

# RECONCILING ENKRASIA AND HIGHER-ORDER DEFEAT

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**Abstract.** Michael Titelbaum (2015) has recently argued that the Enkratic Principle is incompatible with the view that rational belief is sensitive to higher-order defeat. That is to say, if it cannot be rational to have akratic beliefs of the form “ $p$ , but I shouldn’t believe that  $p$ ,” then rational beliefs cannot be defeated by higher-order evidence, which indicates that they are irrational. In this paper, I distinguish two ways of understanding Titelbaum’s argument, and argue that neither version is sound. The first version can be shown to rest on a subtle, but crucial, misconstrual of the Enkratic Principle. The second version can be resisted through careful consideration of cases of higher-order defeat. The upshot is that proponents of the Enkratic Principle are free to maintain that rational belief is sensitive to higher-order defeat.

## 1. Introduction

Two theses about epistemic rationality have attracted a lot of attention recently. First, the Enkratic Principle: the thesis that it is never rational to have akratic beliefs of the form “ $p$ , but I shouldn’t believe that  $p$ .” Second, the thesis that higher-order defeat is possible, that is, the thesis that even fully rational beliefs can be defeated by sufficiently strong higher-order evidence, which indicates that they are irrational.

Michael Titelbaum (2015) has recently argued that the Enkratic Principle is incompatible with the possibility of higher-order defeat. That is to say, if akratic beliefs are never rational, then rational beliefs cannot be defeated by misleading higher-order evidence. In this paper, I distinguish two ways of understanding Titelbaum’s argument, and argue that neither version is sound. The first version can be shown to rest on a subtle, but crucial, misconstrual of the Enkratic Principle. In brief, the mistake is to think that the Enkratic Principle amounts to the claim that there are certain falsehoods about the requirements of rationality that it can never be rational to believe. Properly understood, the Enkratic Principle says something importantly different, namely that there are certain epistemic situations that one cannot occupy while being rationally permitted to believe certain falsehoods about the requirements of rationality. Once this misunderstanding is cleared away, the first version of Titelbaum’s

argument loses its force. The second version can, I argue, be resisted through careful consideration of cases of higher-order defeat.

Here is the plan. In §2, I introduce some terminology and notation that I will be using, in §§3-4, to give more precise formulations of the Enkratic Principle and the view that higher-order defeat is possible. In §5, I review Titelbaum's argument for the claim that the Enkratic Principle is incompatible with the possibility of higher-order defeat. In §6, I suggest two ways of understanding Titelbaum's argument, and argue that the argument fails on either understanding. I conclude, in §7, that proponents of the Enkratic Principle are free to maintain that rational belief is sensitive to higher-order defeat.

## 2. Preliminaries

On one intuitive picture of rational belief, the recommendations of epistemic rationality describe a function, call it ' $R$ ', from possible epistemic situations to sets of doxastic states, where a doxastic state corresponds to a set of doxastic attitudes towards different propositions. If  $s$  denotes an epistemic situation,  $R(s)$  denotes the set of doxastic states that someone who occupies  $s$  is rationally permitted to be in. Accordingly, we can use  $R$  to give a simple model of what it means for a doxastic attitude to be rationally permitted or required in a given epistemic situation:

**Rational Permission:** A doxastic attitude  $A$  is rationally permitted in an epistemic situation  $s$  iff  $A \in d$ , for some doxastic state  $d \in R(s)$ .

**Rational Requirement:** A doxastic attitude  $A$  is rationally required in an epistemic situation  $s$  iff  $A \in d$ , for every doxastic state  $d \in R(s)$ .

According to this model, a doxastic attitude is rationally *permitted* in an epistemic situation just in case the attitude is part of *at least one* of the doxastic states that it is rational to adopt if one occupies that situation; and a doxastic attitude is rationally *required* in an epistemic situation just in case the attitude is part of *every* doxastic state that it is rational to adopt if one occupies that situation.<sup>1</sup> Derivatively, I will say that a doxastic attitude is rationally *forbidden* just in case it is not rationally permitted.

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<sup>1</sup> This picture of epistemic rationality bears clear resemblance to model-theoretic developments in deontic logic; see McNamara (2014) for background. Titelbaum (2015, p. 263) introduces a very similar model to frame his discussion.

I will make two simplifying assumptions about the function  $R$ . First, I will assume that whenever a doxastic attitude is rationally required, the attitude is also rationally permitted. This amounts to assuming that every epistemic situation rationally permits at least one (non-empty) doxastic state. Second, I will assume that doxastic attitudes are binary, rather than graded. That is, I will be talking about belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment, rather than levels of confidence or credences. But otherwise I will not make any substantive assumptions about  $R$  at this point. In particular, I will not assume that  $R$  validates the Uniqueness Thesis, according to which any epistemic situation rationally permits at most one doxastic attitude towards any given proposition; nor will I assume that  $R$  never gives rise to epistemic dilemmas, that is, situations where two (or more) incompatible doxastic attitudes are both rationally required.<sup>2</sup> By staying neutral on such theses, there should be no risk of begging any interesting questions from the outset.

### 3. The Enkratic Principle

Philosophers have long discussed and, for the most part, endorsed a principle of *practical* enkrasia, according to which it is never rational to intend (or fail to intend) to perform an action that one judges one should (or should not) perform.<sup>3</sup> If I intend to sell my house despite judging that I should keep it, something appears rationally flawed about my state of mind; and likewise if I judge that I should sell my house, but nonetheless intend to keep it. Someone who does not intend to act in accordance with his or her own best overall judgment fails to be rational by his or her own lights, and such a failure has struck many as an obvious case of irrationality.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, epistemologists have drawn attention to an analogous principle of *epistemic* enkrasia, according to which it is never rationally permissible to have a belief that one believes to be rationally forbidden; or, conversely, fail to have a belief that one believes to be rationally required. If I believe that it is raining, despite believing that I am rationally forbidden believe that it is raining, something appears rationally flawed about my state of

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<sup>2</sup> For discussions of the Uniqueness Thesis, see Levinstein (2015), Schoenfield (2014), Titelbaum and Kopec (2016), White (2005), among others. For discussions of epistemic dilemmas, see Christensen (2007b; 2010; 2014), Lasonen-Aarnio (2014), and Worsnip (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Discussions of practical akrasia go back as far as to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book VII, Chs. 1-10). For early modern discussions of practical akrasia, see Davidson (1970) and Hare (1952).

<sup>4</sup> Although see Arpaly (2000), Audi (1990), and McIntyre (1990) for authors who doubt that practical akrasia need always be irrational.

mind; and likewise if I believe that I am rationally required to believe that it is raining, but nonetheless fail to so believe. Just as it seems irrational to *act* against one's best judgment about how one ought to *act*, it seems irrational to *believe* against one's best judgment of what one ought to *believe*.

We can use the model of epistemic rationality introduced in the previous section to give a slightly more precise formulation of the view that epistemic akrasia is never rational:

**Enkratic Principle:** There is no epistemic situation  $s$ , doxastic state  $d \in R(s)$ , and doxastic attitude  $A$  such that:

- (i)  $d$  contains  $A$ , and  $d$  contains the belief that [ $A$  is rationally forbidden in  $s$ ]; or
- (ii)  $d$  does not contain  $A$ , and  $d$  contains the belief that [ $A$  is rationally required in  $s$ ].

The first clause says that it is never rationally permissible to have a doxastic attitude that one believes to be rationally forbidden in one's epistemic situation. For example, it is never rationally permissible to believe that it is raining, while also believing that one's epistemic situation rationally forbids believing that it is raining. The second clause says that it is never rationally permissible to fail to have a doxastic attitude that one believes to be rationally required in one's epistemic situation. For example, it is never rationally permissible to fail to believe that it is raining, while also believing that one is rationally required to believe that it is raining. As such, the Enkratic Principle imposes two constraints on rational belief, corresponding to two ways in which one might be epistemically akratic: either by having an attitude that one believes to be forbidden, or by failing to have an attitude that one believes to be required.

How plausible is the Enkratic Principle, thus understood? From an intuitive standpoint, akratic beliefs undoubtedly seem rationally flawed. Statements like "it's raining, but I shouldn't believe it" strike us as incoherent in much the same way as Moorean statements like "it's raining, but I don't believe it."<sup>5</sup> But philosophers have reacted very differently to the intuitive oddness of epistemic akrasia. Some authors accept the Enkratic Principle largely without argument; see, e.g., Scanlon (1998), Bergmann (2005), Feldman (2005), and Broome (2007). Others try to back the Enkratic Principle up by substantive argument; see, e.g., Greco (2014) and Kolodny (2005, pp. 521-27). Yet others call the Enkratic Principle into doubt,

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<sup>5</sup> See Horowitz (2013) for a detailed discussion of the intuitive oddness of epistemic akrasia. For related discussions of Moore's paradox, see Green and Williams (2007) and Smithies (2012).

despite its intuitive appeal. For example, Worsnip (2015) argues that it is possible for a body of evidence to mislead about what it itself supports, in which case it is possible for one's total evidence to support a belief of the form " $p$ , but my total evidence doesn't support  $p$ ." If so, there is pressure to accept that epistemic akrasia can sometimes be rational, although Worsnip ultimately wants to resist this conclusion. In a similar vein, Lasonen-Aarnio (forthcoming) argues that the Enkratic Principle conflicts with Evidentialism and maintains that we should sacrifice the Enkratic Principle on the altar of Evidentialism. Finally, Christensen (2016) argues that agents who rationally believe themselves to be anti-reliable—that is, agents who rationally believe themselves to be more likely than not to make an incorrect judgment of their total evidence—must sometimes be epistemically akratic in order to maximize the expected accuracy of their beliefs. If so, and if accuracy trumps enkrasia, there is pressure to give up the Enkratic Principle.

I will not try to evaluate these (and other related<sup>6</sup>) arguments for or against the Enkratic Principle. My aim here is not to assess the overall viability of the Enkratic Principle, but to argue for its compatibility with the view that rational belief is sensitive to higher-order defeat. Henceforth, I will therefore put aside whatever other qualms one might have about the Enkratic Principle.

#### 4. Higher-Order Defeat

As Christensen (2010, p. 185) has points out, there is a trivial sense in which all evidence is defeating evidence. Whenever one gets new evidence that requires a change in one's belief state, there is a sense in which one's original belief state has been defeated. In most cases, the newly acquired evidence does not get its defeating force by indicating that one's original belief state was irrational *to begin with*. If I believe that tomorrow's class will start at 8am as usual, but then receive an e-mail saying that the class has been cancelled, I may well be required to give up my belief that tomorrow's class will start at 8am. But this doesn't show that it was irrational of me to believe as I did before receiving the e-mail. Nothing about the e-mail reception indicates that I have been anything less than fully rational. In such cases where a belief state  $d$  is defeated by evidence that does not indicate that  $d$  was initially irrational, let us say that  $d$  has been subject to *first-order defeat*.

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Coates (2012), Weatherson (ms.), Wedgwood (2012), and Williamson (2000).

Not all defeaters are first-order defeaters, so understood. Sometimes one's belief state is defeated precisely because one gets evidence, which indicates that one's current belief state is rationally flawed. Consider the following example:

**Parental Bias:** Mary rationally believes that her son Peter is a brilliant pianist. This morning, however, Mary reads a study showing that most parents suffer from a pronounced *parental bias*, which leads them to overestimate their children on a wide range of desirable traits such as intelligence, musical talent, social skills, and the like.

By stipulation, Mary's initial evaluation of Peter's abilities on the piano is unbiased. Yet, there seems to be a strong intuition that she ought to lower her evaluation of Peter after learning about the parental bias. For even if Mary does not *in fact* suffer from the parental bias, she has strong reasons to *think* that she does; and this seems sufficient to require Mary to give up her belief (or, at the very least, to lower her confidence) that her son is a brilliant pianist. The recent literature on higher-order evidence contains many similar cases in which a fully rational agent seems required to change her belief state, because she gets a body of misleading higher-order evidence, which indicates that her current belief state is rationally flawed.<sup>7</sup> When a rational belief state is defeated in this way, let us say that the belief state has been subject to *higher-order defeat*.

We can use the model of epistemic rationality introduced in the previous section to give a more precise formulation of the view that rational belief is sensitive to higher-order defeat:

**Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat:** It is possible for a rationally permitted doxastic state *d* to be defeated by sufficiently strong higher-order evidence, which indicates that *d* is rationally forbidden.

Three comments about this view are in order. First, note that higher-order evidence must be *misleading* to have defeating force. Non-misleading higher-order evidence will either indicate that a rational belief state is rational (in which case the belief state is not defeated), or indicate that an irrational belief state is irrational (in which case the belief state is already irrational, and hence not defeasible). So, in contrast to ordinary first-order evidence, only misleading higher-order evidence can serve as a defeater.

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Christensen (2010; 2016), Horowitz and Sliwa (2015), Schoenfield (2016), and Worsnip (2015).

Second, the claim that higher-order defeat is possible should not be confused with the claim that *self-misleading evidence* is possible. Self-misleading evidence is a synchronic phenomenon, whereby a body of evidence supports a falsehood about what it itself supports. For example, if my evidence supports that it's raining, while also supporting that my evidence doesn't support that it's raining, then my evidence is self-misleading. By contrast, higher-order defeat is a diachronic phenomenon, whereby a doxastic attitude, which is initially rational, becomes irrational at a later stage due to the acquisition of a body of misleading higher-order evidence. As such, cases of higher-order defeat are *ipso facto* not cases of self-misleading evidence, since the doxastic attitude, which the higher-order evidence says is irrational, in fact ends up being irrational. It remains an open question whether self-misleading evidence is indeed possible, and whether the Enkratic Principle is compatible with the possibility of self-misleading evidence.<sup>8</sup> But this as it may; the issue at stake here is whether the Enkratic Principle is compatible with the possibility of higher-order defeat, understood as a diachronic phenomenon.

Finally, the distinction between first-order and higher-order defeat should be distinguished from the familiar distinction, due to Pollock (1974), between rebutting and undercutting defeat. As pointed out by Christensen (2010), DiPaolo (forthcoming), and others, higher-order defeat is importantly different from undercutting defeat in a number of respects. However, we still lack a comprehensive understanding of how, exactly, higher-order defeat fits into a broader picture of epistemic defeat, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to address these wider issues. For present purposes, it suffices to have at least an initial grasp of the distinction between first-order and higher-order defeat.

How plausible is it that rational belief is sensitive to higher-order defeat? According to a prominent line of defense, due to Christensen (2007; 2010; 2011), those who maintain that higher-order defeat is impossible are committed to an implausible form of dogmatism about our own cognitive abilities. We may use the Parental Bias case to illustrate the point: if Mary disregards the study on the parental bias, she must take the study to be misleading. But the study is only misleading if Mary's initial evaluation of Peter was in fact unbiased. So if Mary disregards the study, she must assume that her initial evaluation of Peter was unbiased. Yet, in doing so, she seems to beg the question in much the same way as someone who disregards

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<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of self-misleading evidence, see Worsnip (2015; forthcoming), Lasonen-Aarnio (forthcoming), and Skipper (forthcoming).

a body of evidence merely on the grounds that it opposes his or her prior opinion. To avoid this sort of dogmatic reliance on her own cognitive abilities, Christensen maintains, Mary should lower her evaluation of Peter’s abilities upon learning about the parental bias.<sup>9</sup>

Another defense of the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat may be derived from Elga’s (2007) “bootstrapping” objection against the Right Reasons View of peer disagreement. According to the Right Reasons View, when two epistemic peers discover that they disagree about some proposition  $p$ , the peer who is in the right (that is, the peer who initially judged the shared body of evidence correctly) is rationally permitted to retain her initial belief about  $p$  in light of the disagreement. Elga’s objection against this view goes by way of *reductio*: suppose that, if two epistemic peers  $a$  and  $b$  find themselves in disagreement, the peer who is right, say  $a$ , is rationally permitted to retain her initial opinion about the disputed proposition. Presumably, this means that  $a$  is thereby justified in concluding that  $b$  is wrong, and hence justified in concluding that  $b$  is (at least to some extent) epistemically inferior to  $a$  with respect to the matter of dispute. Yet, it seems absurd to suppose that the mere fact that  $b$  disagrees with  $a$  should make it rational for  $a$  to conclude that  $b$  is epistemically inferior to  $a$ . So, Elga maintains, the Right Reasons View cannot be true.<sup>10</sup>

If we understand disagreement as a kind of higher-order evidence (as many have done<sup>11</sup>), the Right Reasons View amounts to the claim that a particular sort of misleading higher-order evidence does not have defeating force. So, if the Right Reasons View is indeed false, it follows that at least one kind of higher-order evidence can have defeating force, which strictly speaking suffices to establish the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat. Thus, anyone who rejects the Right Reasons View (including virtually everyone in the disagreement debate<sup>12</sup>) should accept the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat.

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<sup>9</sup> As also pointed out by Christensen (2010, pp. 196-97), it is not obvious *how*, exactly, Mary begs the question if she disregards the study on the parental bias. But *that* she, in one way or another, begs the question seems intuitively clear. The situation is similar to the traditional Dogmatism Puzzle: as Harman (1973, pp. 148-49) notes, it is not obvious *why* it is irrational to disregard a body of evidence on the grounds that it speaks against one’s knowledge; but *that* it is irrational seems intuitively clear.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, Elga’s position in the disagreement debate is far from uncontroversial. For criticism, see Kelly (2010) and Lackey (2008).

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Kelly (2010), Christensen (2010), and Rasmussen et al. (forthcoming).

<sup>12</sup> These include not only proponents of various forms of “conciliationism” such as Elga (2007), Christensen (2007), and Feldman (2006), but also proponents of moderately “steadfast” views of disagreement such as Kelly (2010), Lackey (2008), and Worsnip (2014). To my knowledge, Titelbaum (2015) is the only current proponent of the view that disagreement cannot have defeating force.



Despite the pull of Christensen and Elga's arguments, some philosophers remain doubtful that rational belief is indeed sensitive to higher-order defeat. Whiting (2016) argues, in a general vein, that all reasons for belief or action are *first-order* reasons, in which case the distinction between first-order and higher-order defeat rests on a mistake in the first place. Lasonen-Aarnio (2014) argues that there is no satisfactory way of accommodating higher-order defeat within a broader picture of epistemic justification, while also steering clear of epistemic dilemmas. Elsewhere, I have argued that Lasonen-Aarnio's argument should not worry proponents of higher-order defeat (Skipper, ms). But as already mentioned, my present aim is not to assess the overall plausibility of the view that rational belief is sensitive to higher-order defeat. Rather, my hope is to show that those who accept this view are free to accept the Enkratic Principle as well. So, in what follows, I will put aside whatever other qualms one might have about the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat.

## 5. Titelbaum Against Higher-Order Defeat

Let us now consider Titelbaum's reasons for thinking that the Enkratic Principle is incompatible with the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat. I will reconstruct his argument in three steps. In doing so, I will deviate to some extent from Titelbaum's own exposition. But the reconstruction should amount to a charitable interpretation of his argument.

The first step consists in showing that the Enkratic Principle entails the following thesis:

**Substantive Enkratic Principle:** There is no epistemic situation  $s$  and doxastic attitude  $A$  such that:

- (i)  $s$  rationally requires  $A$ , and  $s$  rationally permits believing that  
[ $s$  rationally forbids  $A$ ]; or
- (ii)  $s$  rationally forbids  $A$ , and  $s$  rationally permits believing that  
[ $s$  rationally requires  $A$ ].

According to the first clause, it is never permissible to believe that one's epistemic situation forbids a doxastic attitude that it in fact requires. For example, if I am required to believe that it is raining, I am not permitted to believe that I am forbidden to believe that it is raining. Likewise, if I am required to disbelieve that the sun is shining, I am not permitted to believe that I am forbidden to disbelieve that the sun is shining. According to the second clause, it is never permissible to believe that one's epistemic situation requires a doxastic attitude that it in fact forbids. For example, if I am forbidden to believe that it is raining, I am not permitted

to believe that I am required to believe that it is raining. Likewise, if I am forbidden to disbelieve that the sun is shining, I am not permitted to believe that I am required to disbelieve that the sun is shining. As such, the Substantive Enkratic Principle amounts to the claim that there are two kinds of mistakes about the requirements of rationality that it can never be rational to make: mistakes about which doxastic attitudes one's epistemic situation rationally requires, and mistakes about which doxastic attitudes one's epistemic situation rationally forbids.

I call the Substantive Enkratic Principle "substantive" because it constrains which *individual* doxastic attitudes it can be permissible to have. More precisely, the Substantive Enkratic Principle says that it is never permissible to believe a false proposition about which doxastic attitudes one's epistemic situation requires or forbids. By contrast, the Enkratic Principle is a coherence constraint on rational belief in virtue of constraining which *combinations* of doxastic attitudes it can be permissible to have.

Despite this difference, it is easily verified that the Enkratic Principle entails the Substantive Enkratic Principle: suppose, contra the Substantive Enkratic Principle, that there is an epistemic situation  $s$  and a doxastic attitude  $A$  such that either (i)  $s$  requires  $A$ , and  $s$  permits believing that [ $s$  forbids  $A$ ], or (ii)  $s$  forbids  $A$ , and  $s$  permits believing that [ $s$  requires  $A$ ]. In the former case, it follows that there is a doxastic state  $d \in R(s)$  such that  $d$  contains both  $A$  and the belief that [ $s$  forbids  $A$ ], which violates the first clause in the Enkratic Principle. In the latter case, it follows that there is a doxastic state  $d \in R(s)$  such that  $d$  does not contain  $A$ , but contains the belief that [ $s$  requires  $A$ ], which violates the second clause in the Enkratic Principle. Hence, the Enkratic Principle must be false, if the Substantive Enkratic Principle is false; or, equivalently, the Enkratic Principle entails the Substantive Enkratic Principle.

The Substantive Enkratic Principle is a slightly generalized version of Titelbaum's so-called "Special Case Thesis," according to which "there do not exist [a doxastic] attitude  $A$  and [an epistemic] situation such that  $A$  is rationally required in that situation, and it is rationally permissible in that situation to believe that  $A$  is rationally forbidden [in that situation]" (Titelbaum 2015, p. 267). The Special Case Thesis prohibits one particular kind of mistake about the requirements of rationality, namely that of believing that one's epistemic situation forbids a doxastic attitude that it in fact requires. The Substantive Enkratic Principle is a slightly stronger thesis in virtue of prohibiting an additional kind of mistake, namely that of believing that one's epistemic situation requires a doxastic attitude that it in fact forbids. For reasons of generality, I prefer to work with the Substantive Enkratic Principle. But

someone who finds the second clause in the Substantive Enkratic Principle particularly objectionable is free to replace the Substantive Enkratic Principle with the Special Case Thesis in what follows. Nothing of importance is going to hinge on the choice here.

The second step of Titelbaum's argument consists in showing that proponents of the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat are committed to the following thesis:

**No Fixed Point Thesis:** There are distinct epistemic situations  $s$  and  $s'$  such that  $s'$  rationally permits believing a falsehood about which doxastic attitudes  $s$  rationally requires or forbids.

The label alludes to Titelbaum's so-called "Fixed Point Thesis," according to which "no [epistemic] situation rationally permits an a priori false belief about which overall [doxastic] states are rationally permitted in which situations" (Titelbaum 2015, p. 261). As Titelbaum puts his thesis in a slogan: "mistakes *about* the requirements of rationality are mistakes *of* rationality" (Titelbaum 2015, p. 253). That is, the Fixed Point Thesis amounts to the claim that, for any false proposition  $p$  about which doxastic attitudes a given epistemic situation  $s$  rationally requires or forbids, any agent is rationally forbidden to believe that  $p$ , regardless of whether the agent occupies  $s$  or not. The No Fixed Point Thesis denies this claim: according to it, it may well be rationally permissible to be mistaken about which doxastic attitudes a given epistemic situation requires or forbids, as long as one does not occupy that situation. If I occupy an epistemic situation  $s$ , and a different epistemic situation  $s'$  requires believing that it is raining, I may well be permitted to believe that [ $s'$  forbids believing that it is raining]. Likewise, if  $s'$  forbids believing that the sun is shining, I may well be permitted to believe that [ $s'$  requires believing that the sun is shining].

Why are proponents of the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat committed to the No Fixed Point Thesis? Consider again the Parental Bias case: let  $s$  be Mary's epistemic situation before learning about the parental bias, let  $s'$  be her epistemic situation after having learned about the parental bias, and let  $p$  be the proposition that [ $s$  forbids believing that Peter is a brilliant pianist]. Given that Mary's initial evaluation of Peter is unbiased, she is in fact permitted in  $s$  to believe that her son is a brilliant pianist. Thus,  $p$  is a false proposition about which doxastic attitudes  $s$  requires or forbids. Yet, in  $s'$ , Mary is permitted to believe that  $p$ . Assuming, as we do, that Parental Bias is a case of higher-order defeat, Mary is forbidden in  $s'$  to believe that her son is a brilliant pianist. And the *reason* for this is that the study on the parental bias

indicates that her belief was never permissible *to begin with*.<sup>13</sup> So, in  $s'$ , Mary is permitted to believe that  $p$ , and hence permitted to believe a falsehood about which doxastic attitudes  $s$  requires or forbids. Consequently, those who accept the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat are committed to the No Fixed Point Thesis.<sup>14</sup>

The third and final step of Titelbaum's argument aims to show that the Substantive Enkratic Principle is incompatible with the No Fixed Point Thesis. In light of the first two steps, this means that the Enkratic Principle is incompatible with the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat. I will eventually argue that the third step of Titelbaum's argument is unsound, and that the Substantive Enkratic Principle is in fact compatible with the No Fixed Point Thesis. But let me first lay out Titelbaum's reasons for thinking otherwise.

Let  $P_{rat}$  be the set of all propositions, whether true or false, about which doxastic attitudes various epistemic situations permit, require, or forbid. We can think of the propositions in  $P_{rat}$  as statements of the form "such-and-such epistemic situation permits (requires, or forbids) such-and-such doxastic attitude." Given this, the Substantive Enkratic Principle amounts to the claim that it is never permissible to be mistaken about those propositions in  $P_{rat}$  concerning which doxastic attitudes one's own epistemic situation requires or forbids; and the No Fixed Point Thesis amounts to the claim that it is sometimes permissible to be mistaken about those propositions in  $P_{rat}$  that do not concern which doxastic attitudes one's own epistemic situation requires or forbids. Thus, someone who accepts both the Substantive Enkratic Principle and the No Fixed Point Thesis is committed to the following thesis:

**Current Situation Thesis:** It cannot be rationally permissible to be mistaken about those propositions in  $P_{rat}$  that concern which doxastic attitudes one's current epistemic situation rationally requires or forbids, but it can be rationally permissible to be mistaken

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<sup>13</sup> Strictly speaking, this step of the argument relies on a (relatively weak) evidentialist thesis, since an inference is drawn from what Mary's evidence supports to what she is rationally permitted to believe. However, since anyone who accepts the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat is committed to this evidentialist thesis, Titelbaum gets the relevant version of evidentialism for free. For further discussion of evidentialism, see Conee and Feldman (1985; 2004) and Shah (2006).

<sup>14</sup> An anonymous reviewer has rightly pointed out that this line of reasoning presupposes a relatively fine-grained individuation of epistemic situations. More specifically, it is assumed that epistemic situations are sufficiently fine-grained to make it the case that Mary indeed transitions to a new epistemic situation when she learns about the parental bias. For present purposes, I shall simply grant a fine-grained individuation of epistemic situations, since my qualms about Titelbaum's argument lie elsewhere.

about those propositions in  $P_{rat}$  that do not concern which doxastic attitudes one's current epistemic situation rationally requires or forbids.

The Current Situation Thesis is equivalent to the conjunction of the Substantive Enkratic Principle and the No Fixed Point Thesis. And since the Substantive Enkratic Principle is implied by the Enkratic Principle, while the No Fixed Point Thesis is implied by the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat, it follows that the Enkratic Principle and the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat jointly imply the Current Situation Thesis. Thus, anyone who endorses both the Enkratic Principle and the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat is committed to the Current Situation Thesis.

However, according to Titelbaum, proponents of the Current Situation Thesis face an explanatory challenge: what constitutes the epistemically relevant difference between those propositions in  $P_{rat}$  that concern which doxastic attitudes one's current epistemic situation rationally requires or forbids, and those that do not? Without an explanation of this apparent epistemic asymmetry, the Current Situation Thesis comes across as "egregiously *ad hoc*" (Titelbaum 2015, p. 275). To appreciate this explanatory challenge, consider an analogous point about a different domain: let  $P_{math}$  be the set of true or false statements of elementary arithmetic (such as " $2+2=7$ ", " $3\times 7=21$ ", and so on). Suppose that someone claimed that there are some propositions in  $P_{math}$  that one cannot be rationally mistaken about, but others that one can be rationally mistaken about. Such a claim would seem to call out for an explanation of what constitutes the epistemically relevant difference between those propositions in  $P_{math}$  that one can be rationally mistaken about, and those that one cannot be rationally mistaken about. Without such an explanation, it seems *ad hoc* to say that one can be rationally mistaken about some propositions in  $P_{math}$ , but not others.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Titelbaum maintains, unless the proponent of the Current Situation Thesis can point out an epistemically relevant difference between those propositions in  $P_{rat}$  that concern which doxastic attitudes one's own epistemic situation requires or forbids, and those that do not, it seems *ad hoc* to say that one can be rationally mistaken about the latter class of propositions, but not the former.

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<sup>15</sup> Of course, one might try to give a principled reason to think that rational mistakes are possible only for a certain subset of  $P_{math}$ . For example, one might think that it can only be rational to be mistaken about sufficiently complex arithmetic statements. But in the absence of such a principled reason, the thought goes, it seems *ad hoc* to claim that rational mistakes are possible for certain propositions in  $P_{math}$ , but impossible for others.

Yet, says Titelbaum, is that it is hard to see what the epistemically relevant difference could be between those propositions in  $P_{rat}$  that concern which doxastic attitudes one's current epistemic situation requires or forbids, and those that do not. To see why, Titelbaum asks us to consider what might justify our doxastic attitudes towards various propositions in  $P_{rat}$ . One potential source of justification is *a priori*: arguably, one can reflect *a priori* on epistemically relevant features of a given situation, and thereby come to be justified in adopting such-and-such doxastic attitudes towards such-and-such propositions about which doxastic attitudes that situation requires or forbids. For example, I might imagine myself climbing Mount Everest and come to realize that, in this situation, I would be permitted (or even required) to believe that I am above sea level. Likewise, I might imagine myself scuba diving and come to realize that, in this situation, I would be forbidden to believe that I am above sea level.

If this is how we acquire justification for propositions in  $P_{rats}$ , says Titelbaum, the kind of justification that one can get for a given proposition in  $P_{rat}$  does not seem to depend on which epistemic situation one occupies. Just as I can reflect on what I *am* permitted to believe when I *am* climbing Mount Everest, I can reflect on what I *would* be permitted to believe, if I *were* climbing Mount Everest. Likewise, just as I can reflect on what I *am* forbidden to believe, when I *am* scuba diving, I can reflect on what I *would* be forbidden to believe, if I *were* scuba diving.

Obviously, Titelbaum grants, one might try to come up with alternative accounts of how we acquire justification for propositions in  $P_{rat}$ . But regardless of what the correct account turns out to be, the thought goes, it seems implausible to suppose that the kind of justification that one can get for a given proposition in  $P_{rat}$  should depend on which epistemic situation one currently occupies. And if so, it is implausible to suppose that whether or not one can be rationally mistaken about a given proposition in  $P_{rat}$  should depend on which epistemic situation one currently occupies. Yet, this is precisely what the Current Situation Thesis seems to say. So, Titelbaum concludes, the Current Situation Thesis cannot be true; or, equivalently, either the Substantive Enkratic Principle or the No Fixed Point Thesis must be false.

This completes our reconstruction of Titelbaum's argument for the claim that the Enkratic Principle is incompatible with the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat. Before moving on, let us briefly sum up the three steps: first, the Enkratic Principle implies the Substantive Enkratic Principle; second, the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat implies the No Fixed Point Thesis; and, third, the Substantive Enkratic Principle and the No Fixed Point Thesis cannot both be true. Hence, the Enkratic Principle and the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat are incompatible.

## 6. Reconciling Enkrasia and Higher-Order Defeat

I take the first two steps of Titelbaum's argument to be uncontroversial: it is easily verified that the Enkratic Principle entails the Substantive Enkratic Principle, and it should be equally clear that adherents of the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat are committed to the No Fixed Point Thesis. The culprit is the third step of the argument, which seeks to show that the Substantive Enkratic Principle is incompatible with the No Fixed Point Thesis (or, equivalently, that the Current Situation Thesis is false). In this section, I will begin by distinguishing two ways in which one might understand the third step of Titelbaum's argument, and then argue that the argument fails on either understanding.

The two ways of understanding the third step of Titelbaum's argument correspond to two ways of understanding the explanatory challenge that Titelbaum raises for the proponent of the Current Situation Thesis. On one understanding, the explanatory challenge concerns the kind of justification that one can *acquire* for various propositions in  $P_{rat}$ . Thus understood, the challenge is that of explaining why one cannot acquire all-things-considered misleading justification for those propositions in  $P_{rat}$  that concern one's current epistemic situation, when one can acquire all-things-considered misleading justification for those that do not. On another understanding, the explanatory challenge concerns the kind of justification that one can *have* for various propositions in  $P_{rat}$ . Thus understood, the challenge is that of explaining why one cannot have all-things-considered misleading justification for those propositions in  $P_{rat}$  that concern one's current epistemic situation, when one can have all-things-considered misleading justification for those that do not.<sup>16</sup> These two explanatory challenges are indeed distinct: the justification that one *has* in a given epistemic situation can (and typically does) come apart from the justification that one can *acquire* in that epistemic situation. Even if I lack justification to believe that the sun is shining, I might acquire such justification. The fact that I presently lack the justification does nothing to prevent me from acquiring it. So the two interpretations of Titelbaum's explanatory challenge are importantly different, and should be evaluated separately.

Let me begin by considering the first interpretation of Titelbaum's challenge to the proponent of the Current Situation Thesis. This version of the challenge, I shall argue, rests on a subtle, but crucial, misconstrual of the Substantive Enkratic Principle. The mistake is to think that the Substantive Enkratic Principle amounts to the claim that there are certain

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<sup>16</sup> I am grateful to Maria Lasonen-Aarnio for bringing the latter interpretation to my attention.

propositions in  $P_{rat}$ —those propositions that concern which doxastic attitudes one’s current epistemic situation requires or forbids—that one can never be rationally mistaken about. In other words, the mistake is to think that the Substantive Enkratic Principle says that there is a certain class of propositions in  $P_{rat}$  that no epistemic situation permits believing. Properly understood, the Substantive Enkratic Principle implies no such thing. Rather, the Substantive Enkratic Principle is fully compatible with the claim that, for any false proposition in  $P_{rat}$ , some epistemic situation permits believing that proposition.

To see why, let  $s$  be any epistemic situation and let  $p$  be any falsehood in  $P_{rat}$  about which doxastic attitudes  $s$  requires or forbids. According to the Substantive Enkratic Principle, an agent who occupies  $s$  is forbidden to believe that  $p$ , since  $p$  is a falsehood about which doxastic attitudes the agent’s current situation requires or forbids. But this obviously does not mean that the agent cannot *become* permitted to believe that  $p$ . It simply means that the agent’s epistemic situation must *change*, if the agent is to be permitted to believe that  $p$ . And such a change in the agent’s epistemic situation is precisely what the right kind of misleading higher-order evidence can bring about.

The Parental Bias case can serve to illustrate the point: as above, let  $s$  be Mary’s epistemic situation before learning about the parental bias, and let  $p$  be the false proposition that [Mary is forbidden in  $s$  to believe that Peter is a brilliant pianist]. According to the Substantive Enkratic Principle, Mary is forbidden in  $s$  to believe that  $p$ . But when Mary learns about the study on the parental bias, she transitions to a new epistemic situation  $s'$  in which she is permitted to believe that  $p$ . So there *is* an epistemic situation in which Mary is permitted to believe the relevant falsehood  $p$  about which doxastic attitudes  $s$  requires or forbids. But since the belief is made rational by a higher-order defeater that at the same time issues a shift in Mary’s epistemic situation, she no longer occupies  $s$  when being permitted to believe that  $p$ . Thus, Mary does not end up believing a falsehood about which doxastic attitudes her *current* epistemic situation requires or forbids, but ends up believing a falsehood about which doxastic attitudes her *previous* epistemic situation requires or forbids.

More generally, let  $s$  be any epistemic situation, and let  $p$  be any falsehood in  $P_{rat}$  about which doxastic attitudes  $s$  requires or forbids. According to the Substantive Enkratic Principle,  $s$  forbids believing that  $p$ . But if an agent who occupies  $s$  receives sufficiently strong misleading higher-order evidence in support of  $p$ , the agent transitions to a new epistemic situation  $s'$  in which the agent is permitted to believe that  $p$ . So there is a situation in which the agent is permitted to believe the relevant falsehood  $p$  about which doxastic attitudes  $s$  requires or



forbids. But since the belief is made rational by a higher-order defeater that at the same time issues a shift in the agent's situation, the agent no longer occupies  $s$  when being permitted to believe that  $p$ . Thus, the agent does not end up believing a falsehood about which doxastic attitudes the agent's current situation requires or forbids, but ends up believing a falsehood about which doxastic attitudes the agent's previous epistemic situation requires or forbids.

This puts us in a position to defuse the first version of Titelbaum's argument against the Current Situation Thesis. Recall that, according to this version of the argument, the Current Situation Thesis is implausible in virtue of implying that the kind of justification one can *acquire* for a given proposition in  $P_{rat}$  about a situation  $s$  depends on whether one occupies  $s$  or not. But as we have seen, the Current Situation Thesis does not commit us to this claim. On the contrary, the Current Situation Thesis is compatible with the claim that one can acquire the same sort of justification for any proposition in  $P_{rat}$ , regardless of which epistemic situation one occupies. The temptation to think otherwise stems from a misconstrual of the Substantive Enkratic Principle to the effect that there is a certain class of propositions in  $P_{rat}$  that enjoy a special epistemic status, making it impossible to be rationally mistaken about them. Once we see that the Substantive Enkratic Principle does not have this implication, the first version of Titelbaum's argument against the Current Situation Thesis loses its force.

I shall leave it open whether Titelbaum's argument is best interpreted as relying on this sort of misconstrual of the Enkratic Principle. But it is worth noting that others seem to have misconstrued the Enkratic Principle in much the same way. For example, Greco (2014) describes the Enkratic Principle as "puzzling" on the following grounds:

[T]he claim that epistemic akrasia is always irrational amounts to the claim that a certain sort of justified false belief—a justified false belief about what one ought to believe—is impossible. But justified false beliefs seem to be possible in any domain, and it's hard to see why beliefs about what one ought to believe should be an exception. (Greco 2014, p. 201)

In a similar vein, Littlejohn (2015) takes the Enkratic Principle to say that there is "a special class of propositions about the requirements of rationality that we cannot make rational mistakes about" (Littlejohn 2015, p. 1), and he describes this result as "surprising" because:

You might think that there can be rational mistakes about just about anything. The best evidence might be misleading. If it's good enough evidence, it might make mistakes reasonable. (Littlejohn 2015, p. 5)

On one very natural reading of these passages, Greco and Littlejohn both take the Enkratic Principle to say that there are certain false propositions about the requirements of rationality that it is never rationally permissible to believe. If this were the case, the Enkratic Principle would indeed be a puzzling thesis (at least for those who think that justified false beliefs are possible across all subject-matters<sup>17</sup>). But as we have seen, the Enkratic Principle does not say that justified false beliefs are impossible for certain propositions in  $P_{rat}$ . All the Enkratic Principle says is that there are certain epistemic situations that one cannot *occupy* while being permitted to believe certain false propositions in  $P_{rat}$ . As such, the Enkratic Principle does not have the kinds of puzzling consequences for the possibility of justified false beliefs about the requirements of rationality that Greco and Littlejohn seem to think.

Let us now turn to the second interpretation of Titelbaum's challenge to the proponent of the Current Situation Thesis. While this statement of the challenge does not rest on any misconstrual of the Substantive Enkratic Principle, I will argue that the challenge is benign. To begin with, note that there is nothing puzzling about a thesis that implies that one cannot have all-things-considered misleading justification for such-and-such propositions in such-and-such epistemic situations. In other words, there is nothing puzzling about a thesis that imposes constraints on which epistemic situations an agent can occupy while being permitted or required to have certain doxastic attitudes towards certain propositions. After all, that's just what the requirements of rationality are supposed to *do*. So, the mere fact that the Current Situation Thesis imposes constraints on which mistakes it can be rational to make in one's current epistemic situation hardly constitutes an explanatory challenge to the proponent of the Current Situation Thesis. The challenge, if there is one, must lie elsewhere.

Instead, one might take the second version of the challenge to be that of explaining how the Current Situation Thesis could be consistent with a plausible story about the kind of justification that agents can have for propositions in  $P_{rat}$ . As mentioned in the previous section, Titelbaum (2015, p. 275) considers a story, according to which any agent has *a priori* justification for any true proposition in  $P_{rat}$ . Let us simply grant this assumption for the sake of argument. Presumably, the proponent of the Current Situation Thesis must then maintain

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<sup>17</sup> There are, of course, those who argue that epistemic justification is factive—see, e.g., Littlejohn (2012), Steglich-Petersen (2013), Sutton (2007), and Williamson (2000; forthcoming). However, such philosophers must in any case deny the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat, since the No Fixed Point Thesis (which is implied by the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat) says that a particular kind of justified false belief is possible, in which case epistemic justification cannot in general be factive.

that it is possible for an agent to have misleading empirical evidence bearing on the propositions in  $P_{rat}$ . Indeed, if we are to make sense of the No Fixed Point Thesis, it must be possible for such misleading empirical evidence to outweigh whatever *a priori* justification agents have for the truths in  $P_{rat}$ . At the same time, however, the proponent of the Current Situation Thesis must maintain that it is impossible for an agent to have strong misleading empirical evidence bearing on those propositions in  $P_{rat}$  that concern which doxastic attitudes the agent's *current* epistemic situation requires or forbids. At least, such misleading empirical evidence must not be able to outweigh the relevant *a priori* justification, on pain of violating the Substantive Enkratic Principle. Perhaps we should take the second version of Titelbaum's argument to say that this sort of story cannot constitute a viable way of making sense of the Current Situation Thesis, since it leaves us without an explanation of why it is impossible to have strong misleading empirical evidence for those propositions in  $P_{rat}$  that concern which doxastic attitudes one's current epistemic situation requires or forbids, when it is possible to have strong misleading empirical evidence for those that do not.

But if this is how we should understand the explanatory challenge, the proponent of the Current Situation Thesis should be on safe ground. After all, anyone who accepts the Substantive Enkratic Principle is committed to the claim that it is impossible to have strong, misleading empirical evidence for those propositions in  $P_{rat}$  that concern which doxastic attitudes one's current epistemic situation requires or forbids. So, if the proponent of the Current Situation Thesis faces a distinct challenge, it must be that of explaining why it is nevertheless possible to have strong, misleading empirical evidence for those propositions in  $P_{rat}$  that do not concern which doxastic attitudes one's current epistemic situation requires or forbids. And we have already seen that the proponent of the Current Situation Thesis can meet this challenge through careful reflection on cases of higher-order defeat. Effectively, the story I have told about the Parental Bias case is one where Mary at no point is permitted to believe a falsehood in  $P_{rat}$  about her current situation, but where she nevertheless ends up being permitted to believe a falsehood in  $P_{rat}$  about her previous situation, because she receives strong misleading higher-order evidence in favor of the relevant falsehood in  $P_{rat}$ . As I see it, nothing prevents the proponent of the Current Situation Thesis from appealing to this story to make sense of the claim that Mary can have all-things-considered misleading justification for those propositions in  $P_{rat}$  that do *not* concern her current epistemic situation, although she cannot have all-things-considered misleading justification for those that *do*. If this is right, the proponent of the Current Situation Thesis does indeed have the resources to meet the second

version of Titelbaum's explanatory challenge, and hence resist the second version of his argument against the Current Situation Thesis.

## 7. Conclusion

In sum, regardless of whether we understand Titelbaum's explanatory challenge to the proponent of the Current Situation Thesis in terms of the kind of justification that one can *acquire* for propositions in  $P_{rat}$ , or in terms of the kind of justification that one can *have* for propositions in  $P_{rat}$ , we are left without a reason to think that the Substantive Enkratic Principle is in conflict with the No Fixed Point Thesis. Hence, we are left without a reason to think that the Enkratic Principle and the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat are incompatible. This obviously does not show that either thesis is true. For all I have said, there might be independent grounds for rejecting either (or both) theses. Yet, given their widespread appeal, I take it to be good news that they can be jointly accepted.

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