The argument of my “Rationality’s Fixed Point (or: In Defense of Right Reason)” (2015) began with the premise that akrasia is irrational. From there I argued to a thesis that can be stated in slogan form as follows:

**Fixed Point Thesis (rough):** Mistakes about the requirements of rationality are mistakes of rationality.

The basic idea of the Fixed Point Thesis is that an agent who forms a false belief about what rationality requires thereby makes a rational error.

I then applied the Fixed Point Thesis to cases of peer disagreement—cases in which two agents of equal reasoning abilities reason from the same evidence to opposite conclusions. I argued that if one of the agents has drawn the rationally-required conclusion from that common evidence, it would be a rational mistake for her to withdraw that conclusion upon discovering the disagreement with her peer.

The premise of “Right Reason”’s argument, the thesis to which it leads, and the position on peer disagreement that follows have all been subsequently challenged in a number of ways. This essay responds to many of those challenges. Section 1 clarifies how I understand rationality, and describes the Akratic Principle, according to which akratic states are rationally forbidden. It then explains more fully the argument for this principle I sketched in “Right Reason”. This indicates my response to those who would set aside the Akratic Principle in order to avoid its consequences.

Section 2 provides a high-level gloss of my argument from the Akratic Principle to the Fixed Point Thesis. The discussion reveals the intuitive problem at the core of that argument, and highlights the argument’s generality. That generality becomes important in Section 3, which responds to authors who try to mitigate the argument’s consequences by distinguishing ideal rationality from everyday rationality, or rationality from reasonableness, or structural norms from substantive. Section 3 also takes up the suggestion that authoritative evidence for falsehoods about rationality creates a rational dilemma.

Section 4 addresses the charge that my notion of rationality must be externalist or objectivist, because any internalist account of rationality would excuse an agent who’s unable to figure out what rationality requires. I show that this charge is misaimed against the Fixed Point Thesis, which is perfectly compatible with subjectivist/internalist accounts of rationality (including my own). A similar mistake occurs in peer disagreement debates, when critics of my position wonder how the agent who drew the rationally-required conclusion before meeting her peer can determine that she was the one who got things right. The short answer is that she’s able to figure out what was rationally required after interacting with her peer because she was able to figure it out beforehand.

The best response I’m aware of to this point can be reconstructed from Declan Smithies’ work on logical omniscience. The basic idea is that responding to
a disagreeing peer brings new reasoning dispositions of the agent’s to bear, and those dispositions’ unreliability defeats the agent’s doxastic justification for her initial conclusion. In Section 5 I carefully reconstruct this response, then offer some responses of my own.

Ultimately, I find these challenges to the “Right Reason” position on peer disagreement unconvincing. Nevertheless, I believe that position requires revising. In “Right Reason”, I assumed that if peer disagreement could rationally change an agent’s attitude toward her original conclusion, it would have to do so by altering her stance on what the initial evidence required. I now see that, contrary to a common assumption in the literature, peer disagreement can rationally affect an agent’s opinions without providing any higher-order evidence. Section 6 provides some examples, and indicates how my position on peer disagreement must change as a result.

Before we begin, I should admit that while the argumentation in “Right Reason” is slow, careful, and detailed, my approach here will be much more brisk and at times hand-wavy. I will not pause over details and caveats I dwelt on in the earlier piece. I hope that if you’ve read the other essay, this one will deepen your understanding, fill in some gaps, and improve the view. If you’re reading this essay first, I hope it will encourage you to work through the fine print elsewhere.

1

The main premise of my argument is the

**Akratic Principle:** No situation rationally permits any overall state containing both an attitude \( A \) and the belief that \( A \) is rationally forbidden in one’s situation.

This requires a bit of unpacking. As I understand it, rationality involves an agent’s attitudes’ making sense from her own point of view. In this essay, I will use “rational” as an evaluative term, applied primarily to an agent’s total set of attitudes (beliefs, credences, intentions, etc.) at a given time. I’ll call that set of attitudes the agent’s “overall state”. Whether a particular set of attitudes makes sense for an agent at a given time may depend on her circumstances at that time. The aspects of an agent’s circumstances relevant to the rationality of her overall state constitute what I’ll call her “situation”.

One important way for an agent’s attitudes to fail to make sense is for them to stand in tension either with each other or with her situation. Such tensions or conflicts constitute rational flaws. When I say that an agent’s situation at a particular time rationally permits a particular overall state, this entails that if the agent possessed that overall state at that time it would contain no rational flaws. A situation requires a state when that state is the only rationally permitted state. An individual attitude is rationally permitted when at least one permitted state contains that attitude; an attitude is required when all permitted states contain it.

The Akratic Principle says that no matter an agent’s situation, if she possesses both some attitude and the belief that that attitude is rationally forbidden, then her overall state is rationally flawed. Notice that there is no evaluation of the agent here. The question of whether an agent herself is rational or irrational is connected to the question of whether her set of attitudes is rationally flawless, but the connection is complex and indirect. An agent’s overall state may contain rational flaws without the agent’s thereby being criticizable or blameworthy.
A great deal of interesting work (Smithies 2012; Greco 2014; Horowitz 2014; Littlejohn 2018; Worsnip 2018) has been done in recent years on why akritic states are rationally flawed. In “Right Reason”, I offered the following terse and obscure explanation:

The Akritic Principle is deeply rooted in our understanding of rational consistency and our understanding of what it is for a concept to be normative. Just as part of the content of the concept bachelor makes it irrational to believe of a confirmed bachelor that he’s married, the normative element in our concept of rationality makes it irrational to believe an attitude is rationally forbidden and still maintain that attitude. The rational failure in each case stems from some attitudes’ not being appropriately responsive to the contents of others. (p. 289, emphases in original)

The argument I meant to gesture at is fairly simple, and not original to me. But it may help to elaborate here. As I said a moment ago, a rational overall state lacks internal conflicts assessable the agent’s own point of view. I also consider rationality a genuinely normative category: when an overall state violates rational requirements, there is something genuinely wrong with that state. (Here I invoke the familiar distinction between evaluations, prescriptions, etc. that are genuinely normative and those—like, say, the rules of Twister—that are norms in some sense but do not have deep normative force. If I fail to get my left hand on yellow, I have violated a norm of Twister but have not done anything genuinely wrong.)

Now consider an agent who possesses both an attitude A and the belief that A is rationally forbidden to her. (I’ll refer to the content of that belief as “B”.) Since rationality is a genuinely normative category, B entails that there is something wrong with possessing A. So there is an internal tension in the agent’s overall state, and that state is rationally flawed.

As I said, it’s a simple argument. It can’t be denied by disputing my position that internal tensions undermine a state’s rationality; that’s just how I use the term “rationality”. One could deny that the requirements of rationality so understood are genuinely normative. That would lead to some broad questions in the theory of normativity to which I’m assuming a particular answer here.

A more interesting response would deny that co-presence of the attitude A and the belief that B generates any tension in the agent’s overall state. Compare the canonical rational tension generated by an agent’s believing both p and ∼p. Those beliefs have logically inconsistent contents, and therefore clearly stand in conflict. The same is true of the belief that someone’s a bachelor and the belief that he’s married, which unfortunately makes my example from “Right Reason” a bit inapt. For there’s no conflict between the contents of the attitude A and the belief that B; B states that A is rationally forbidden, while A might be an attitude with virtually any content at all.

But not every conflict involves inconsistent contents, especially when it comes to the normative. Clinton Castro suggested to me the example of a person smoking in front of a “No Smoking” sign. There’s clearly a tension in this tableau—between the content of the sign and the state of the person. Similarly, akritasia involves a tension between the content B of an agent’s belief (that attitude A is forbidden) and that agent’s state of possessing attitude A. This tension is not exactly the same.

1Compare, for instance, (Wedgwood 2002, p. 268).
as the tension between two contradictory beliefs, but it still constitutes a rational flaw.

2

Suppose we grant, either for these reasons or for reasons offered by the other authors I mentioned, that akratic overall states are rationally flawed. Why does it follow that it’s a rational mistake to have false beliefs about what rationality requires? Because rationality either requires things, or it doesn’t. Given the Akratic Principle—and perhaps even without it, as we’ll see in the next section—the entire Fixed Point debate comes down to that.

What might rationality require? I’ve already suggested that rationality requires avoiding akrasia; perhaps it also requires avoiding contradictory beliefs; perhaps it also requires maximizing expected utility. Opponents of the Fixed Point Thesis typically suggest that rationality requires respecting evidence from certain types of sources. Testimony from a privileged class of agents is the most frequently-invoked such source, but intuition, reasoning, or even perception might play the role as well. It’s crucial, though, that Fixed Point opponents characterize these authoritative sources in terms independent of what rationality requires, so as not to beg any questions about whether rationality always requires that they be respected.

Supposed counterexamples to the Fixed Point Thesis arise when an authoritative source provides false information about what rationality requires. Suppose, for instance, that an authoritative source says maximizing expected utility is rationally forbidden, when in fact utility maximization is rationally required. Intuitively, the agent is at least rationally permitted to believe the authority. But if she does, we have a problem. When the agent, having formed that belief, confronts a choice between two acts and recognizes that one of them maximizes expected utility, what intention should she adopt? If she intends to perform the maximal act, she violates the Akratic Principle, because she believes that maximizing expected utility is rationally forbidden. But if she fails to so intend, she will violate the rational requirement to maximize expected utility.

Fixed Point opponents will reply that rationality isn’t so simple. Rationality requires the agent to maximize expected utility (say) unless an authoritative source convinces her it’s forbidden. Maximizing expected utility full-stop isn’t really what rationality requires. Fine. Complicate the requirements of rationality all you want. If you like, make them conditional, or pro tanto, or prima facie. Whatever the requirements are, and whatever logical form they take, they must ultimately combine to yield some all-things-considered facts of the form “When the agent’s situation is like this, these overall states are rationally permitted”, “When the agent’s situation is like that, those states are rationally permitted,” etc. Rationality must require something.

Now hone in on one of those requirement facts, of the form “When the situation is S, states X, Y, and Z are rationally permitted.” In particular, choose a case in which S includes an authoritative source saying that in situation S, the relevant states X, Y, and Z are all rationally forbidden. If the agent is permitted to believe this authoritative source, then there’s a permitted state in situation S containing the belief that X, Y, and Z are forbidden. But since X, Y, and Z are the only permitted states in situation S, that means one permitted state contains the belief that it itself is forbidden—which violates the Akratic Principle.
There are only three ways out of this problem: (1) insist that no situation $S$ involves an authoritative source ruling out as forbidden all of the permitted states; (2) maintain that when an authoritative source says such things, rationality permits and requires the agent not to believe them; (3) hold that such authoritative pronouncements generate rational dilemmas, in which no permitted state is available. On each of these options, the case changes so that it no longer involves evidence from an authoritative source making it permissible for the agent to have a false belief about what rationality requires.

It takes a few more steps\(^2\) to get to the full Fixed Point Thesis:

**Fixed Point Thesis:** No situation rationally permits an a priori false belief about which overall states are rationally permitted in which situations.

I spell out those argumentative details in “Right Reason”.\(^3\) But I hope here to have conveyed the essential dynamic of the argument. Rationality requires something of us. Attempts to exempt agents from putative rational requirements in the face of misleading evidence simply generate alternate rational requirements. The exemption maneuver must stop somewhere, on pain of contradiction. At that point we have the true rational requirements in hand. Violating those is a rational flaw; having false beliefs about them creates rational flaws as well.

None of this surrenders the idea that rationality requires an agent’s attitudes to harmonize from her own point of view. Making good on that idea requires us not only to understand the agent’s point of view, but also to substantively fill out the notion of harmony in question. Rational requirements tell us what it is for a set of attitudes to harmonize—what it takes to avoid internal tension.

Quine (1951) wanted everything in the web of belief to be revisable. But regardless of what he wanted, it had to mean something for the web to cohere. Similarly, rationality requires some fixed content somewhere, if it is not to dissolve as a normative concept entirely.

The argument of the previous section is highly general.\(^4\) Take any normative category in the business of issuing requirements and permissions, or even just the business of approving and disapproving of overall states. If that normative category disapproves of states containing both an attitude and the belief that that attitude is disapproved, then the argument goes through, and the category will satisfy an analogue of the Fixed Point Thesis.

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\(^2\)Steps which, I should note, have been challenged by (Skipper ta). It would take me too far afield here to respond to Skipper’s interesting critique of my argument. For what it’s worth, though, out of the two interpretations of the argument he proposes, I would favor the second one, and would suggest that on that interpretation the argument isn’t so benign as he thinks.

\(^3\)For instance, the restriction to a priori false beliefs in the Fixed Point Thesis is there to keep it from applying to cases in which an agent is wrong about the nature of her current situation, or her current overall state.

\(^4\)Other highly general arguments towards the same conclusion can be found in (Littlejohn 2018, §4.1), (Field ta, §1), and (Lasonen-Aarnio ta, §1). Lasonen-Aarnio also makes the interesting point that one can argue not only from the Akratic Principle to the Fixed Point Thesis, but also in the opposite direction. Suppose Fixed Point is true, and an agent possesses both attitude $A$ and the belief that $A$ is forbidden in her situation. Either $A$ is forbidden, in which case possessing $A$ is rationally flawed, or $A$ is not forbidden, in which case the belief generates a rational flaw by the Fixed Point Thesis.
I’ll be the first to admit that the Fixed Point Thesis has odd, counterintuitive consequences. When you have a false belief about an ordinary, garden-variety empirical fact, there is a sense in which your belief has gone wrong. But the notion of rationality is meant to capture a way in which your belief still might have gone right. Your belief may have been a perfect response to the evidence; it’s just that the evidence was misleading. Then your belief—and the overall state it’s a part of—could be rationally flawless even though the belief is false.

The Fixed Point Thesis says that when it comes to beliefs about what’s rational, we can’t maintain this gap. In a non-akratic agent, a false belief about what’s rational may engender other rationally flawed attitudes, or lead you to do irrational things. So even possessed of certain kinds of misleading evidence, an agent cannot form false beliefs about the rational requirements while remaining rationally flawless.

In some sense this shouldn’t be surprising, given the Akratic Principle. The Akratic Principle correlates the attitudes in a rational overall state with higher-order attitudes about the rationality of those attitudes. So rational constraints on the attitudes become constraints on rationally-permissible higher-order contents. Beliefs about the requirements of rationality have a very special place in the theory of rationality.

Nevertheless, it’s tempting to reinstall the gap. An inaccurate belief about rationality can’t be rational—but in the right circumstances, might it at least be reasonable? (Schoenfield 2012) Or maybe there are two kinds of rationality: the Fixed Point Thesis applies to ideal rationality, but not to everyday rationality. Yet here the generality of the argument bites. Are some sets of attitudes reasonable, and others unreasonable? Is it reasonable to hold an attitude while also believing that attitude to be unreasonable? If not, then a Fixed Point Thesis can be derived for the normative category of reasonableness. And similarly for any normative category that is substantive and satisfies an analogue of the Akratic Principle.

It’s worth working through the details of at least one proposal that tries to reintroduce the gap, and showing how the Fixed Point argument undermines that proposal. In her later work (2015, ta), Schoenfield specifies more precisely what it takes to be “reasonable” in the sense of her (2012). She focuses on agents’ plans for handling various contingencies, and distinguishes two types of normative evaluations of such plans. On the one hand, we can evaluate which plan would turn out best were the agent to actually execute that plan. On the other hand, we can evaluate which plan would be best for the agent to make in advance—taking into account that an agent doesn’t always execute the plan that she makes. As far as I can tell, Schoenfield’s best plans to execute specify what’s rational in the sense I’ve been discussing, while what’s “reasonable” for an agent to do in Schoenfield’s earlier sense is specified by the best plan for an agent to make.

Schoenfield then presents a case\footnote{Schoenfield 2015, §3ff., based on Adam Elga’s (ms) well-known “hypoxia” example. (I’m grateful to an anonymous referee for pointing out that a similar example appears in (Williams 2005, p. 299).)} in which the best plan to execute requires the agent to adopt one attitude, yet the best plan to make requires a different one. While there’s some sense in which the former attitude would be rational, the latter attitude is the one that’s reasonable. Crucially, the two plans come apart because...
it’s been suggested to the agent by an authoritative source that she’s unable to
discern what the best plan to execute requires.

But a case like that isn’t the real crucible for Schoenfield’s normative category of
reasonableness. In Schoenfield’s case, there’s a problem with the agent’s discerning
the best plan to execute, but no potential problem discerning the best plan to make. Yet if we go back to the Fixed Point argument of the previous section, we’ll
predict a problem for Schoenfield’s new normative category precisely when the best
plan to make requires attitude A, but an authoritative source says the best plan to
make forbids A. What’s the best plan to make for a case like that? By stipulation,
it involves attitude A, but does it also involve believing the authoritative source?
While Schoenfield acknowledges the possibility of cases like this (see (ta, note 25)
and the attached text), she sets them aside. But it’s exactly in cases like this that
the problems for the old notion of rationality she hoped to avoid with her new
notion of reasonableness come back with a vengeance.6

Let’s try another tack—perhaps the gap between rationality and accuracy is so
central to the former concept that when it can’t be maintained, the possibility of
being rational breaks down altogether. David Christensen (2007) argues that cases
in which an authoritative source provides misleading evidence about the require-
ments of rationality are rational dilemmas. This was one of the three available
responses to the problem cases I noted in the previous section. And indeed, it’s
consistent with the Fixed Point Thesis in a certain sense: on Christensen’s view,
any overall state that includes a false belief about what rationality requires must
be rationally flawed in these cases, because on his view every overall state available
in such cases is rationally flawed.

But to simply say that the problem cases are rational dilemmas leaves an im-
portant question unanswered. Consider a case in which the agent has a number
of mutually exclusive attitudes available—perhaps the options are belief, disbelief,
and suspension of judgment in some proposition, or intending to perform some act
versus intending not to perform it. Call one of the available attitudes A, and let’s
stipulate that in the agent’s situation A is rationally required. Now suppose also
that an authoritative source tells the agent B, where B is the proposition that A
is rationally forbidden while one of the other available attitudes is rationally per-
mitted. Set aside for a moment what the agent should do about A, and focus on
whether the agent is permitted to believe B. Even if one reads this case as a rational
dilemma, B is a falsehood about what rationality requires.7 Anyone who accepts
the Fixed Point Thesis (including rational dilemma theorists) must maintain that
rationality forbids believing B. But to this point the only evidence bearing on

6What about a proposal on which reasonableness addresses the problem cases for old-style
rationality, some other normative category addresses the problem cases for reasonableness, yet
another category addresses the problem cases for that normative category, and so on up the line?
A few philosophers have dabbled with infinite hierarchies of this sort, but Robinson (ms) helpfully
points out why they won’t avoid the problem. With enough craftiness, we can build a case in
which an authoritative source provides misleading information about what’s required by all of the
normative categories past a particular point in the hierarchy.

7I’m grateful to an anonymous referee for prompting me to make explicit how this case reads
on the rational dilemmas view. If the case is a rational dilemma in the sense that neither A nor
any of its alternatives is rationally permitted, then we can say that A and all of the alternatives
are vacuously both required and forbidden. (This is the standard approach to dilemmas in deontic
logic.) Yet as none of them are permitted, B is still a falsehood about what rationality requires.
of the authoritative source’s endorsement. Intuitively, that seems like evidence in favor of \( B \). And we haven’t seen any evidence in the situation that either rebuts or undercuts it. So if the agent’s total evidence supports \( B \), how can \( B \) be rationally impermissible to believe?

One possible answer is that no rebutting or undercutting is required, because the authoritative source hasn’t actually provided any support for \( B \). It might be that no evidence can ever rationally support (to any degree) a falsehood about the requirements of rationality. Thus because of its content in this case, the authority’s testimony is evidentially inert. In “Right Reason”, though, I granted the intuition that the authority provides at least pro tanto or prima facie evidence for \( B \). So I needed to find some evidential factor that could defeat this support, yielding the result that belief in \( B \) is all-things-considered rationally forbidden. I settled on the suggestion that every agent always has available a body of a priori support for the truths about rationality, strong enough to defeat whatever empirical evidence tells against them. Importantly, this claim about the a priori was not a premise of my argument to the Fixed Point Thesis (contra (Field ta)); it was a suggestion of one way the epistemological landscape might lie if the Thesis is true.

Since then, some other approaches have been tried. One popular trend (e.g., (Worsnip 2018)) is to distinguish “structural” requirements of rationality, which place formal coherence constraints on combinations of attitudes, from “substantive” norms, which direct the agent to follow her evidence and respect the reasons it provides. When I wrote “Right Reason”, I assumed there was a single normative notion of rationality in play. I took that notion to both direct agents’ responses to evidence and be subject to the Akratic Principle. So I assumed, for instance, that if an agent’s total evidence all-things-considered supported a particular proposition, then it was rationally permissible for that agent to believe that proposition. Thus if I wanted to say that belief in \( B \) was rationally forbidden, I had to find some evidence to defeat the authoritative source’s support for \( B \). (And any dilemmas theorist who believes all-things-considered evidentially-supported beliefs are rationally permitted faces a similar problem.) But on the present view, the Akratic Principle is a structural requirement, while evidential requirements are substantive. So while the former may make it incoherent to be wrong about rationality, this doesn’t tell us anything about the agent’s total evidence.

Yet even if we set aside structural requirements and the Akratic Principle, it might not do to be so sanguine about what “following the evidence” requires. Why think that the reasons evidence provides bear only on an agent’s beliefs about what she ought to do in her situation, and not directly on what that situation requires? If an authoritative source says you’re forbidden to adopt attitude \( A \), doesn’t “following your evidence” require you not only to believe that \( A \) is forbidden, but also to avoid adopting \( A \)? Doesn’t evidence against expected utility theory also tell against maximizing utility? It may be objected that the reasons provided by evidence are theoretical reasons (not practical), and so may bear only on belief. Fine, then consider cases in which \( A \) is a belief. Suppose (to borrow an example from “Right Reason”) that Jane’s evidence contains the proposition \( \sim(X \lor \sim Y) \), and an authoritative (though sadly mistaken) logic teacher tells her that such evidence requires her to believe \( \sim Y \). If Jane follows her evidence and respects what her

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8This assumption of my argument has been noted by (Littlejohn 2018, §1) and (Daoust ta, n. 23). The first person to point it out to me was Kieran Setiya, in conversation.
logic teacher has said, this seems to require not only believing that her evidence requires her to believe ∼Y, but also believing ∼Y simpliciter. This, after all, was the point of Feldman’s (2007) “evidence of evidence is evidence” principle. If that’s right, and if the reasons provided by substantive norms apply to the first-order moves recommended just as much as to beliefs about those first-order moves, then the problem behind the Fixed Point argument recurs. We don’t need structural rationality or its ban on akrasia to generate our problem cases; they arise just from trying to understand what “following the evidence” requires. Again, the argument of the previous section is highly general; as long as a normative category contains some substance and parallel constraints at lower- and higher-orders, our argument is off and running.

4

I often hear the complaint that it’s inappropriate to find rational fault in false beliefs about rationality, because an agent may not be “able to figure out” what rationality requires in a given situation. The requirements of rationality can be complex, and thoughtful people can get them wrong. (Consider, for example, folks on one side of the Fixed Point debate.) This complaint can be linked to my earlier talk of rationality’s concerning what makes sense “from the agent’s own point of view”. If an agent can’t see the truths of rationality from where he cognitively stands, how can there be any rational error in his making mistakes about them? The Fixed Point Thesis can’t hold for the notion of rationality I’ve described; it’s plausible only on an externalist account of rationality, or an “objectivist” account, or a “highly idealized” account.

All of this is wrong. The Fixed Point Thesis is perfectly compatible with internalist, subjectivist, everyday accounts of rationality. First off, such accounts typically require a version of the Akratic Principle, so we can argue as in Section 2 that the Thesis applies to them. But second, the complaint just described fails even when it’s run using such accounts.

Grant the complaint its assumption that on the notion of rationality I’ve identified, an attitude can be rationally required or forbidden in a situation only if the agent in that situation is able to figure out (whatever that means) that that attitude has the relevant rational status. Now suppose we have an agent who’s faced with a decision between two acts, one of which would maximize expected utility, while the other (given the agent’s attitudes toward risk) would maximize risk-weighted expected utility. In point of fact, maximizing traditional expected utility is rationally required. But the agent has been convinced by formidable arguments of (Buchak 2013) that the risk-weighted approach is correct, and it’s beyond his abilities to find the subtle flaws in those arguments. So the agent believes that maximizing risk-weighted utility is rationally permitted, when in fact it’s forbidden. It looks here like the Fixed Point Thesis will count that belief as rationally flawed, even though the agent is unable to see his mistake. Which contravenes the principle I granted at the start of this paragraph.

9Worsnip (2018, §IV) pushes against this suggestion; Daoust (ta, §2) pushes back. See also Feldman’s (2005), in which he argues in favor of “respecting the evidence,” described as follows: “a person respects the evidence about E and P by believing P when his or her evidence indicates that this evidence supports P or by not believing P when the evidence indicates that this evidence does not support P.” (pp. 95–6)
This objection to the Fixed Point Thesis fails because under the objector’s own assumptions, the case described is impossible. The objection assumes that an attitude is rationally required/forbidden in a situation only if the agent in that situation can figure out that it’s required/forbidden. As the case has been described, the agent can’t see his way to the conclusion that maximizing risk-weighted utility is rationally forbidden. But then given the objection’s assumption, maximizing risk-weighted utility can’t be rationally forbidden for him. And so the belief that maximizing risk-weighted utility is permitted isn’t false, and the Fixed Point Thesis won’t fault him for maintaining it. The Fixed Point Thesis won’t forbid the agent to possess any belief he can’t figure out is forbidden.

The point is that there’s a parallel between the constraints rationality places on an agent at the first order and the constraints Fixed Point places on his beliefs about those first-order constraints at higher orders. Go ahead and restrict rationality in any way you like to what an agent can figure out, or what’s “accessible” to him, or what’s “subjectively available”. This restriction will immediately limit the first-order attitudes required of that agent. And since the first-order rational requirements on the agent will be limited by this restriction, the truths about rational requirements that the Fixed Point Thesis concerns will also be limited. If being able to be figured out is necessary for something to be a rational requirement, and the Fixed Point Thesis only tracks rational requirements, then the Fixed Point Thesis won’t require an agent to believe anything he can’t figure out.

We must keep this parallelism in mind as we consider the Fixed Point Thesis’s consequences for the peer disagreement debate. To repeat an example from “Right Reason”, suppose that at some initial time Greg and Ben, two mutually acknowledged epistemic peers, each possess the same total evidence $E$ relevant to some proposition $h$. Suppose further that rationality requires Greg and Ben to each believe $h$ in light of $E$. Greg reasons through the consequences of $E$ correctly, and comes to believe $h$ through that reasoning. Ben, on the other hand, reasons from $E$ to $\sim h$. (To keep the characters straight, remember that Greg does the good thing while Ben reasons badly.) Some time later, Greg and Ben interact, sharing their conclusions about $h$ on the basis of $E$.

I argued in “Right Reason” that if the Fixed Point Thesis is correct, then were Greg to change his opinion about what $E$ supports after interacting with Ben, the resulting opinion would be rationally mistaken. This is a version of what’s sometimes called the “Right Reasons”—or “steadfast”—approach to peer disagreement. Abbreviated, my argument against the contrary “split the difference”—or “conciliatory”—approach was this: Any plausible view that required Greg to move his opinion towards Ben’s would also require Greg to believe $\sim h$ on the basis of $E$ were he to encounter sufficiently many epistemic superiors who claimed that $E$ supports $\sim h$. But this would involve a false belief about the requirements of rationality, and so would contradict the Fixed Point Thesis. Thus the Fixed Point Thesis faults Greg’s overall state if he makes any change to his initial view about what $E$ supports.

10Allan Hazlett (2012) argues that after interacting with Ben, Greg ought to continue to believe $h$, but ought to suspend judgment on the question of whether $E$ supports $h$. Yet if I’m reading Hazlett correctly, his position that Greg should suspend on the higher-order question in light of peer disagreement would also endorse Greg’s adopting a false belief about what $E$ supports should Greg receive enough (misleading) authoritative evidence. (“Misleading higher-order evidence undercuts good lower-order evidence when...it warrants belief that said lower-order
Like the Fixed Point Thesis, the steadfast view on peer disagreement is disconcerting. When we investigate empirical matters, it’s often advisable to merge our observations and opinions with those of others, especially when those others have proven reliable in the past. I should be clear: Nothing about my steadfasting view tells against agents’ employing authoritative sources to determine what’s rational. It’s just that—as I’ve been emphasizing throughout this essay—there’s an important rational asymmetry between empirical facts and facts about what’s rational. When we form an opinion about empirical matters by trusting reliable authorities, there’s a small chance those authorities are wrong. In that case we’ll have formed a false belief, but at least the belief will be rational. When we rely on authorities to form opinions about what’s rational, we take on additional risk: if the resulting belief is false, it will be rationally flawed as well. (Another casualty of collapsing the gap between inaccuracy and irrationality.)

Suppose the earth is gradually warming, but 100 experts tell me otherwise. If I believe what they say, I will have made a factual error, but perhaps not a rational one (depending on the rest of my circumstances). Now suppose maximizing traditional expected utility really is what’s required by rationality. If 100 experts tell me otherwise, and I believe what they say, then form the intention that maximizes risk-weighted utility, I will have made both a factual and a rational error. These are the stakes when we set out to determine what’s rational. But this shouldn’t be surprising given that description of the enterprise.

And really, is the alternative view more plausible? The conciliationist holds that overwhelming expert testimony makes it perfectly rational to believe (and do) whatever the experts say is rationally required. For the conciliationist, consulting the experts about what’s rational is a wonderful idea, because it has a kind of magical quality. Presumably the experts rarely get these things wrong. But even when they do, the fact that you consulted them makes it rational to do what they said. In this sense, conciliationism makes experts infallible about what rationality requires of their audience.\footnote{People often ask me how, in the peer disagreement scenario, Greg is supposed to figure out that he’s the one who would be rationally mistaken if he changed opinions. Here’s where my earlier parallelism point kicks in. Suppose once more that agents can be rationally required to adopt an attitude only when they can figure out that that requirement holds. As we’ve constructed the case, before Greg interacts with Ben he’s rationally required to believe $h$ on the basis of $E$. For this to be a rational requirement, it must be the case that Greg can figure out that $E$ requires belief in $h$. And as we’ve told the story, Greg does figure that out: he reasons properly from $E$ to $h$, and believes $h$ on the basis of that reasoning. So after Greg talks to Ben, can he still figure out that $E$ requires belief in $h$? Yes—all he has to do is repeat the reasoning that led to his initial position. Talking to Ben hasn’t somehow made it impossible for Greg to do that.}

Again, let me emphasize that I’m not saying there’s some \textit{objective}, or \textit{external} sense in which Greg would be correct to go on believing $h$, while there’s another (subjective/internal) sense that recommends conciliation. Whatever it means to “figure out” from one’s subjective point of view what rationality requires, Greg is
capable of doing that after conversing with Ben. Why? Because he was able to do so before the conversation.

And what about poor Ben? What should he do, and how can he tell? Again, let me be clear: I am not saying that rationality requires agents to adopt a policy on which, whenever they confront disagreement, they always stick to their initial opinions. My peer disagreement position is motivated by the Fixed Point Thesis, which says that false beliefs about rationality are rationally mistaken. Ben’s initial opinion about the rational relation between \( E \) and \( h \) was rationally mistaken, so were he to stick with it after interacting with Greg, he would simply perpetuate a rational mistake. Is Ben capable of figuring out that he’s made a rational mistake? Well, we started off the case by saying that both Greg and Ben are rationally required to believe \( h \) on the basis of \( E \). Under the principle that being rationally constrained implies being able to figure out that you’re rationally constrained, Ben must initially have been capable of figuring out that \( E \) supports \( h \). Interacting with Greg may have enhanced—and certainly can’t have degraded—that capability.

The best response I’m aware of to this parallelism point can be reconstructed from some arguments in Declan Smithies’ (2015). Smithies begins by distinguishing propositional from doxastic justification. In order for a belief to be doxastically justified (and rational), it must not only be supported by the agent’s evidence; the agent must also base his belief on that evidence in the right way. We can grant that before interacting with Ben, Greg’s belief in \( h \) was both propositionally and doxastically justified—it was supported by Greg’s evidence, and correctly based on that evidence. Greg’s conversation with Ben provides evidence that his earlier reasoning may have been flawed. Smithies is willing to grant that even with this evidence, Greg is still propositionally justified to believe \( h \) after the interaction. Yet Smithies maintains that “evidence of one’s cognitive imperfection functions as a doxastic defeater, rather than a propositional defeater—that is to say, it does not defeat one’s propositional justification. . . . but merely prevents one from converting this propositional justification into doxastic justification.” (2015, p. 2786, emphases in original)

How does that work? Smithies holds that “What is needed for doxastic justification is . . . safety from the absence of propositional justification.” (p. 2784) Beliefs are unsafe from the absence of propositional justification when “they are formed on the basis of doxastic dispositions that also tend to yield beliefs in the absence of propositional justification.” (ibid.) So even if, in a particular case, an agent reasons to a conclusion that correctly picks up on his propositional justification for that conclusion, he may not be doxastically justified. In order for him to be doxastically justified in believing the conclusion, the reasoning disposition that formed the belief must be such that it would not easily (in nearby similar cases, whether actual or counterfactual) yield beliefs lacking propositional justification.

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12In his (2015), Smithies focuses exclusively on beliefs in logical truths. His discussion involves credences as well as full beliefs. He draws a distinction between ideal and “ordinary” standards of rationality. And he isn’t directly talking about peer disagreements. (Though his footnote 25 suggests extending his position to that application.) That’s why the response I’ll present here has to be reconstructed from Smithies’ view, and why I’ve made some bracketed amendments in the quotations to come.
Let’s apply this to Greg’s case, while keeping the parallelism point in mind. Before Greg talked to Ben, Greg’s belief in $h$ was doxastically justified. On Smithies’ view, this implies that the reasoning disposition that formed Greg’s initial belief in $h$ was safe from the absence of propositional justification. So the disposition that formed it would not have yielded beliefs lacking propositional justification in nearby cases. In more concrete terms, whatever kind of reasoning Greg employed to determine $h$ on the basis of $E$, had he deployed the same cognitive faculty on other, similar reasoning problems, the faculty would not have yielded beliefs unsupported by his evidence.

Then Greg meets Ben, and has to decide whether to remain steadfast in his belief that $h$. Notice that if Greg simply relies on the reasoning he initially employed, he will maintain a belief that is propositionally justified for him. And since we’ve already seen that this reasoning is, in Greg, safe from the absence of propositional justification, Greg’s continued belief in $h$ looks like it will be doxastically justified as well.

Smithies acknowledges that the reasoning disposition behind Greg’s initial belief in $h$ has not been impaired by the interaction with Ben: “Misleading evidence about your cognitive imperfection impacts neither the actual quality of our first-order reasoning nor the ideal ranking of options.” (p. 2787) So why might Greg nevertheless lose doxastic justification? Because acquiring evidence about our cognitive imperfection brings new reasoning dispositions into play and so it does impact on the overall quality of our reasoning. We need to consider not just your first-order dispositions to reason, but also your second-order dispositions to respond to evidence of your own cognitive imperfection. Your first-order reasoning is reliable enough to make [belief in $h$] rational in ordinary contexts, but your second-order dispositions to respond to evidence of your cognitive imperfection are unreliable enough to make [belief in $h$] irrational in contexts where you have such evidence. (ibid.)

And why are those second-order dispositions unreliable? Because “exercising the same doxastic dispositions in response to the same empirical evidence could easily yield the false and unjustified belief that I correctly [reasoned] when in fact I didn’t.” (ibid.)

The argument seems to be this: Admittedly, the first-order reasoning dispositions that formed Greg’s initial belief in $h$ remain in reliable working order after the interaction with Ben. Yet the empirical evidence from Ben that Greg might have made a mistake brings into play a new reasoning disposition: Greg’s disposition to respond to empirical evidence of his own cognitive imperfection. If Greg remains steadfast, he deploys a disposition that would in many nearby cases yield a belief lacking propositional justification—when given evidence of cognitive imperfection, that disposition would blithely instruct him to keep his beliefs intact even when they weren’t propositionally justified. The unreliability of this second-order disposition defeats Greg’s doxastic justification to go on believing that $h$. And since Greg’s belief in $h$ can’t be doxastically justified after he interacts with Ben, it can’t be rational either.

My response to this line from Smithies comes in many stages. First, I’m honestly not sure how to differentiate reasoning dispositions, or rule on which dispositions
were involved in basing a given belief. Suppose that in our case Greg hears the evidence from Ben, but goes on relying on his initial reasoning to govern his opinion about $h$. In that case has he employed only the initial reasoning disposition, the one we conceded was safe from the absence of propositional justification? Or has the recognition of Ben’s evidence forced him to deploy an additional reasoning disposition as well? How should we identify and assess that additional reasoning disposition? It may be question-begging to describe it as a disposition to set aside evidence of cognitive imperfection in all cases of peer disagreement. (As I said near the end of the previous section, the Fixed Point Thesis does not endorse a universal policy of sticking to one’s guns.) What if Greg’s higher-order disposition is to set aside such evidence just in cases in which his initial reasoning correctly latched on to what rationality requires? (And don’t tell me Greg “can’t figure out” which cases those are!)

This brings us to the second stage of my response to Smithies: Which exactly are the nearby cases that determine the reliability of the higher-order disposition? If it’s just cases of reasoning about propositions very similar to $E$ and $h$, then a higher-order disposition to remain steadfast might actually be safe for Greg across those cases. (Since his first-order reasoning about such cases was established to be safe initially.) But if it’s a wide variety of reasoning cases, including domains in which Greg’s first-order reasoning is not so reliable, then the higher-order disposition may have a problem.

Suppose, though, that we set aside these detail concerns, and grant the entire Smithies-inspired argument. What does it give us in the end? Notice that after the interaction with Ben, there is no attitude towards $h$ other than belief that would be doxastically justified for Greg.\textsuperscript{13} This is easily established, because Smithies grants that belief is still the attitude towards $h$ propositionally justified for Greg after the interaction, and propositional justification is necessary for doxastic justification. So we don’t have an argument here that Greg would be doxastically justified/rational in conciliating with Ben, or that in cases with many experts the agent would be doxastically justified in believing their falsehoods about what rationality requires. At best these cases become rational and doxastic justification dilemmas.

Perhaps I’ve made it too easy to reach this conclusion by focusing on Smithies, who grants that Greg’s propositional justification for $h$ remains intact. Salas (ms) takes a position similar to Smithies’, which I haven’t focused on here because it isn’t as thoroughly worked-out. But Salas thinks that the interaction with Ben defeats not only Greg’s doxastic justification but also the propositional. Perhaps Salas offers a view on which conciliating with Ben could be doxastically justified/rational for Greg? Or maybe all this talk of reliable first-order dispositions and unreliable second-order dispositions has put us back in mind of Schoenfield’s distinction between best plans to execute and best plans to make?

But now the alarms from our earlier Schoenfield discussion should be ringing again. The Fixed Point argument from Section 2 was highly general, and should alert us that there’s no stable landing point to be found in this direction. Any view that claims an agent is doxastically justified in believing misleading testimony from

\textsuperscript{13}van Wietmarschen (2013) notes and concedes this point about his own doxastic/propositional peer disagreement stance. I haven’t discussed van Wietmarschen’s arguments for that stance here because they seem to me to rely on an independence principle that is question-begging against the steadfast position.
massed experts about rationality has to deal with the problem cases we identified in Section 2. And even if Greg were simply to suspend judgment about \( h \) after his interaction with Ben, he could be in serious rational trouble. Suppose \( h \) is the proposition that rationality requires maximizing traditional expected utility, which turns out to be not only supported by Greg’s initial evidence but also true. If Greg suspends judgment on \( h \), then confronts a decision between two options (one of which maximizes traditional expected utility, the other risk-weighted), what is he going to do?

So even if a line like Smithies’ goes through, it is not going to yield the verdict that conciliating in cases of peer disagreement is rationally permissible. At best, it will tell us that peer disagreement cases are rational dilemmas, in which no overall state is rationally permissible. This does not contradict the Right Reasons position I’ve defended, on which conciliating in peer disagreement cases generates a rational mistake. And it certainly doesn’t undermine the Fixed Point Thesis.

Nevertheless, I do need to amend and clarify the position on peer disagreement that follows from Fixed Point. While I didn’t recognize this when I wrote “Right Reason”, there are cases in which an agent who initially adopted the attitude towards a proposition required by her evidence nevertheless should change her attitude towards that proposition upon learning that an epistemic peer drew the opposite (and rationally incorrect) conclusion.

To see why, let’s begin with a case somewhat different from the Greg and Ben setup; later we’ll adapt a lesson from this case to Greg and Ben’s. Sometimes a body of evidence mandates a single rational attitude towards a given proposition. But it’s possible that some bodies of evidence allow for multiple interpretations; multiple attitudes towards the same proposition are rationally permissible in light of that evidence. Following (White 2005), call these “permissive cases”. There has been much recent philosophical debate about whether permissive cases exist. ((Kopec and Titelbaum 2016) provides a survey.) But for our purposes it will be helpful to imagine that such cases do exist, then consider how peer disagreement might act as evidence within them.

One way to think about a permissive case is that in the case, two agents have different evidential standards—sets of principles that guide their interpretation of evidence and recommend attitudes. Given a particular body of total evidence \( E \) and proposition \( h \), if the two evidential standards draw different lessons about \( h \) from \( E \), yet both standards are permissible, then it might be rationally permissible for one agent to follow her standards and believe \( h \) on the basis of \( E \), while the other follows her standards and believes \( \sim h \) instead.

In our (ta), Matthew Kopec and I examine a permissive case with one further wrinkle. Imagine that neither agent knows the details of how the other agent’s evidential standards work, or what those standards will say about any particular evidence-proposition pair. But each agent knows that both standards are reliable in the long term: for each standard, 90% of the propositions it recommends on the basis of evidence turn out to be true.

Take one of the two agents in this situation—call her Anu. Anu initially evaluates \( E \), applies her own evidential standards correctly, and comes to believe \( h \) on the basis of \( E \). This is what rationality requires of Anu. But because Priya has different
(though still rationally permissible) evidential standards, she is rationally required
to believe $\sim h$ on the basis of $E$. This case is different from Greg and Ben’s, because
the epistemic peers initially disagree about a given proposition based on the same
body of evidence without either party’s making a rational mistake. Permissive cases
allow for this possibility.

Now suppose that Anu interacts with Priya. Anu learns that Priya’s evidential
standards recommend belief in $\sim h$ on the basis of $E$. Kopec and I argue that
in this case Anu should suspend judgment about $h$. This is not because Priya’s
testimony is evidence that Anu made any sort of rational mistake. It’s because
Priya’s testimony is evidence that $h$ is false.

As I said, a number of philosophers deny that permissive cases exist. But just
by imagining that they do, we learn an important lesson. Schoenfield (2014, p.
203) helpfully distinguishes two worries an agent might have about one of her
own beliefs: “My belief might not be rational!” versus “My belief might not be
true!” Schoenfield winds up concluding that in peer disagreement cases, the worry
about truth shouldn’t move one to change one’s opinions, but the worry about
rationality might. She’s right about rationality, in the following sense: Sometimes
disagreement may prompt you to realize that your previous opinion was rationally
flawed, in which case it might be a good idea to amend it. (Perhaps this is what
Ben should learn from his disagreement with Greg, and how he should respond.)
But I think Schoenfield’s wrong about truth. In the permissive case, interacting
with Priya need not indicate to Anu that her initial $h$ belief was irrational. But
the interaction should make her worry that $h$ isn’t true, which rationally requires
a change in attitude towards $h$.

Interestingly, the same thing can happen in cases where permissivism is not an
issue. In the Greg and Ben case, either Greg and Ben have the same evidential
standard, or they both have evidential standards on which $E$ requires belief in $h$.
Up to this point, we’ve assumed that when Greg finds out about Ben’s belief in
$\sim h$, this disagreement poses a threat to Greg’s stance by worrying him that his
initial belief in $h$ was irrational. According to the Fixed Point Thesis, if this worry
leads Greg to alter his previous opinion about what rationality requires, and if he
changes his attitude towards $h$ as a result, the resulting attitudes will be rationally
mistaken.

But now suppose we add some extra details to the story. Suppose Greg is episte-
modically savvy, and incredibly epistemically careful. He knows that sometimes
evidence is misleading. So upon receiving evidence $E$ and initially concluding that
it supports $h$, Greg enlists a confederate. This confederate is to go out into the
world and determine whether $h$ is actually true. If $h$ is indeed true, the confederate
will send Greg a peer to converse with who agrees with Greg that $E$ supports $h$.
But if $h$ turns out to be false, the confederate will supply Greg an interlocutor who
(falsely) believes that $E$ supports $\sim h$. Greg has full (and if you like, fully rational)
certainty that the confederate will execute this task correctly; he dispatches the
confederate and sets out to wait. Sometime later, Ben enters the room, and Greg
discovers that Ben disagrees with him about whether $E$ supports $h$. I submit that
in this case rationality requires Greg to revise his initial attitude towards $h$.

This is not a permissive case. We can suppose that both Greg’s and Ben’s
evidential standards demand initial belief in $h$ on the basis of $E$. It is also not a
case in which Ben’s testimony should lead Greg to question whether $E$ supports
Nevertheless, Greg should change his opinion about \( h \) upon receiving Ben’s testimony. This is not because Greg receives evidence that his initial opinion about \( h \) wasn’t rational; it’s because he receives evidence that that opinion wasn’t true.

I’ll admit this modified Greg/Ben case is somewhat baroque. Could the same effect occur in more realistic settings? In conversation, Kenny Easwaran suggested the following possibility: Suppose two detectives are partners—call them Brain and Brawn. When confronted with a case, Brain and Brawn collect the evidence together, and analyze it. Brain does a better analysis job; he almost always draws the rational conclusion from the evidence. Brawn is terrible at analyzing evidence. But Brawn has an interesting feature: he’s very intuitive. In the course of interviewing subjects, poking around crime scenes, etc., Brawn picks up on certain cues subconsciously. Brawn isn’t explicitly aware of this material, and he certainly wouldn’t list it as part of his evidence. But his subconscious processing leaks into his conscious thought; in particular, it introduces a bias when he goes to analyze the explicit evidence. So even though Brawn’s evidential interpretations are often terrible on the merits, they nevertheless are infected (not through explicit reasoning but instead through implicit processes) by factors that point them towards the truth.

If that’s how it is with Brawn, and Brain knows that, then even after Brain has (rationally) interpreted the evidence, it seems rational for him to take Brawn’s analysis into account. If Brawn disagrees with Brain about a case, Brain should seriously consider the possibility that Brawn’s opinion—while not a rational response to the stated evidence—nevertheless may point towards the truth. Again, Brawn’s testimony shouldn’t change Brain’s view on whether his own analysis was rationally correct, but it may shift his opinion on whether the conclusion of that analysis is true.

Philosophers have been discussing for millennia how an agent ought to respond to disagreement from his peers. In the recent epistemology literature, it’s been assumed that if peer disagreement changes an agent’s opinion, it must do so by providing higher-order evidence—evidence that changes his opinions about what’s rational.14 The debate between steadfasters and conciliationists is a debate about whether, in the unmodified version of the case, Ben’s testimony should affect Greg’s opinion that \( E \) supports \( h \). Assuming the Akratic Principle, the expectation is that changes in Greg’s higher-order opinion will cause—or at least coincide with—a change in Greg’s first-order attitude towards \( h \).

But the examples I’ve just given—the modified Ben/Greg case, and Brain vs. Brawn—show that peer disagreement may rationally change an agent’s first-order opinions (Greg’s attitude towards \( h \)) without changing his attitudes about what’s rational. This means that my earlier, blanket steadfast view about peer disagreement was too general. The Fixed Point Thesis shows that an agent who draws the rationally-required conclusion from her evidence makes a rational mistake if she allows testimony from others to change her belief that that conclusion was required. But the thesis does allow such testimony to change the agent’s attitude towards that conclusion—as long as this first-order change isn’t accompanied by a higher-order one.

In fact, I now think it’s a mistake to classify a given piece of evidence as intrinsically higher-order or not. The evidential significance of a given fact will often

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14See, for instance, Skipper (ta, §4), and the authors he cites there.
vary according to context, and in particular according to the background information possessed by the agent receiving it. The very same fact may mean different things to different people; it may rationally alter their opinions in differing ways, or may produce the same doxastic effect through two different routes. Disagreeing testimony from an epistemic peer may lead you to question the rationality of your earlier reasoning, or it may leave your assessment of your earlier reasoning unmoved while nevertheless changing your attitude toward the result of that reasoning. This latter possibility was the one I missed in “Right Reason”.15

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