

Reasons Fundamentalism and Rational Uncertainty – Comments on Lord, *The Importance of Being Rational*

Julia Staffel

University of Colorado Boulder

(forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* as part of a book symposium, with a précis and a reply from Errol Lord and further contributions by Mark Schroeder and Karl Schafer)

Introduction

In his new book *The Importance of Being Rational*, Errol Lord aims to give a real definition of the property of rationality in terms of normative reasons. If he can do so, his work is an important step towards a defense of ‘reasons fundamentalism’ – the thesis that all complex normative properties can be analyzed in terms of normative reasons. I will focus on his analysis of epistemic rationality, which says that your doxastic attitudes are rational just in case they are correct responses to the objective normative reasons you possess. For some fact to be an objective normative reason to do something that you possess, you have to be in a position to know this fact and be able to competently use it as a reason to do that thing. Lord’s view is thus a knowledge-first view about possessing normative reasons.

Throughout the book, Lord conceptualizes belief in the traditional tripartite way – if you take any attitude at all towards a proposition, then you either believe it, or disbelieve it, or you suspend judgment about it. Lord doesn’t discuss cases in which we’re uncertain. Yet, those cases are ubiquitous, so I will explore how his view can be extended to them. I will first discuss whether his strategy for vindicating coherence requirements in terms of normative reasons can be applied to credences. I will then ask how Lord can conceive of the doxastic attitudes that encode uncertainty.

1. Coherent Credences and Attenuation

It is commonly assumed that it is irrational to have doxastic states that are inconsistent or incoherent in some way. In the case of outright belief, it is commonly assumed that it is irrational to believe p and to believe $\sim p$ simultaneously. Lord proposes to explain this in terms of possessed normative reasons: If the reasons you possess decisively support p , then you are rationally required to believe that p . Add to this the assumption that it’s never the case that a set of reasons can decisively support p and also give sufficient support for $\sim p$. Hence, someone who has contradictory beliefs must be irrational, because they are not correctly responding to the reasons they possess. Their reasons can’t support both believing p and believing $\sim p$.

Can this strategy be expanded to explain coherence requirements on credences? For now, I will take credences to be whichever doxastic attitudes encode uncertainty.¹ For simplicity, I will focus on a basic coherence requirement that follows from the claim that one’s credences should be probabilistic. It says that it is rationally required that your credences in p and $\sim p$ add up to 1. How

¹ Depending on which more specific view of credences one adopts, one may claim that they primarily encode uncertainty in their contents, or in the attitude itself. More on this in section 2.

can we explain this in terms of the objective normative reasons you possess?² One immediate complication is that it is an open question whether a given body of evidence always decisively supports one specific credence assignment, or whether it sometimes permits a range of different credence assignments. I will discuss the permissive option first, show that it leads to two separate problems, and then explore whether denying permissivism helps.

Suppose Bob's evidence permits any credence in p between 0.6 and 0.7, and hence any credence in $\sim p$ between 0.3 and 0.4. Say Bob's evidence is the experience of tasting of his cocktail, which permits a credence between 0.6 and 0.7 that the cocktail contains cherry bitters ($=p$). Based on his evidence, Bob adopts a credence of 0.65 in p . To be coherent, he must adopt a credence of 0.35 in $\sim p$. How can Lord's view explain this? As Lord illustrates in chapter two, permissive cases are problematic for a reasons-based account of coherence requirements. This is because it looks like when your reasons permit ϕ ing and also permit not ϕ ing, they also permit ϕ ing and not ϕ ing simultaneously, even when this is incoherent. Lord's strategy for dealing with this problem is to appeal to the fact that reasons can be intensified and attenuated by other reasons. Suppose my reasons permit intending to order dessert, and they also permit intending not to order dessert. Yet, it would plausibly be irrational to have both intentions. Lord's solution is to argue that once I form one of the intentions, e.g. to order dessert, the fact that I have this intention attenuates my reasons to intend not to order dessert to the point where they are insufficient to support such an intention. In other words, forming an attitude that is permitted by my reasons generates a reason, namely the fact that I have the attitude, which can itself affect the balance of reasons, and make it such that it is no longer permissible for me to form other attitudes that are incoherent with this attitude.

To apply this to the case of coherent credences, we should examine examples of epistemic attenuators and intensifiers. Epistemic attenuators have been studied extensively, and are usually divided into different categories of defeaters.³ I will argue that our understanding of how epistemic attenuators, or defeaters, work doesn't fit well with how Lord needs them to function in order to secure coherence requirements on credences. Suppose r is a reason to believe that p . If s is a *rebutting defeater* for r , it means that it weakens r 's support for p by lending support to $\sim p$ instead. If s is an *undercutting defeater* for r , then s weakens r 's ability to support p , but without lending additional support to $\sim p$. Applying this idea to our permissive case, we should say that if Bob adopts credence 0.65 in p , then the fact that he has this credence intensifies his reasons to adopt a 0.35 credence in $\sim p$ to the point where they are decisive, and weakens his reasons to adopt any alternative credence in $\sim p$. In epistemic terms, we should say that the fact that he formed this credence serves as a defeater for his evidence supporting a credence other than 0.35.

While this solution technically secures coherence, I am worried that the mechanism Lord appeals to is not plausibly interpreted as being a genuine species of attenuation or defeat. To see why, I want to consider some ordinary cases of defeat. I will focus on partially undercutting defeaters, which seem most relevant here, but the argument could also be made with rebutting

² Worsnip (2018) mentions that this type of case might present a problem for a reasons-based explanation of coherence, but doesn't discuss Lord's attenuator/intensifier solution.

³ For a nice overview of different types of defeaters, see Sudduth (2008).

defeaters. The presence of a partially undercutting defeater makes it such that a piece of evidence is less indicative of the truth of some claim p than it would be if the defeater were absent. For example, suppose Jen says that Sam has a navy-blue car. I rationally become highly confident that Sam has a navy-blue car, because Jen's testimony is good evidence for this. However, suppose I learn later that she only saw his car briefly in the dark. This fact serves as a partial undercutting defeater for Jen's testimony, because people often can't distinguish colors well in the dark. In light of this, Jen's testimony is a less reliable indicator of the color of Sam's car than I initially thought. Intensifiers work in a similar way. If I learn instead that Jen did the paint job on Sam's car, this should presumably make me trust her testimony more, and increase my confidence that Sam's car is navy-blue.

Let's now see if this mechanism can secure coherence in permissive cases. Recall that Bob's evidence is his experience of his cocktail's taste, which permits a credence between 0.6 and 0.7 that the drink contains cherry bitters. Bob adopts a 0.65 credence that it does. Does the fact that he has this credence influence how probable his experience makes the claim that the drink doesn't contain cherry bitters? I don't see how this could be. For his credence to work like a standard undercutting/intensifying defeater, it would have to make it the case that the evidence is now decisively in favor of a 0.35 credence in no cherry bitters. Yet, there's no good explanation of why Bob's reaction to the evidence would change its justifying power in any way. And this problem generalizes. It's usually not the case that the fact that someone reacts to a body of evidence in a certain way influences what is supported by the evidence, and to what degree. Defeaters and intensifiers work by either making it so that the affected evidence is a less powerful indicator of the truth, or a more powerful one, and the fact that someone reacts to the evidence in a particular way doesn't seem to do either of those things.

You might think that sometimes, a person's reaction to a body of evidence *can* be an indicator of what the evidence supports. For example, if you disagree with me about whether our evidence supports that we each owe \$27.50 for lunch, this should perhaps make me question my *evaluation* of the evidence. However, the fact that you disagree doesn't change whether my evidence in fact supports that we each owe \$27.50. In other words, the fact that you disagree does not weaken my evidence, rather, it gives me grounds for checking my response to the evidence. Hence, this is not a case in which someone's reaction to a body of evidence changes what the evidence in fact supports, and therefore not an instance of the type of attenuation Lord needs. Moreover, we're just focused on cases involving one reasoner here. The fact that I take my evidence to support some attitude does not change whether or not the attitude is in fact rational for me (see e.g. Titelbaum 2015, forthcoming). These considerations give us reason to worry about using Lord's attenuator/intensifier strategy to explain why credences should be coherent. While it technically solves the problem, it seems to be committed to implausible claims about how and when defeaters are active.

There is a second problem for expanding Lord's explanatory strategy to credal coherence, which arises independently of the one just discussed. It stems from Lord's view of what is required for someone to possess a normative reason. The fact that my credence in p is x can only serve as an intensifier for my reasons to adopt a credence of $1-x$ in $\sim p$ if it is a reason I possess. For this fact

to be a reason I possess, have to (be in a position to) know that my credence in p is x . This is necessary for me to be in a position to manifest knowledge about how to use the fact that my credence in p is x to adopt a credence of $1-x$ in $\sim p$. This creates two complications: First, this means that someone who has a credence of x in p , but isn't in a position to know this (because introspection is difficult sometimes), is not rationally required to be coherent in a permissive case. This is because, if you don't possess a reason, you're not making a rational mistake by not responding to it. And since we're often bad at introspectively knowing our credences, this would leave many cases in which coherence is not required on Lord's view (although intuitively it is).⁴ Secondly, one might worry that this proposal is too intellectually demanding, because it requires that we can use knowledge about our own mental states as reasons. Yet, Lord wants his view to also apply to children, who might still lack the ability to form beliefs about their credences. The current proposal seems to entail that children who can't form such beliefs are not rationally required to have coherent credences in permissive cases. I don't think this is a consequence that Lord welcomes.⁵ To sum up, if we assume permissivism, there are two problems for explaining coherence requirements on credences in terms of possessed normative reasons. The first problem is that the way epistemic attenuators and intensifiers have to function to secure coherence doesn't map onto our usual understanding of how they work. The second problem is that for an agent to possess the reasons that secure coherence, they have to be in a position to know their credences, which is not always the case. These problems come up specifically for reasons-based attempts to explain coherence requirements, but not for alternative arguments, such as Dutch book arguments or accuracy-based arguments.

Perhaps we can avoid these problems if we reject the claim that our evidence is sometimes permissive. Does adopting uniqueness give us an unproblematic reasons-based explanation of why we should have coherent credences? The idea would be that for any given body of evidence you might possess, there is only one rational, coherent credence assignment you can adopt, and so permissive cases don't arise. If your credences differ from this assignment (whether they are coherent or incoherent), then you are irrational, because you fail to respond correctly to the normative reasons you possess. This proposal mimics the explanation for why contradictory beliefs are irrational. This is a bit too fast, however. Most defenders of the uniqueness thesis admit that it is often impossible for normal human thinkers to determine which exact credences their evidence supports. Hence, even if, say, E , which is everything I am in a position to know, supports precise credences of 0.65 in p and 0.35 in $\sim p$, I might not be in a position to know that it does. But this means that I don't possess E as a reason to adopt these credences by Lord's definition of possession, because I don't meet the practical condition. According to the practical condition, I don't possess

⁴ Can Lord's strategy of using knowledge of how things appear to me be put to use to fix this problem? I think not. In fact, it might even lead to 'rational' incoherence. Here is why: suppose my credence in p is 0.63, but I don't know this. In fact, I know that it appears to me that my credence in p is 0.65. Lord might be committed in this case to saying that the rational credence for me to adopt in $\sim p$ is 0.35, making me incoherent.

⁵ A similar problem can also arise for outright belief. To generate the problem, there must be permissive cases (e.g. cases where my evidence permits both belief in p and suspending judgment about p), in which my introspective abilities are insufficient to put me in a position to know whether I believe p or suspend judgment about p .

a fact as a normative reason to ϕ unless I am in a position to manifest knowledge about how to use r to ϕ . But if I don't know that E supports some particular precise credence assignment, then I am not in a position to manifest knowledge about how to use E to arrive at those credences. And even if I adopted the credences that E actually supports, this would not be a manifestation of my ability to use my knowledge, because I just got lucky – I could have easily adopted slightly different credences that aren't supported by E . Hence, the problem for the impermissive view is that there is no precise credence function that the reasons I possess require or permit me to adopt. Here's again a breakdown of why this is: First, the reasons I possess don't permit or require that I have incoherent credences. Secondly, since I don't possess reasons to adopt the precise credences that are supported by my knowledge (since I fail the practical condition on possession), I am not rationally required to adopt those credences. Moreover, if I did adopt those credences, doing so would not be rational, because it would not be a correct response to the reasons I possess. For any other coherent precise credence function, I can't rationally adopt it, because the things I know don't support it. The result we were hoping to get from assuming uniqueness was that it would be impermissible to adopt any incoherent credences, and that there is some coherent precise credence function that I can rationally adopt. The uniqueness view doesn't deliver this result.

Yet, in cases in which I am unable to know which precise credences are supported by my knowledge, I might be able to realize something weaker, for example that my evidence doesn't support a credence higher than 0.8 or lower than 0.5. This knowledge can perhaps give me reasons that put some constraints on which credences to adopt. Yet, if this makes these cases analogous to permissive cases we discussed earlier, the same problems will arise. Another possibility might be that I am required to have particular imprecise credences in these cases. However, the imprecise solution would presumably bring its own problems, because then the agent would have to know which imprecise credences to have based on their evidence, and it would also generate well known problems for using one's credences in decision making.⁶

2. What Kinds of Attitudes?

So far, I have left open how credences should be best conceived of in Lord's framework. One standard account of credences takes them to be graded attitudes towards propositions. Hence, uncertainty is encoded in the attitude, rather than in its content (although this of course doesn't preclude the possibility of having a graded attitude towards a proposition that also concerns probability). This picture unfortunately doesn't align well with a knowledge-first view of the attitudes that are involved in possessing normative reasons. The literature presents us with two potential solutions. One option that knowledge-firsters tend to favor is to claim that uncertainty is encoded in beliefs about evidential probabilities, which can constitute knowledge in favorable circumstances. For example, Bob's 0.65 credence that the cocktail contains bitters could be

⁶ A further problem that arises even if we adopt a uniqueness thesis about credences (either precise or imprecise), is that it doesn't rule out a different kind of permissivism, namely regarding whether an agent should adopt an outright belief based on their high credence or not. See Littlejohn (forthcoming) for complications this sort of possibility generates for Lord's view.

analyzed as Bob knowing that it's 0.65 likely on his evidence that the cocktail contains bitters (assuming his belief satisfies the conditions for knowledge). Unfortunately, ever since knowledge norms have become fashionable, people have raised problems for appealing to knowledge of evidential probabilities. (See e.g. Cresto 2010, Mueller and Ross 2017, Littlejohn forthcoming, Tang forthcoming, and references therein).

One issue that creates complications for this type of view is the forgotten evidence problem (Tang forthcoming). It is generally thought that I can retain justified beliefs and even knowledge in cases in which I have forgotten my original evidence. The same seems plausible for credences. For example, suppose I have a 0.95 credence that tango is popular in Finland. When I formed this credence, I did so based on good evidence. I have now forgotten my original evidence, but I still retain my high credence. Many epistemologists want to say this is rational. But if we conceive of credences (that give us possessed normative reasons) as knowledge of evidential probabilities, this is a problem, since I can't know that my evidence makes p x likely when I no longer possess it. Perhaps there are alternative ways in which my current evidence could sustain my justification, for example my knowledge that I usually form such beliefs based on reliable information (see e.g. Conee & Feldman 2001). However, it is questionable whether this backup evidence would support the exact credence that my original, but now forgotten evidence supported. Perhaps there is a way to get around this problem. In any case, this is just to suggest that appealing to knowledge of evidential probabilities will not be a solution that is easy to implement.

Another strategy for the knowledge firster could be to adopt Moss' view of probabilistic knowledge (2018). Moss proposes that we should conceive of credences either as graded doxastic attitudes towards propositions, or as ungraded doxastic attitudes towards sets of probability spaces. She favors the latter option, because she finds that it leads to a more elegant integration between treatments of uncertainty in epistemology, semantics, and the philosophy of mind. While this proposal avoids some of the problems generated by the evidential probability proposal, it would force Lord to give up some other central aspects of his view. Most centrally, Moss' view requires us to rethink what we mean by knowledge being factive, since sets of probability spaces are not bearers of truth values in a traditional sense. She must adopt an expressivist, minimalist conception of truth and facts. Since normative reasons are taken to be facts, Lord would thus have to take on an expressivist picture of what constitutes a reason, which might be a bigger divergence from his original view than he'd be willing to take on. My comments on this issue can only scratch the surface here, but I hope they demonstrate that integrating a suitable way of representing uncertainty into a reasons fundamentalist view is not an easy feat.

References

- Conee, Earl and Feldman, Richard. 2001. Internalism Defended. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38 (1), 1-18.
- Cresto, Eleonora. 2010. On Reasons and Epistemic Rationality. *Journal of Philosophy* 107 (6), 326-330.

- Littlejohn, Clayton. forthcoming. Being More Realistic About Reasons: On Rationality and Reasons Perspectivism. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.
- Lord, Errol. 2018. *The Importance of Being Rational*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mueller, Andy and Ross, Jacob. 2017. Knowledge Dethroned. *Analytic Philosophy* 58 (4), 283-296.
- Moss, Sarah. 2018. *Probabilistic Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sudduth, Michael. 2008. Defeaters in Epistemology. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. URL: <https://www.iep.utm.edu/ep-defea/>
- Tang, Weng Hong. forthcoming. Knowledge and Probability. In: Stephen Hetherington and Markos Valaris (eds.), *Knowledge in Contemporary Philosophy*. Bloomsbury.
- Titelbaum, Michael. 2019. Return to Reason. in: Mattias Skipper and Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen (eds.), *Higher-Order Evidence. New Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Titelbaum, Michael. 2015. Rationality's Fixed Point. *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* 5, 253-294.
- Worsnip, Alex. 2018. Review of Benjamin Kiesewetter, *The Normativity of Rationality*. *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*. URL: <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/the-normativity-of-rationality/>