *arational* (like the responses of someone completely drunk). Dispossession has a corrosive effect: dispossess too much and you end up with nothing. I would say, however, that this limitation is a feature of rational self-doubt and our theorizing about it, rather than constituting a specific problem for my view (see Sliwa and Horowitz 2015: 2853-2854). Arguably, if an agent entertains doubts about everything, including about how to react to self-doubt and uncertainty, then at some point she will lose her capacity to respond to reasons and even to entertain doubts meaningfully, so that her behavior stops being evaluable as rational. Rationality presupposes that explicit self-doubt is circumscribed to some confined domain and does not become global. Indeed, ordinary cases of self-doubt tend to be of this local type—it is not easy to provide good reasons to

entertain generalized doubts about all our rational capacities. I am satisfied, therefore, if my proposal deals suitably with cases of local, restricted self-doubt.<sup>12</sup>

I hope that the notion of dispossessing defeat is sufficiently clear, and that I have managed to motivate the view that misleading self-doubt can work as a dispossessing defeater. I do not want to claim that such a view is undisputable, but only that it is plausible enough and that it offers the most promising defense of calibrationism. In the next section I appeal to dispossessing defeat in order to develop a solution to the puzzle posed by misleading self-doubt.

## **6. Solving the puzzle of misleading self-doubt**

The central challenge in cases of misleading self-doubt is to explain in what sense the agent comes to occupy a weaker position in relation to her original first-order attitude, taking into account that the higher-order evidence does not need to attenuate the strength of her original reasons for that attitude. Once dispossessing defeat comes into the picture, it is easy to see what is going on: the agent's possession of some of her original first-order reasons is undermined as a result of the acquisition of the higher-order evidence, which acts as a dispossessing defeater despite its misleading nature. This opens the door to an account of misleading self-doubt that does not involve conflicts between Reasons Responsiveness and Interlevel Coherence, and that respects the calibrationist intuition.

The account goes along the following lines. After getting the higher-order evidence, the agent no longer has access to some of her original first-order reasons. Those now unpossessed first-order reasons will be beyond the scope of Reasons Responsiveness as applied to the agent's deliberation once the higher-order evidence is in play. In this way, such reasons will not contribute to the determination of what attitudes the agent ought to adopt when deliberating in the presence of the higher-order evidence. The set of first-order reasons possessed by the agent has been reduced, so that it may now support a more cautious attitude towards her original conclusion, in line with the calibrationist

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<sup>12</sup> Generalized self-doubt about the right way to react to uncertainty is discussed by Lasonen-Aarnio (2015). See also Sliwa and Horowitz (2015), Titelbaum (2015). I thank Roy Sorensen for his helpful comments about this issue.

intuition. There does not need to be any incoherence between this more cautious first-order attitude (say, withholding belief about the original conclusion) and the higher-order attitude supported by the misleading higher-order evidence. Arguably, there will be an alignment between the first-order and higher-order attitudes recommended by the new set of possessed reasons, given that by adopting a more cautious first-order attitude the agent will be responding to the same considerations that also speak in favor of the doubt-induced higher-order attitude (see Littlejohn 2018). More specifically, the agent will be manifesting her sensitivity to the fact that, given the presence of the higher-order evidence, it is very likely that some of her original first-order reasons do not actually support her initial first-order attitude.

Let us return to Jane's predicament in Mathematics. According to the discussion in the previous section, when Jane learns that she has taken the distorting pill, she stops possessing the premises of her original reasoning as deductive reasons for her original belief—her possession of such reasons has been defeated. This means that she is not in a position to properly rely on those reasons in deliberations taking place after the discovery that she may be under the influence of the pill. Assume that Jane originally concluded that she owes Olga 55\$ just on the basis of her mathematical calculation (she had no additional reasons to conclude so). Then, when deliberating after learning about the pill, Jane will not possess sufficient reasons to hold her original belief that she owes Olga 55\$. Indeed, the fact that now her possessed reasons to (dis)believe her original conclusion are insufficient constitutes a possessed decisive reason to withhold belief (a reason that did not exist before the higher-order evidence about the pill intervened as a dispossessing defeater). So, Jane ought to withhold belief about whether she owes Olga 55\$, which is perfectly coherent with the higher-order belief that, because of the potential effects of pill, her original mathematical reasoning was very likely to be unreliable.

Thus, it turns out that Reasons Responsiveness and Interlevel Coherence do not impose incompatible demands in cases of misleading higher-order evidence like Mathematics. It remains an open possibility, therefore, that properly responding to all your possessed reasons is sufficient for having coherent attitudes (for discussion of this view, see Kolodny 2008; Kiesewetter 2017; Lord 2018).

It should be remembered that Reasons Responsiveness has to do with the ex ante normative status of attitudes, and that it only ranges over possessed reasons. Thus, dispossessing defeat undermines not only the ex post, but also the ex ante normative status

of attitudes. It is not the case that Jane is *ex ante* permitted to believe her original conclusion, but *ex post* obligated to withhold belief about it. Rather, after she learns about the pill and thereby acquires a dispossessing defeater, believing the original conclusion is both *ex ante* and *ex post* impermissible for Jane. In this way, my account of self-doubt cases does not involve introducing conflicts between *ex ante* and *ex post* permissibility, or between propositional and doxastic justification, as happens in proposals like Wietmarschen's (2013), Smithies's (2015) or Silva's (2017). According to these views, due to the presence of the misleading higher-order evidence the agent is not in a position to stick to the original first-order attitude justifiedly (i.e. with doxastic justification), even if the attitude remains propositionally or *ex ante* justified. I take it to be desirable to avoid this type of mismatch between *ex ante* and *ex post* statuses, if only to leave open the plausible view that *ex ante* justifiability requires being in a position to adopt the attitude in an *ex post* justified way (Lord 2018: 101; Turri 2010). Moreover, if we assume that doxastic justification requires propositional justification, these proposals have the implication that the cautious calibrated attitude would not be doxastically justified either, insofar as the attitude that would remain propositionally justified is the original, non-calibrated one (see Titelbaum forthcoming). My account, by contrast, makes the calibrated attitude both propositionally (*ex ante*) and doxastically (*ex post*) justified. To be sure, we can postulate further *ex ante* normative statuses not enjoyed by the calibrated attitude (say, being sufficiently supported by all existing reasons, or by all reasons constituted by facts known by the agent). The crucial point, however, is that such *ex ante* statuses would not be necessary in order for the agent's attitude to be *ex post* permissible or justified. The sort of *ex ante* normative status required for *ex post* permissibility or justification only involves support by *possessed* reasons.

It would be necessary to say much more in order to offer a detailed analysis of the different examples of misleading self-doubt discussed in the literature.<sup>13</sup> However, the

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<sup>13</sup> In particular, I have not examined cases in which the attitude originally recommended is withholding (see Worsnip 2018: 24-34). I think that a solution along the lines sketched above could also be applied here. In these cases, the agent would be dispossessed of some of her original reasons to withhold. The attitude that she should adopt would depend on what other reasons she possesses after acquiring the higher-order evidence. Due to space

considerations above will hopefully provide a general idea of how the notion of dispossessing defeat allows us to do justice to the calibrationist intuition while retaining both Reasons Responsiveness and Interlevel Coherence.

## 7. Conclusions

I have argued that, in cases of rational but misleading self-doubt, the higher-order evidence acquired by the agent undermines her possession of some of her original reasons, as a result of which such reasons stop being available to the agent in her deliberations. Thus, these cases are examples of a more general phenomenon, which I have called dispossessing defeat. This type of defeat explains why the epistemic position of the agent worsens in the presence of misleading higher-order evidence, even in cases like Mathematics in which her original reasons are not attenuated. From the impoverished position the agent occupies after acquiring the misleading higher-order evidence, she can remain coherent while properly responding to all the reasons she has access to (which do not include anymore some of the reasons she originally had). In this way, we can account for cases of misleading self-doubt without appealing to conflicts between Reasons Responsiveness and Interlevel Coherence. I take it that this makes the notion of dispossessing defeat interesting and worth exploring.<sup>14</sup>

## References

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limitations, more detailed discussion of these interesting cases has to wait for another occasion.

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