# Epistemic Akrasia: Irrational or Worse

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Abstract: Epistemically akratic agents believe both p and that believing p is irrational for them. Some of the costs of thinking that epistemic akrasia can be rational are clear. It is hypocritical, and outright weird, to have beliefs that we consider irrational, let alone to reason with or act on those beliefs. However, as Maria Lasonen-Aarnio (2020) and Brian Weatherson (2019) have argued, the weirdness of akrasia does not obviously tell against its rationality. Here I argue that views permitting epistemic akrasia fare worse than previously thought. These views imply that we should sometimes have beliefs that we know for certain are either irrational or false. And while having a belief that we know to be irrational is straightforwardly irrational, the additional possibility that the belief may be false cannot make having it any more rational.

## (1) Introduction

An *epistemically akratic* agent believes both p and that it is irrational for her to believe p. Are there situations in which it is rational to be epistemically akratic? Some (so-called *level-connectors*), like Daniel Greco (2014) and Michael Titelbaum (2015), say no. On their views, not only does having akratic beliefs appear incoherent, but reasoning with and acting on those beliefs is patently irrational. Others (so-called *level-splitters*), like Maria Lasonen-Aarnio (2020) and Brian Weatherson (2019), say yes. They maintain that rationality sometimes requires us to hold akratic beliefs, and that the appearance of irrationality is due to the agent's manifesting an epistemic vice other than irrationality.[1]

The kinds of circumstances in which level-splitters think that we are rationally required to be akratic are those that involve misleading *higher-order evidence*. Higher-order evidence is typically taken to be evidence about what rationality requires us to

[1] For Lasonen-Aarnio (2020), the akratic agent manifests a *bad epistemic disposition*, whereas for Weatherson (2019) the akratic agent is *unwise*.

believe.[2] So, when rationality requires us to believe p, but we get enough higher-order evidence suggesting that we may not believe p, level-splitters would say that we should believe both p and that believing p is irrational. That is how we get to be rationally akratic on the level-splitting view.

Nothing in the circumstances that level-splitters take to justify epistemic akrasia restricts how strongly we may hold each of our akratic beliefs. Nothing stops it from being the case that we may rationally be very confident in both p and in the claim that believing p is irrational. This is something that level-splitters have so far allowed, and for good reason. As Weatherson (2019: 120) notes, "there are no true level-crossing principles, describing necessary connections between first-order and second-order claims." If there are no such connections, there should be no reason why we could not sometime be rationally highly confident in both p and in the claim that believing p is irrational. Saying otherwise would seem to go against the spirit of level-splitting, and cede ground to level-connectors.

In what follows I explore a strange implication of level-splitting. As long as we could rationally be highly confident in both p and in the claim that believing p is irrational, we could reason to the *akratic conjunction* 'p and believing p is irrational.' But beliefs in akratic conjunctions have an unusual property. They are, necessarily, irrational or false. I argue that this property makes akratic conjunctions irrational to believe, and so any view that permits beliefs in akratic conjunctions is suspect. I consider the possible responses available to level-splitters, and argue that while they could all teach us something new about what it takes to permit epistemic akrasia, some of them are ill-advised.

[2] Thomas Kelly (2010: 215) takes HOE to be "evidence about the normative upshot" of one's evidence.

**(2) Akratic conjunctions are irrational or false**

Richard Feldman (2005) has noticed a bizarre yet largely overlooked implication of views that permit epistemic akrasia. To see it, consider the following schema:

*Akratic Conjunction*: p but it is irrational for us to believe p.

Let AC be a proposition that fits the schema. Propositions that fit the schema have an unusual property. Whenever it is rational to believe AC, AC is false. This is because if it is rational for us to believe 'p but it is irrational for us to believe p,' then it is rational for us to believe p, and so it is false that it is irrational for us to believe p. Thus, the second conjunct of AC is false if it is rational to believe AC, and so AC on the whole is false if it is rational to believe AC. Equivalently, belief in AC is irrational or false.

The reasoning rests on the (eminently sensible) presupposition that if it is rational for us to believe a conjunction, it is rational for us to believe each conjunct. We can call this presupposition *Rational Simplification* (RS), and use it to put things more formally:

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| (1) | $Rb(p \wedge \neg Rb(p))$ | assumption that AC is a rational belief |
| (2) | $Rb(p)$ | 1, RS |
| (3) | $\neg\neg Rb(p)$ | 2, double negation |
| (4) | $\neg p \vee \neg\neg Rb(p)$ | 3, addition |
| (5) | $\neg(p \wedge \neg Rb(p))$ | 4, De Morgan |
| (6) | $Rb(p \wedge \neg Rb(p)) \rightarrow \neg(p \wedge \neg Rb(p))$ | 1–5, conditional introduction |
| (7) | $\neg Rb(p \wedge \neg Rb(p)) \vee \neg(p \wedge \neg Rb(p))$ | 6, law of the conditional |

Anyone who thinks that beliefs in akratic conjunctions can be rational is committed to the rationality of beliefs that are irrational or false. Of course, this alone is nothing

noteworthy. There is nothing unusual about beliefs that are, contingently and unbeknownst to us, irrational or false. For example, false but rational beliefs have this property. So it is not especially significant when we consider it rational to sometimes have beliefs that are irrational or false. But belief in AC is different. Belief in AC is irrational or false *by necessity*, and we can easily come to know this. So anyone who thinks that beliefs in akratic conjunctions can be rational is committed to the rationality of beliefs that *we know* (or are at least in a position to easily know) to be irrational or false. The result is that without additional restrictions on when epistemic akrasia can be rational, level-splitters appear committed to the rationality of beliefs that we know (or are at least in a position to easily know) to be irrational or false.

Feldman stops roughly here, and deems this result "peculiar":

> it is impossible for the [agent's] belief in [AC] to be both true and reasonable. And, if knowledge requires truth and reasonable belief, it also follows that she cannot know [AC]. While it does not follow that belief in [AC] cannot be reasonable, it does make it peculiar. (2005: 109, my brackets)

In response, Weatherson (ms.) says that it remains unclear why belief in AC must be irrational:

> To make the argument that [AC] could not be justified work, Feldman needs to thread a very tight normative needle. […] if justification does not require knowability, then it isn't clear why the belief in [AC] is not justified. By hypothesis, each conjunct is well supported by the evidence. So we only get a problem if justification requires knowability, but not

> knowledge. And there's no reason, I think, to hold just that position; it makes the relation between justification and knowledge just too odd. (ms.: 12, my brackets)

Weatherson is right. It is not clear from Feldman's words why belief in an akratic conjunction cannot be rationally justified. It is not clear that rational justification requires knowability.

More recently, Declan Smithies (2019) has offered an argument similar to Feldman's, with the important additional claim that a kind of knowability is indeed necessary for rational justification. Specifically, Smithies maintains that in order to have justification to believe a proposition we must have justification to believe we are in a position to know it:

> *JK Principle*: Necessarily, you have justification to believe p only if you have justification to believe that you're in a position to know that p.

The idea is that since AC is irrational or false, no one can have justification to believe they are in a position to know it, and so no one can have justification to believe AC itself. If JK is right, belief in akratic conjunctions cannot be rational.

The support Smithies offers for JK comes from cases in which an agent has justification to believe she is in fake barn country, and so intuitively lacks justification to believe that a given barn is real. If the principle is right, then the agent should not believe that a given barn is real because her justification to believe she is in fake barn country implies justification to believe she is not in a position to know that a given barn is real.[3] However, level-splitters will not grant JK unless the principle is proven

[3] Smithies (2019: 307).

absolutely necessary, and this will require much more than its ability to account for certain fake barn cases. Other principles can explain why agents who rationally believe they are in fake barn country should not believe that they are looking at a real barn. For example, as Smithies grants, good reason to believe that we are in fake barn country undercuts our perceptual reason to believe that there is a barn in front of us, and so defeats our reason to believe that we are looking at a real barn. A principle that says that rational justification requires undefeated reason would allow us to account for these fake barn cases without invoking JK.[4]

Feldman took his initial observation that propositions like AC are necessarily irrational or false to show that it is impossible for the agent who believes AC to know AC. Weatherson was unmoved because knowability is not clearly needed for rational justification. Smithies tried to show that a kind of knowability was needed after all, but relied on a controversial principle to do so. But this rather sparse dialectic surrounding Feldman's observation has failed to uncover the true force of the initial point. And I believe that the focus on knowability is the culprit. The key issue is not whether rational justification can be had in the absence of something like knowability. Rather, it is whether rational justification is consistent with knowing for certain that the belief in question is irrational or false. I now argue that when we know that a belief is irrational or false, it is irrational to have it.[5]

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[4] There are also direct objections to JK, such as Williamson's (2011, 2014) cases of *improbable knowledge*. Smithies (2019: 372-375) discusses these, and argues that they can be resisted on the assumption that evidence is luminous. Another place to put pressure on Smithies' argument is in its move from the fact that AC is not knowable to our never having justification to believe that we are in a position to know it.

[5] This claim is compatible with a view like Weatherson's (2019), on which necessary mathematical falsehoods can be rationally believed. Such beliefs are necessarily false, but we might not be in a position to know that they are.

**(3) Akratic conjunctions are irrational**

The claim that it is irrational to have beliefs that we know are either irrational or false is prima facie plausible. One relatively weak consideration in support of the claim's plausibility comes from our intuitive reaction to cases where agents know that their beliefs are irrational or false. Take a doctor who knows for certain that her diagnosis *d* is irrational or false. The doctor would know that the only chance she has of helping the patient is to be in the unlikely scenario where her irrational belief is also the true one. It seems irrational for such a doctor to retain her belief in *d* or go through with treating the patient for *d*. Relatedly, a patient who knows that her doctor's diagnosis is irrational or false should refuse treatment for *d* and find another doctor.

However, this relatively weak consideration is relatively weak. From the current state of the dialectic it is clear that mere appeal to intuition will move no one. Level-splitters tell us that our intuitive judgments about cases involving akrasia are not the best guide to the rationality of akratic beliefs. Presumably, they would say the same here. Indeed, perhaps the apparent irrationality of agents who hold beliefs that they know to be irrational or false can be explained away using something like Lasonen-Aarnio's *bad epistemic disposition* account, or Weatherson's *unwise belief* account. So, to break the dialectical impasse we need a stronger consideration than the appearance of irrationality in some finely tuned cases. Here is one.

Anyone who grants the factivity of knowledge would deny that we can rationally believe p while *knowing* that belief in p is irrational. If we know that belief in p is irrational, then it is irrational, and we cannot rationally believe it. Yet it is unclear how changing our knowledge from 'belief in p is irrational' to 'belief in p is irrational or false' could possibly make believing p *more* rational. The added possibility that a proposition is false cannot make believing it more rational, and typically makes it less

so. For example, it is irrational to think that we will win the lottery when we know we should not believe we will win. It is even worse to think that we will win the lottery when we know that either we should not believe we will win or our ticket is a fake.[6]

To stress the point, consider an exchange between two agents about the above lottery example:

S1: I know that my belief that I'll win the lottery is irrational or false, because I know that either I suffer from a bad case of wishful thinking, or my ticket is a fake.

S2: Hold on—you know that it's irrational for you to believe you'll win? So don't believe it!

S1: No no. I don't know that it's irrational for me to believe I'll win. If I did then I wouldn't believe I'll win. You're forgetting that my ticket might be a fake.

S2: You're telling me that if you also knew that your ticket was real, you'd stop believing you'll win?

S1: Yes.

S2: How can learning that you're holding a real ticket rather than a fake one make you *less* confident that you'll win? Seems awfully irrational.

Furthermore, this result does not appear to be unique to rationality. A parallel point seems to hold in the moral domain. When we learn that the moral permissibility of an action is inconsistent with the good, the action becomes forbidden for us. Consider a case where we feel rather tired, and are unsure if it is morally permissible for us to drive in our condition. Suppose we then learn the following disjunction: either it is morally

[6] Nothing special rides on my use of 'should' in this argument. I take what is *epistemically rational* to believe, what is *rationally justified* believe, and to what we *rationally should* believe, to all refer to the beliefs that rationality permits or requires.

impermissible for us to drive, or if we drive we would hit a drunken pedestrian jumping into traffic. Knowing that driving is either impermissible or will lead to harm is reason enough not to drive. Morality forbids us from driving in such a case, despite our not knowing which of the two disjuncts is true.

Again, imagine an exchange between two agents about the example:

S3: I know that driving in my condition is either immoral or harmful, because I know that either I'm too tired or I'd hit a pedestrian with my car upon driving.

S4: Hold on—you know that it's immoral for you to drive? So don't do it!

S3: No no. I don't know that it's immoral for me to drive. If I did then I wouldn't drive. You're forgetting that I might just hit a pedestrian upon driving.

S4: You mean to tell me that the possibility that you'd hit a pedestrian upon driving is making you *more* inclined to drive than you otherwise would be, if you knew that you wouldn't hit one?

S3: Yes.

S4: Seems awfully immoral.

Extant considerations against the possible rationality of akrasia are primarily intuition-driven. What we frequently get are cases in which agents look quite irrational in their akratic state (Smithies (2012), Littlejohn (2015)), or look like they are reasoning and acting in irrational ways (Horowitz (2014)). And although some reliance on intuitions is needed to get anywhere, thinking through individual cases and the agents' appearance of irrationality is not enough. Level-splitters argue that there is a live possibility that irrationality is not what is intuitively objectionable about akratic agents, but rather something less epistemically insidious. So to accommodate this possibility, what level-connectors need is a more principled reason for thinking that akratic agents

are irrational. Feldman's observation gives us the beginning of such a principled reason. But as Feldman predicted, trying to leverage the observation by appeal to the complex relationship between rational justification and knowability muddies the waters, and is unlikely to convince. If we instead focus on Feldman's observation itself, namely that akratic agents have beliefs that are necessarily irrational or false, we can hope for some progress in the debate. Rational justification is (uncontroversially) inconsistent with knowledge that a belief is irrational, and since the added possibility that the belief is false cannot add justification to believe it, rational justification must also be inconsistent with knowledge that a belief is irrational or false. Intuitive judgments about cases support this claim, but the claim's plausibility is not primarily derived from those judgments. The claim's plausibility is derived from the idea that an added bad option cannot make a situation better.

**(4) Resisting the argument**

The argument I advance starts from the level-splitter's granting the simultaneous rationality of akratic beliefs: the belief that p and the belief that belief in p is irrational. The discussion then proceeds in three main moves. The first consists in the claim that an agent with rational akratic beliefs could rationally infer an akratic conjunction like 'p but belief in p is irrational.' The second consists in the claims that beliefs in akratic conjunctions are necessarily irrational or false, and that the akratic agent can easily know this fact about her belief in AC. The third consists in arguments for the claim that we should never have beliefs that we know (or are in a position to know) to be irrational or false. These three moves make for three places where level-splitters might resist.

**(4.1) Against inferring the akratic conjunction**

As far as I know, since Feldman pointed out that epistemically akratic agents could reason to a belief in the corresponding akratic conjunction, level-splitters have not resisted the move. As is clear from the earlier passage by Weatherson, he is one level-splitter who accepts this implication of the view. Still, to resist the move from the rationality of epistemic akrasia to the rationality of a belief in an akratic conjunction level-splitters have a couple of options. They could deny that rationally akratic agents may use their akratic beliefs in reasoning. They could also deny that the akratic beliefs of rationally akratic agents are supported strongly enough to allow for a rational inference to their conjunction.

Denying that akratic agents may use their akratic beliefs in reasoning would have allowed level-splitters to resist Sophie Horowitz's (2014) demonstration of epistemic akrasia's apparent licensing of poor reasoning and irrational action. Yet level-splitters have not gone this route, perhaps largely because it is a tall order. As Horowitz argues, restricting rational reasoning to only some of our rationally held beliefs would require novel considerations against an attractive rational-belief-to-reasoning bridge principle, as well as careful delineation of what rational beliefs we may and may not reason with.[7] Instead of pursuing this route, Weatherson takes Horowitz's arguments to establish the *weirdness* of akrasia rather its irrationality.[8] So it would be progress in the debate if the argument on offer led level-splitters to deny the rationality of reasoning with our rationally held akratic beliefs.

An alternative way to resist the argument is to deny that the two akratic beliefs can be supported strongly enough to allow for a rational inference to their conjunction. For

[7] Horowitz (2014: 734-735).

[8] Weatherson (2019: 176-178).

example, level-splitters could say that epistemic akrasia is only rational when our akratic beliefs enjoy relatively low support (perhaps corresponding to no more than a .7 credence in each proposition), which would make their conjunction unjustified. If epistemic akrasia could only be rational in such cases, level-splitters would avoid the charge of asking us to have beliefs that we know to be irrational or false.

This route comes at a high cost. Nothing in the typical level-splitting story restricts how strongly supported each of the akratic beliefs can be. Just as one disagreeing peer can give us some reason to think that our belief that p is irrational, many peers can give us very strong reason to think that our belief that p is irrational. At the same time, p could in fact be strongly supported by our evidence. In other words, it is hard to imagine there being a principled reason why akrasia could be rational when our evidence justifies a medium-high credence in both p and in the claim that believing p is irrational, but not when our evidence justifies a high credence in each claim. Insisting that this is just how akrasia works would seem like a makeshift way of blocking the argument here. Moreover, this response would effectively be endorsing a tenet of the opposing level-connection view, namely that our justification for p is intimately connected to our justification for the claim that believing p is rationally justified.

**(4.2) Against knowing that one's akratic conjunction is irrational or false**

Next, level-splitters could resist the claim that the akratic agent can come to know that her belief in AC is irrational or false. In particular, I have in mind here a line that Lasonen-Aarnio mentions when noting Titelbaum's discussion of level-splitting. Lasonen-Aarnio claims that epistemic akrasia does not look so irrational unless we

assume *state-luminosity*, i.e., that the agent is suitably aware of her own doxastic states.[9] If instead the agent's doxastic states are not luminous, an agent who believes both p and that believing p is irrational may not realize that her attitudes are in apparent conflict, and would not seem irrational. The suggestion also fits well with Greco's account of epistemic akrasia, on which akratic agents are fragmented. Although Greco argues against the rationality of akrasia, unless our doxastic states are luminous such fragmentation could ameliorate the akratic agent's appearance of irrationality. Now, denying state-luminosity in cases of rational akrasia would allow level-splitters to resist the argument I offer. If an akratic agent's doxastic attitudes are not luminous, the agent might not realize that she believes AC, and so could not easily know that she believes something irrational or false.

I believe that this response goes too far. One reason to think this is that the response would leave level-splitters with very little in terms of scenarios in which it could be rational to be akratic. For example, it excludes from potentially being rationally akratic those who encounter misleading peer disagreement, or misleading information about what the correct theory of rationality is. These are arguably the primary kinds of cases that make level-splitters want to allow akrasia, yet agents in those cases are usually well aware of their own doxastic attitudes. In typical cases of peer disagreement, like David Christensen's (2007) restaurant case, the agents involved know full well what they believe since their peers tell them they should not have that very belief. Similarly, when we are akratic as a result of being understandably skeptical that we have followed the one true theory of rationality, we rarely have trouble knowing what our doxastic attitudes are. So if rational akrasia requires failing to know that we hold akratic

[9] Lasonen-Aarnio (2020: 609).

attitudes and that we believe AC, most cases of peer disagreement and uncertainty about the correct theory of rationality would not permit akrasia. The same goes for cases in which we learn that our rational capacities may have been compromised, like Miriam Schoenfield's (2015) Hypoxia and Christensen's (2016) Logic on Drugs.[10] These are just the kinds of cases in which level-splitters have maintained that epistemic akrasia is rationally permitted, so it would be news if they had to revise that view.

But there is a deeper reason to think that this response goes too far. When trying to argue that epistemic akrasia cannot be rational, level-connectors can only do so much. Perhaps the strongest thing they could hope to show is that something rationally abhorrent follows from being akratic. For example, if level-connectors were to show that an akratic agent is committed to believing an outright contradiction, that would pretty much be going as far as they can go in this debate. If that would not convince the level-splitter to give up their position, it is not clear that anything could. Yet on the anti-luminosity line under consideration, the level-splitter could in principle defend their position by saying that even contradictions are not so bad when one is not aware of them. If we reach such a point in this debate then level-splitting would start to look unfalsifiable, and we have gone too far.

**(4.3) Against the irrationality of knowingly believing something irrational or false**

Finally, level-splitters could take my arguments against the rationality of beliefs that we know to be irrational or false head on. They could resist the generalization from the lottery example to all beliefs that we know to be irrational or false. They could also

[10] In Schoenfield's Hypoxia (2015: 646), a pilot learns that she may be hypoxic, and that their judgments are 50% likely to be incorrect. In Christensen's Logic on Drugs (2016: 401), an agent learns that someone has laced their drink with a reasoning-distorting drug that causes people to draw wrong conclusions 20% of the time.

argue that morality and rationality are importantly different.

It is true that the lottery case alone does not show that all beliefs that we know to be irrational or false are irrational. But the argument and related dialogue surrounding the case look like they can be made to fit any belief that an agent knows to be irrational or false. So the burden is on whoever wants to say that the argument does not generalize to show that some beliefs that we know are irrational or false can be rational. And not only would those exceptions have to be found, but so would some common elements between those exceptions and beliefs in akratic conjunctions—if one is to argue that beliefs in akratic conjunctions should count as exceptions too. In the absence of such common elements, it would still be highly probable that beliefs in akratic conjunctions are irrational.

Now, there is no doubt that morality and rationality are importantly different, despite their similarities. However, the reason that the moral parallel bolsters the point it is not just the presupposed similarity between morality and rationality. Rather, it is the fact that once we start suspecting that knowledge about a belief being irrational or false is inconsistent with rationally believing it, we are guided to what looks like a parallel truth in the moral domain. While it is possible that this finding about morality is a coincidence, it is much more likely that we have stumbled upon a normative truth that manifests in both domains.

**(v) Conclusion**

I have revisited the observation that views on which epistemic akrasia is rational appear to have a peculiar implication. They seem committed to there being situations that require us to believe something that we know for sure is either irrational or false. I have offered two key reasons to think that we should never have beliefs that we know are

either irrational or false. The first is that factivity guarantees the irrationality of having a belief that we know is irrational, and the added possibility that the belief is false cannot make the belief more rational for us. The second is that a parallel point seems to hold in the moral domain, where we may not perform actions that we know are either immoral or harmful. I have reviewed several ways that level-splitters could respond to the argument, along with some thoughts on their prospects and significance for the debate. And while there is reason to believe that none of those responses would be an easy sell, my goal here has primarily been to point out new costs to an implication of epistemic akrasia that level-splitters must face up to. Their preferred way of addressing the matter could teach us something new about what it takes to permit epistemic akrasia.

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