

AGAINST EPISTEMIC AKRASIA¹

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ABSTRACT: Arguments against epistemic akrasia have been met with counterexamples from the higher-order evidence literature. Here, I present two counterarguments to address these challenges. Firstly, the *attitude reclassification argument* disentangles reason-responsiveness from the constraints of evidentialism and allows for the adoption of conflicting propositions by coherent doxastic attitudes. Secondly, the *failure reclassification argument* demystifies the loss of doxastic control in purported cases of epistemic akrasia by appealing to the more comprehensive and distinct phenomenon of self-deception.

KEYWORDS: epistemic akrasia, higher-order evidence, self-deception, evidentialism, doxastic voluntarism, fitting attitudes

1. Epistemic Akrasia

A Moore-like paradox of the form “ p , but my evidence does not support p (or supports having little confidence in p /believing $-p$)” is often understood as a specific type of *doxastic failure*, namely *epistemic akrasia*. This kind of failure is conceived after its practical counterpart and refers to our doxastic attitudes and specifically to *belief*. Epistemic akrasia bears similar features to the *practical failure* to accord one’s actions (or intentions) with an overall judgment about what is better or best to do. On parity, epistemic akrasia denotes a failure to match one’s belief to one’s decisive evidence or to one’s belief as to what or how one *should* believe from a strictly epistemic point of view.²

My goal is to address challenges to arguments against epistemic akrasia without altogether denying the possibility of doxastic failures obtaining outside the vicinity of honest mistakes. In section 2, I set the stage by delineating a few features that should characterize a doxastic failure worthy of the name of akrasia. In section 3, I spell out a distinctive reading of two ‘impossibility arguments’³ against epistemic

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² I will be calling the former *first-level/order* or *object-belief* interchangeably. I will be calling the latter *higher-level/order* or *epistemological-belief* interchangeably. A higher-order belief is formed on higher-order evidence, which is mainly evidence about the epistemic principles that govern belief or about the fallibility of our cognitive capacities.

³ Famously supported by Hurley (1989, 130–35, 159–70); Pettit and Smith (1996, 448–49); Owens

akrasia: the static and the dynamic⁴. In section 4, I refer to counterexamples from the current discussion about higher-order evidence (HOE) that undermine the effectiveness of the traditional impossibility arguments. In section 5, I support the static and the dynamic arguments. Specifically, in section 5.1, I show that HOE-type arguments favoring epistemic akrasia are convincing only insofar as reason-responsiveness is gratuitously grasped through an exclusively evidentialist perspective. In section 5.1.1, a criticism of the reason that grounds the evidentialist single-mindedness opens the way for reclassifying the attitude of belief and resolves the putatively akratic cases. Section 5.1.2 deals with three possible objections to the reclassification argument. In section 5.2, I resist an attempt to turn the dynamic argument against epistemic akrasia on its head. This attempt focuses on the failure to exercise our non-voluntary doxastic control, but it is only half-baked because it leaves out the reason for this agential idleness. Once the reason becomes visible, the failure finds better accommodation under the distinct phenomenon of self-deception. Section 6 concludes with a synopsis of the main points.

A note on terminology is in order. Just as the treatment of practical akrasia presupposes and makes explicit more general stipulations about practical reason, action theory, and morality, so does epistemic akrasia rely on broader admissions about structural and substantive rationality. Some of these admissions I explicitly pronounce, and others tacitly imply. Various terms I use (like evidential support, reasons-responsiveness, fitting attitude, coherence, and self-deception) are highly controversial. I provide clarifications when necessary, but I am operating throughout with a standard conception of these terms.

2. Parallels

How should we think of epistemic akrasia? Practical akrasia is the prototype after which the characterization of the epistemic counterpart should be modeled if we want to do justice to the common label of the phenomenon.⁵ Let me submit a sample

(2002); and Adler (2002a; 2002b).

⁴ The terms originate in Mele (1987b) as labels for self-deception's main challenges. Even though their meaning differs somewhat in the present context, they aptly depict the issues that any idea of epistemic akrasia faces.

⁵ This is reminiscent of the *which came first* puzzle. For example, Davidson's (1980) pivotal account of practical akrasia rests on his understanding of how theoretical reason works, as does Tenenbaum's (2007, chap. 7) internalist explanation. In the history of philosophy, however, the explicit problem of *epistemic* akrasia gained currency only during the last century. In contrast, the discussion about *practical* akrasia has been in focus since the days of Plato and Aristotle without any explicit parallels drawn to a theoretical analogue.

definition of practical akrasia, which most epistemologists, whether of an internalist or an externalist band, should accept. Akrasia consists of

“uncompelled, intentional actions that, as [agents] recognize at the time, are contrary to what they judge best, the judgment being made from the perspective of their own values, principles, desires and beliefs” (Mele 1996, 149).

A mirror definition of epistemic akrasia would hold that it consists of uncompelled, intentional beliefs that, as epistemic subjects recognize at the time, are contrary to what they judge best, the judgment being made from the perspective of their own evidence and beliefs. Obviously, the mirror definition does not reflect its prototype accurately. The reason for this will become apparent below. The features of epistemic akrasia that ensue from the sample definition of classic akrasia are (1) voluntary control over belief, (2) the combination of contradictory beliefs, and (3) first-person luminosity and transparency. In what follows, I appropriate the first two features to the peculiarities of theoretical reason. I accept the third parallel without further elaboration.

2.1 Doxastic agency

To avoid the problem of compulsion, practical akrasia must allow for free and deliberate action against what an agent judges she ought (not) to do. Analogously, epistemic akrasia must allow for free and deliberate belief against either the evidence to the contrary or a higher-level belief that the object-belief ought not to be formed. While it makes sense to think that someone is intentionally eating an ice cream against their *all-things-considered* judgment that, despite craving for it, they would be better off not eating the ice cream, it is not as easy to understand how someone can freely believe something despite counted evidence to the contrary. For instance, someone may want to believe they have gold in their evidently empty pockets or decide to form some belief despite higher-order evidence of their inability to process it accurately.

In the classic argument against doxastic voluntarism, Williams (1973) asserts that our inability to believe at will is not simply a contingent fact of our psychology, like the inability to blush at will, but the result of an *a priori* reason that essentially has to do with belief being the only doxastic attitude aiming at truth. As several authors have brought out, the crux of this argument is that beliefs are not actions and, therefore, cannot be responsive to the same *kind* of reasons to which the will is responsive. Belief is responsive to alethic reasons, which is not the appropriate kind for activating the will into action.⁶ Belief is not constituted by pragmatic reasons,

⁶ The argument presented here is based on the *fitting attitude theory*. This theory is challenged by

even though pragmatic reasons may still provoke a voluntary action to *bring about* a belief as the product of such action.⁷ This is why our mirror definition of akratic belief does not reflect the multitude of sources (values, principles, desires, etc.) that may configure a practical judgment: belief, unlike action, is exclusively responsive to epistemic reasons. Therefore, if doxastic voluntarism is dismissed, an argument for epistemic akrasia cannot get off the ground. How can we think that an akratic belief can result from a failure to control it when voluntary control is not applicable in the case of belief? This is an obstacle that Owens deems insuperable unless a different model of epistemic control becomes available (2002, 381, 395).

In this connection, it turns out that belief has indeed been subjected to a distinctive kind of control for the independent reason of making it answerable to epistemic deontology.⁸ This is not the place for this discussion, but one of its outcomes may help establish the parallel feature of control among practical and epistemic akrasia. A simple observation is that although belief formation may seem, from a willpower point of view, like an automatic process, it does not fall under the category of passive, involuntary bodily movements such as digestion or sneezing. The undeniable ability to form, retain, revise, and extinguish our beliefs is a specific *kind of agency* that falls short of the kind of control we have when we act but is still more advanced than our lack of control over our digestion.⁹ This kind of agency, called ‘evaluative control,’ is exercised *freely* as long as the epistemic agent considers epistemic kind of reasons and regulates her belief accordingly.¹⁰

2.2 Combination of conflicting beliefs

Many epistemologists agree with the intuition that epistemic akrasia is irrational. Below is an example of how the norm can be formulated:

No situation rationally permits any overall state containing both an attitude A and the belief that A is rationally forbidden in one’s current situation (Titelbaum 2015,

what is known as the ‘wrong kind of reasons’ problem. The problem suggests that reasons of the wrong kind may lead to an attitude that is not appropriate for the object or proposition that the reasons concern. In response to this, skepticism towards the problem argues that the *wrong kind of reasons* does not exist; reasons of the *wrong kind* are nothing more than reasons of the *right kind* for other attitudes. So, pragmatic reasons for belief are not the wrong kind of reasons that may elicit a belief but the right kind of reasons for desiring (and potentially attempting to bring about) a belief. See Parfit 2011, 425–28.

⁷ Hieronymi 2009b.

⁸ McHugh 2013.

⁹ Hieronymi 2009a.

¹⁰ McHugh 2014.

261).

Since our focus is epistemic akrasia, we should apply the claim accordingly. First, it is plausible to consider someone who thinks that taking attitude *A* is irrational from an *epistemic* standpoint but also believes that adopting attitude *A* is rationally permitted, if not required, from a *practical* perspective. Kant's *fides practica* is a well-known case in point. Insofar as our issue is *epistemic* akrasia, it is not just any kind of rationality that forbids the formation of *attitude A*, but epistemic rationality. Now, attitude *A* is forbidden in case it is believed to be *epistemically* irrational to be held. If, for example, Kant's doctor believes, given the axioms of his science and the available evidence, that he cannot reach a *belief* about his patient's disease, then the formation of a belief would be epistemically irrational. But the story in Kant's example continues with practical considerations kicking in the deliberation, resulting in the overall state of what is called a 'pragmatic belief.' One could claim that this is a case of practically justified epistemic akrasia: a case of an *epistemically* irrational overall state. However, it is incorrect to assume that attitude *A* is a pragmatic belief. As explained in sec. 2.1, a subject cannot adopt belief simply because there are pragmatic reasons to think that possessing that belief is beneficial.

Given that doxastic involuntarism prohibits the formation of *pragmatic beliefs*, how can we explain that the doctor indeed adopts a doxastic attitude that disposes him to perform the medical act? It has been suggested that the doctor's attitude is that of *acceptance*, "a voluntary species of firm assent that motivates assertion and action in a certain context, but which is justified by its non-epistemic merits rather than by objective grounds."¹¹ So, the doxastic attitude of *acceptance* is rationally taken on both the evidential and the practical reasons the doctor has. Returning to Titelbaum's formulation, we may ask if *this* is the overall doxastic attitude that epistemic rationality prohibits. Hardly. Acceptance is not a doxastic attitude formed exclusively by epistemic reasons because it is not an attitude aimed at truth. The attitude exclusively aimed at it is *belief*. Given the truth-directedness of belief, we conclude that this is the attitude Titelbaum has in mind. On the other hand, any deliberation that takes into consideration both epistemic and non-epistemic reasons issues in a doxastic attitude of the form $D \not\in B$ —the symbol standing for a set of (relatable to evidential reasons) doxastic attitudes, *D*, of which belief, *B*, is not a member.

¹¹ Chignell (2007, 341). See also n. 21 for literature on the distinction between involuntary *belief* and voluntary *acceptance*.

That said, we should not overlook potential versions of *doxastic* akrasia that do not concern belief. Being a lawyer, I may judge, all things considered, that even though I *believe* my client to be guilty, it is better to *accept* his innocence and proceed with his defense. However, I might not do that because of a contrary all-out judgment that such behavior would be immoral. Therefore, I am akratically *not* forming the relevant doxastic attitude because my moral reasons override my overall better judgment that I should accept my client's innocence and defend him.¹² Nevertheless, my akratic situation is not determined by evidential reasons but pragmatic ones. Therefore, I am *acting* akratically in not *accepting* my client's innocence. However, the focus of this paper is not on practical akrasia, even when it pertains to doxastic attitudes that can be akratically adopted for pragmatic reasons. The interesting species of akrasia is the one that can be exhibited in the irrational combination of two instances of inconsistent *belief*. This is the overall state that Titelbaum pronounces as irrational. Every other combination of dissimilar doxastic attitudes is either non-akratic or practically akratic. A belief that I should not believe that $-p$ is not overridden by a relatively positive doxastic attitude, such as an *acceptance* that $-p$; just like *pretending* to smoke is not an akratic episode against my overall better judgment not to smoke. A belief that p and an acceptance that $-p$ is a non-akratic, coherent combination of doxastic attitudes. On the other hand, *accepting* that $-p$ against my belief that I should not *accept* it is not an epistemically but a practically akratic combination of doxastic attitudes, since *acceptance* is a doxastic attitude that can be decided to be held.

One point should be clarified before that section is brought to an end. The picture of mental incoherence that epistemic akrasia paints is motivated by the idea of structural irrationality. However, this is not to suggest that the problem with holding an object-belief, which is inconsistent with a higher-order belief, is a failure of a *sui generis* normative requirement of structural rationality. On the contrary, the problem is that neither belief responds to the evidential reasons presented by, or shaping, the other belief. My position is that the irrationality of an incoherent combination of doxastic attitudes is reducible to failing to comply with the substantive requirements of reason-responsiveness.¹³ What differentiates the akratic

¹² I am designing this example to illustrate that *moral akrasia* is just one aspect of practical akrasia. An agent may be practically akratic in acting according to her moral judgment. This inclusivity highlights the wide-ranging nature of a phenomenon, which Aristotle previously believed was simply restricted to "the pleasures and pains that come about through touch and taste [...], as well as the appetites for them and the avoidances of them" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1150a9-10).

¹³ For a reductive argument that neither eliminates structural irrationality nor grants it normative autonomy, see Kiesewetter 2017, esp. 235-39.

subject from the one who is simply wrong about what their evidence supports is the failure to respond to rebutting evidential reasons that are *transparently* available to the subject; the failure, in other words, to exercise her revising *doxastic agency*. This failure is also reflected in the incoherent combination of opposing beliefs.

2.3 Regular elimination of akrasia

This feature does not explicitly bear on the mirror definition but allows for an illuminating comparison. A situation of alleged practical akrasia may be dissolved just in case the action against an agent's perspectival judgment (e.g., moral) was performed in line with an overall judgment, outweighing the agent's *pro tanto* reason to act.¹⁴ The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for belief. An alleged case of believing against one's counted evidence dissolves either in case the belief is formed in conformity with the totality of evidence in favor of that belief, or in case the doxastic attitude ($D\neq B$) towards the evidence is calibrated in accordance with the overall judgment, as with Kant's doctor.

These two ways to dissolve a purported case of epistemic akrasia leave out a third possibility. It has been suggested that akratically believing against one's evidence may be dissolved if that belief is formed on the basis of wide-scope, *non-epistemic* considerations in favor of having the unwarranted belief.¹⁵ An individual may find it beneficial to hold beliefs that ease stress rather than those supported by evidence and causing distress. This suggestion either lies on the dubious assumption that there are pragmatic reasons for belief or implies that the desire for belief can motivate subjects to get themselves to believe what they desire. Regarding the first assumption, a case where pragmatic reasons for belief outweigh evidential reasons to reject the belief seems, if possible at all, to be compulsive believing, which is not freely formed and, therefore, not akratic.¹⁶ The second assumption pertains to the concept of self-deception, wherein a distorted belief is formed based on evidential reasons. Deception is, by definition, less transparent compared to the first-person acknowledgment of holding two opposing beliefs in akrasia. This feature alone tells against the assimilation of the two phenomena and is further explored in sec. 5.2.

¹⁴ See Mele (1995, 15).

¹⁵ Recall the mirror definition of epistemic akrasia. If it was a perfect copy of classic akrasia, it should commensurably allow one's own *values*, *principles*, and *desires* to weigh in the overall judgment of whether to believe that *p* or not. But *contra* Adler (2002a, 8–10), Mele (1987a, 110–12), and Levy (2004, 150), this is impossible. A belief cannot be formed on pragmatic reasons, even if it means being epistemically irrational.

¹⁶ See Owens 2002, 390–91; Adler 2002a, 8–10.

In simpler terms, epistemic akrasia can be dissolved if the initial evidential reasons for belief are corrected, or the attitude towards those reasons is adjusted based on an overall judgment. Epistemic akrasia can also be dissolved if the overall judgment includes pragmatic reasons that attempt to bring about a belief through a deceptive process that exceeds the first-personal luminosity required by akrasia.

3. Arguments against Epistemic Akrasia

The previous points will assist my illustration of two impossibility arguments against epistemic akrasia.

3.1 The static problem

As mentioned, the problem's name is given after Mele (1987b). I use it here to present Adler's (2002a; 2002b) limitations on the analogy between practical and epistemic akrasia. Adler's analysis takes off from Davidson's (1980) demonstration of the logical consistency of practical akrasia. In his seminal argument, Davidson shows that an *all-out* judgment about what to do *simpliciter* is not the same as a conditional judgment about what is *better* to do in some respect (e.g., morally), nor is it the same as an all-things-considered judgment that evaluates among the various respects (e.g., the moral and the practical). For example, given her various considerations in favor and against having a last round at the local bar, an agent may settle the question of what is better to do with the judgment to abstain from drinking. Notwithstanding this judgment, she may at the same time settle the matter about what to do *simpliciter* with the unconditional judgment to drink. Davidson argues that, although there is nothing substantively irrational in this situation, the akratic agent is guilty of not keeping with the enkratic principle that she should align her unconditional judgment about what to do to her overall judgment about what she had better reason to do. What is interesting about Davidson's argument is that he takes his cue from theoretical reason, implying that epistemic akrasia may be a common phenomenon in the realm of theoretical reason.¹⁷ Adler takes issue with this analogy.

Without dwelling on the details of Adler's well-known argument from disanalogy between theoretical and practical reason, we must focus on the fact that, contrary to practical reason, there can be no mismatch between what one has decisive evidential reason to believe and what one believes.¹⁸ This is because the way

¹⁷ Davidson 1980, 41.

¹⁸ Adler operates throughout with the term *theoretical reason*. To avoid any confusion over what I will say next, we should heed his clarification that "I follow standard terminology [...] in calling

belief relates to evidential reasons differs from how the will relates to various reasons for action. The difference lies in belief's conceptual definition as truth-directed, and this is where the disanalogy surfaces: once a proposition is believed to be true, all countervailing epistemic considerations against it are eliminated. Far from it, a reason for action that has been rejected in an overall evaluative judgment may still be present in the mental space of the agent, exert a motivational pull, and issue in an action that overrides the agent's overall better judgment. However, the situation is not comparable in the case of epistemic akrasia. If the rejected evidence were not eliminated, it would create a static problem for the epistemic subject who would believe that p , and at the same time believe on rejected evidence that not p —an epistemic situation deemed impossible on conceptual reasons (belief is exclusively directed to truth) and substantive rationality (belief responds to alethic reasons alone).

If belief did not eliminate opposing evidence, I presume, it would not be *belief*. It could be the doxastic attitude Davidson has in mind when he analyzes practical rationality: a *hypothesis* (Adler 2002a, 2–3). Unlike belief, a hypothesis may consider various countervailing epistemic reasons and give credence to the proposition *best* supported by them. Alternatively, it could result in *accepting* one of them or taking any D \neq B with which inconclusive evidential and contextual pragmatic reasons are responsive.¹⁹ But none of these doxastic products is that of belief because belief is not the attitude that responds to evidential reasons that support a proposition *better* than others. It is an *all-out* attitude that responds to the truth-making reasons of a proposition.

The static problem of akratically holding a belief in the teeth of evidence or against an opposing belief is, under these considerations, resolved. Adler's verdict is that it is conceptually and substantively impossible to form or retain a belief against evidence. From this conclusion, we may derive that, when this appears to be the case, the produced doxastic attitude is not that of belief. In fact, the static problem

[...] reasoning to *belief* "theoretical reasoning" (2002a, 1).

¹⁹ Adler (2002a, 12–15) carefully shows that belief has a dispositional property that allows action when needed. When insufficient evidential reasons prohibit its formation, other doxastic attitudes, positively related to insufficient evidence, can supplement the dispositional deficit. When there is a practical need to take a doxastic attitude that would dispose an agent to act according to its representations, this attitude will not be a belief if the available evidence cannot support it. To be accurate, Adler identifies this alternative attitude with *partial belief*, but, in my view, there is no need to be inflexible in this regard. For instance, *guessing*, like *acceptance*, is a more plausible doxastic product of an all-things-considered judgment as to what representation of reality can dispose me to act according to my practical judgment and the inconclusive evidence. That is because, unlike belief, guessing is susceptible to voluntary control (Owens 2002, 392–93).

points to the impossibility of akratic believing much in the same way that a stride of internalism about action rejects the possibility of practical akrasia. For example, Plato²⁰ and Harre²¹ reject classic akrasia because they think our action-guiding evaluative judgments are never out of line with our actions. Akratic cases can be dismissed as cases where the agent simply changes her mind, pays lip service,²² or acts out of compulsion.²³ Likewise, Adler's argument rejects the possibility of epistemic akrasia by appealing to some kind of internalism in theoretical reason: alethic reasons bring about beliefs. When the goal has been reached, every rejected theoretical reason loses its evidential effect and exerts no influence on the epistemic agent. Or, as I see it more fitting to suggest, evidence loses its *belief*-responding force, even though it may still elicit alternative doxastic attitudes (D \nexists B).

3.2 The dynamic problem

Once again, the label comes after Mele (1987b) but, in our context, takes on the following meaning: the dynamic problem refers to the impossibility of believing at will, as mentioned in 2.1. It has been brought up largely by Owens, who claims that “[w]e can't control our beliefs by making judgments about how well they achieve certain goals” (2002, 395). Owens develops his argument as a critique against the *teleological* explanation of the stipulation that belief aims exclusively at truth.²⁴ The gist of his argument is that applying the standard concept of a *goal* relativizes the exclusivity of the *truth-goal* of belief because it makes it comparable with other goals. The reason is that the common concept of a goal implies an interaction of purposes and objectives. The concept of a goal involves weighing one aim over another. One can only pursue one goal to the extent that they do not pursue another.²⁵ These considerations, I take it, entrap the teleology of belief on the horns of a dilemma: we must either accept that the aim of belief is exclusive, but then we give up the common concept of a goal as something that interacts with other purposes and objectives, or we preserve the common concept, but end up with a belief that can be formed on the prospect of achieving various goals other than the truth. But this concept of belief is self-defeating not only because the truth-aim of belief demands exclusivity but also because the sufficiency of evidence for belief

²⁰ *Protagoras*, 355d-357d.

²¹ Hare 1952, 1, 169.

²² Hare 1952, 124–26.

²³ Hare 1963, 78–79.

²⁴ See, for example, Velleman 2000, 248–52.

²⁵ Owens 2003, 295–96.

cannot be decided upon pragmatic reasons, e.g., on the goal to relax after a long day of research.

Arguably, Owens' thesis can be viewed as illustrating that the mental product of deliberation is relativized upon the various kinds of reason taken into consideration. If belief could be formed akratically, it would be possible to be voluntarily controlled towards various aims comparable to the aim of truth. However, the exclusive relation that belief bears with truth is not explained by the *aim, goal, or purpose* of truth, and therefore, the kind of agency we exert in pursuing our goals does not control the formation of beliefs. Since the relation of belief with truth is not *goal-oriented*, neither can we form it as we would perform an action, nor can we decide that our evidential reasons are sufficient because this would serve a broader aim. We cannot perform an akratic act of believing because belief is not responsive to goal-oriented reasons. If beliefs could be formed for the wrong kind of reasons, it seems that they would be the product of compulsion. This means that we would either believe on non-epistemic (or epistemic but intangible) reasons or encounter reasons of the right kind but remain *irresponsive* to them.²⁶ Alternatively, Owens admits that a deliberation influenced by practical aims can issue in a different doxastic attitude like *guessing*. This is, I think, the most significant lesson regarding our subject. I will now discuss counterexamples to the static and dynamic arguments against epistemic akrasia.

4. Alleged Cases of Epistemic Akrasia

If we accept that we have a reasonable level of doxastic control over our beliefs (sec. 2.1), it becomes possible to explore epistemic akrasia. Many philosophers have considered disproving Adler's argument by offering examples that center around higher-order evidence (HOE). Several examples are available, but I will only outline two of the most well-known to keep matters relatively simple. The first involves a radical skeptic epistemologist who, against his (misleading) reflective belief that any epistemic judgment should always be suspended, goes on and forms the belief that he has hands (Ribeiro 2011). The second example concerns a detective who initially forms an epistemically justified belief about the identity of the culprit but then receives (misleading) information that his expert superior believes differently (Coates 2012, 140), or realizes that his reasoning may have been affected by a sleepless state (Horowitz 2014, 719).

²⁶ Remaining irresponsive to evidential reasons is much more complex than epistemic akrasia and is explored a little further in sec. 5.2.

It has been argued that, in such epistemic situations, if the subject *steadfastly* rejects her higher-order evidence (Titelbaum 2015) or *defeatedly* dismisses her object-belief (Horowitz 2014), she dogmatically disrespects the other end of the evidence which nonetheless retains its normative effect. Therefore, some epistemologists believe that the epistemic subject *must* respect both her first and second-order evidence and form the akratic object-belief against her higher-order one.²⁷ In their view, an interaction that would calibrate the doxastic states of the two levels could be: (1) unnecessary because the structural rationality of coherence indicates a different normative category than the substantial rationality of evidentialism (Worsnip 2018); (2) mistaken because it would flout the normativity of evidentialism (Coates 2012); (3) unfathomable as it is unclear how an enkritic principle would apply to the conflicting levels which are themselves governed by the rule of evidentialism (Lasonen-Aarnio 2014).

My reductive understanding of structural rationality is diametrically opposite to the first view, but I will not pursue a defense here. I aim to challenge the other two by rethinking their approach to evidential reason-responsiveness. Instead of sticking to the monolithic perspective of evidentialism, I suggest we should be open to other possibilities. We can arrive at a mental state free from akrasia by introducing compatible doxastic attitudes towards contradictory propositions.

5. Overturning the Verdict

Three preliminary points are in order. The first has to do with the plausibility of the akratic epistemic situations. At first glance, they seem to register the features described in sec. 2 and circumvent the objections raised in sec. 3. However, their plausibility comes at the expense of counterintuitive assumptions and implications, such as bad reasoning arising from contradictory beliefs and irrational action stemming from opposing dispositions.²⁸ It seems that describing the aforementioned epistemic situations without resorting to the contentious concept of akrasia is the *best explanation* for the situation. This leads me to my second point—a methodological provision: if an inference to the best explanation is available (where the *best explanation* is a verdict that steers clear of the akratic paradox), it should be preferred over verdicts that include the paradox. Third, I should repeat what I said in sec. 2.2: the doxastic revision induced by undercutting or undermining evidence does not conform to a *sui generis* structural requirement any more than the conclusion of a *modus ponens* is drawn because the subject complies with a *sui*

²⁷ For a concise survey of level-splitting theories supporting epistemic akrasia, see Horowitz 2014, 720–25.

²⁸ Horowitz 2014, 728–734.

generis enkratic rule that necessitates reaching the conclusion.²⁹ While rejecting the autonomy of structural rationality, it is important to note that forming an attitudinally incoherent mental configuration is still considered irrational. This irrationality is reduced to the way our doxastic attitudes respond to our reasons. Moreover, the elimination of the normative autonomy of structural rationality, also known as the enkratic principle in HOE discussions, does not necessarily mean that the static problem of epistemic akrasia is irredeemable. It can be solved on the grounds of substantive rationality instead.

In what follows, I support the static and dynamic arguments against epistemic akrasia in the face of these allegedly disproving counterexamples. The *reclassification of the doxastic attitude* argument (sec. 5.1) shows that a dual inconsistent belief is necessary only under an evidentialist restriction on reason-responsiveness. Removing the restriction removes the akratic paradox. The *reclassification of the doxastic failure* argument (sec. 5.2) shows that a failure to revise the component beliefs of incoherent conjunctions must be blamed on self-deceptive tactics. However, deception to the effect of effacing an unwelcome belief is not a feature of epistemic akrasia.

5.1 Attitude reclassification

It seems that a source of confusion about the possibility of epistemic akrasia is that the various counterexamples are discussed exclusively in terms of evidentialism, while the epistemic subjects are situated in contexts potentially richer in reason-responsive attitudes. A closer look at the various examples of higher-order evidence does not make it entirely clear why reason-responsiveness is univocally construed as eliciting beliefs alone.³⁰ The assumption that every doxastic relation to evidential reasons is instantiated by *belief* not only overlooks our doxastic repertoire but also pays no heed to the obvious ways of responding fittingly to the total body of our reasons (evidential and pragmatic alike). If we successfully show that the combination of different doxastic attitudes better explains epistemic situations like the ones at the beginning of the section, then, according to our admissions in sec. 2.2, epistemic akrasia dissolves.

For example, consider the case of the radical skeptic. His obvious practical need for the doxastic *adoption* of the proposition “I have hands” does not have to be

²⁹ Supposing that *modus ponens* is unequivocally a valid logical truth.

³⁰ In the literature on HOE, the terms ‘confidence’ or ‘credence’ are sometimes used instead of belief. The terms ‘doxastic attitude/state’ or ‘D’ are also used perhaps to indicate an open relation between evidential reasons and doxastic attitudes. However, within the context of evidentialism, these terms serve only as proxies for belief.

instantiated by an akratic belief just because perceptual reasons are present. It is always possible to uphold his positive³¹ relation to perceptual evidence through the attitude of *acceptance*. Conversely and symmetrically, the evidential power of perception may weigh in so strongly that his belief in skepticism may give way to a strong advocacy, an *endorsement*, of the theory of skepticism.³² Generalizing, it always seems possible to fill in the details of a counterexample to make better sense of an akrasia-free combination of doxastic attitudes.³³ In the other famous case, the detective may believe that she uncovered who committed the crime but also *accept* that she may be wrong about it either because of the unreliable state she was in when reasoning towards his guilt or because of her supervisor's conflicting opinion. Alternatively, she may believe that she should not believe in the suspect's guilt but, given the total body of her evidence, keep *suspecting* that he is the culprit. Regardless of the policy she will follow to handle the practical demands of the situation, it is not necessary to conclude that she is in a state of epistemic akrasia. In fact, the *inference to the best explanation* prevents us from drawing this conclusion. Let me now bring into sharper focus a reason I suspect sustains this monotonic view of reason-responsiveness.

5.1.1 The Rule-View of Evidentialism

Reason-responsiveness is often discussed in terms of a *Rule-View*.³⁴ Within this scope, the rule that regulates belief would arguably command something like "respond to evidential reasons with belief." If this is so, epistemic situations that take on board self-misleading evidential reasons along with an enkratic principle would entrap the doxastic subject on the horns of a dilemma: either the subject follows the rule on both the first and higher level but ends up with the mentally incoherent state of akratic belief, or breaks the evidentialist rule on either level and achieves an enkratic but irrational doxastic state. Various strategies out of the dilemma have

³¹ Positive in the sense of *adopting* and not *giving up* the proposition. See Elga 2007.

³² *Endorsement* functions as a domain-specific attitude, common in academia, which allows the rational and coherent combination of two doxastic states holding contradictory propositions. It is proposed by Fleisher (2021) as a solution to the self-undermining problem of conciliationism in the discussion about disagreement. Fleisher (n. 22) aligns this strategy with a broader tradition of attitudinal distinctions. My reclassification argument is closely tied to this strategy but expands to include both top-down and bottom-up evidence interaction, as well as a wider range of context-related doxastic attitudes.

³³ A *suspension of judgment* is often proposed as a response to inconclusive evidential reasons. Within the scope of the reclassification argument, this should be considered a *sui generis* attitude towards *p*. See Friedman 2013 for discussion.

³⁴ See, for example, Lasonen-Aarnio 2014; 2020.

been offered, but I propose one that shows the Rule-View to have devastating consequences for the concept of belief and reason-responsiveness. Once the Rule-View is dispelled, a more flexible response to evidential reasons emerges to the detriment of dilemma₁.

According to the second horn of dilemma₁, the rule of evidentialism *can* be broken, and, thus, a non-akratic belief against one's first (or higher)-order evidential reasons can be formed. If this is the case, the kind of rule governing our response toward evidential reasons is *prescriptive* in nature. It involves the *ought* of epistemic rationality, which guides belief formation in response to evidential reasons. Now, given the idea that *ought* implies *can*, a prescriptive rule can be followed or violated *at will*, and so does the rule of evidentialism. However, this assumption is based on the rejected notion that we have the voluntary control to resist believing the propositions our evidential reasons support.

On the other hand, if we take the first horn of dilemma₁ and accept that the evidentialist rule *cannot* be violated at will, we concede that it is *constitutive* in nature. If this is the case, some form of motivational internalism must be at play, such that belief would necessarily be formed in the presence of its constitutive evidential reasons.³⁵ Epistemic akrasia would then *inevitably* befall subjects in some epistemic situations since it would be impossible for them not to respond to evidential reasons with belief.³⁶ Therefore, if reason-responsiveness is construed as a *rule*, doxastic subjects are, on some occasions, caught on the horns of another dilemma₂ (which knocks out the akratic dilemma₁): either the rule is prescriptive, in which case they exhibit *doxastic voluntarism*, or it is constitutive, in which case motivational internalism *compels* them to occupy an incoherent doxastic territory. Nevertheless, recalling sec. 2.1 and 3.2, the first option is not available, and the second is not akratic. Therefore, the first version of the Rule-View has unacceptable consequences for the involuntarist conceptualization of belief, and the second does not allow an akratic argument to get off the ground.

A possible escape from dilemma₂, which would salvage the Rule-View of evidentialism, would require an overarching rule (a second-tier rule) to reconcile the demands of the evidentialist rule (first-tier rule) at the conflicting levels.³⁷ But

³⁵ To roughly rehash Searle (1969, chap. 2.5), a rule is *constitutive* of some performance P, just in case P would not exist in the absence of the rule. Clearly, the *prescriptive* version of the rule doesn't fit this definition since voluntarily violating it doesn't affect the belief's *existence*, only its *rationality*.

³⁶ For a detailed account of the relation between belief and rules of rationality, see Glüer and Wikforss 2009, esp. 46-52.

³⁷ The hypothesis of a second-tier overrule adjudicating between the first and second-order beliefs (formed under the first-tier rule) is due to Lasonen-Aarnio (2014). She offers three compelling

such an overrule would either relapse into doxastic voluntarism or lead to the division of the self. If the overrule was prescriptive, it could be violated, and if it did, dilemmas would resurface (that is, whether the first-tier evidentialist rule is prescriptive or constitutive). If, on the other hand, the overrule was constitutive (say of a coherent mental space) and the first-tier rule was prescriptive, doxastic voluntarism would resurface.

A third tack is for both the second-tier and the first-tier rule to be constitutive. In that case, an akratic split of doxastic levels would seem the most plausible upshot. However, this split would hardly be described as an akratic state for the following reasons: first, the dual-level beliefs would have been formed under the constitutive rule “respond to evidential reasons with belief” without an option to avoid the rule on either level, which is tantamount to saying that the conflicting beliefs are formed under an inescapable condition—i.e., compellingly, and therefore not akratically. Second, even if we allow the conflicting beliefs to be formed under our doxastic agency (recall the *evaluative control* in sec. 2.1), they would be more plausibly attributed to autonomous doxastic *partitions*. To avoid this schism, we would need to assume level interaction, or, in our reductive terms, assume that our doxastic agency would exercise its revising power in a case where the totality of one’s evidence would be fittingly responsive with a D ∇ B (e.g., with *inquiry*). However, in light of the Rule-View, our doxastic agency’s revisionist power is severed because, by rule’s order, evidential reasons must be responded to with belief.³⁸ So, instead of dividing *kinds* of doxastic attitudes within a single, transparent self, the Rule-View divides the self into believing parts. This approach would still have to fare the objection that the epistemic situation is not akratic because akrasia requires first-person transparency of the mismatch between what one believes and what one believes one ought to believe from an epistemic point of view.³⁹ A case where the left hand does not know what the right is doing can hardly be described as akratic.

reasons why this second-tier rule would fail, ultimately supporting the contested idea that the first-tier rule of evidentialism should configure a level-splitting akratic state.

³⁸ The result is a kind of a *snapshot* that captures the doxastic dynamics in a static misrepresentation. Borgoni (2015) pins the problem with akratic belief exactly on the failure to exercise this special kind of doxastic control. I elaborate on her perspective in sec. 5.2.

³⁹ A more plausible version of this account is given by Tenenbaum (2007, chap. 7.4). Without committing to mental partitioning, Tenenbaum curtails the higher-order belief to an *oblique* cognition, the characteristic of which is that its content is assented to while the evidential reasons for this assent are lacking in clarity. Against the obscurity of this recalcitrant epistemological-belief, a more justified object-belief prevails. In this case, it is not compartmentalization that blocks the interaction between the two doxastic levels but the inaccessibility of the conflicting higher-order evidence. However, I am not sure if the causal reasons featured in the etiology of this

The reason we do not usually find ourselves in the fix of dilemma₁ is that reason-responsiveness irons things out for our attitudes (or, in the bad scenario probed in sec. 5.2, that we self-deceive). Beliefs are not formed based on an evidentialist rule. *Au contraire*, rationality rules are themselves tokens of the kind of reasons upon which beliefs are formed. When I process a *modus ponens*, I do not need an evidentialist rule in addition to the inferential one to believe its conclusion. Similarly, when I have reason to doubt the evidential force of that rationality rule, for instance, a reason that rationally impugns the reliability of my logical process, my doxastic response is towards *that* reason, not towards an external rule that commands “respond to evidential reasons with belief.” And this is why the second horn of dilemma₁ collapses. On the other hand, the first horn collapses if we think of the problematic consequences of stipulating an autonomous overarching rule of structural rationality: either reproduction of the problems of dilemma₂ or production of problematic divisions in the doxastic self.

The previous considerations suggest that the monolithic evidentialist approach to reasons-responsiveness not only rests on the flimsy grounds of the Rule-View but also ignores the fact that conflicting propositions may be taken up non-akratically by compatible doxastic states in a single and transparent self. The simple idea underlying the attitude reclassification argument is that if evidential reasons can be positively responded to by other attitudes, it is against the *inference to the best explanation* to describe such epistemic situations as akratic on the assumption that belief is the only relevant attitude on offer.

5.1.2 Objections to the reclassification argument

Without aspiring to be exhaustive, let me briefly address three possible objections to the reclassification argument. The first may insist on the evidential purity of the doxastic deliberations. Whereas evidential reasons are indeed only responded with belief, the cases I have in mind provide additional reasons that must be considered. This “contamination” of the doxastic deliberation impurifies the doxastic products. Therefore, a case *without* the other kinds of reason could be narrowed down to a case of epistemic akrasia. To overcome this challenge, we should note that purely

background doxastic state designate it as a *belief*. Tenenbaum says that the background belief is formed because I know *that* there are evidential reasons supporting it, but their cognition is unavailable to me; that is, I don’t know *why* or *how* that belief is formed. This seems to suggest that the recognized remaining reasons in the etiology of the doxastic state are Harre-like allusions to conventional epistemological arguments about what one should believe, and/or practical reasons to adopt a doxastic state that will help represent a convenient reality and navigate within it. But lip service is not belief, and a disposition to act is not the privilege of belief alone.

epistemic cases are not immune to the reclassification argument, for the argument does not hang on *all-kinds-of-reason* deliberations but on the fittingness of the evoked attitude. If the deliberated reasons are exclusively evidential, but their probative force is undercut, it seems incongruent to be taken up by belief. They may do so, eventually, after due examination, but while the proposition is *inquired*, it is not believed.⁴⁰ It may very well be endorsed or hypothesized, or it may be accepted, guessed, endorsed, suspected, and so on (also, relative to the overall aims of the doxastic subject). For the most part, practical circumstances will call for a termination of inquiry, which, of course, will not issue in a belief but in an alternative doxastic attitude with sufficient dispositional force for the given context.

A second objection may charge that just as it seems arbitrary to claim that every response to evidence elicits a belief, it is also arbitrary to claim that there are *no cases* where a dual belief is an appropriate response for self-misleading evidential reasons. This charge seems to accept that akrasia is some pre-theoretical datum.⁴¹ The problem with this argument is that it deliberately positions itself outside any theoretical framework. However, epistemic akrasia is a datum only within specific epistemological coordinates; it is a datum because it appeals to broader admissions about rationality, the peculiarities of practical and theoretical reason, etc. To assume that there remain cases of akratic doxastic failure against the best explanation of reclassification demands a theory against this explanation. It demands a theoretical justification of akrasia. The objection fails to provide such a justification and, therefore, cannot stand.

A third worry appeals to the first person *reporting* of akratically believing. What should we make of the case with the philosopher who, like Ribeiro (2011), self-ascribes two contradictory beliefs: a higher order of radical skepticism and another in defiance of the epistemological one? Is the self-ascription of beliefs enough to mark this case as akratic? Chislenko (2021) posits that, while many cases of self-reporting are misidentifications of one's own mental state, we should not accept that this is *always* the case.⁴² He contends that belief attribution is based on a few pre-theoretical marks,⁴³ making the attribution much less demanding than refined epistemological approaches. Self-reporting is one such mark of belief attribution.

⁴⁰ See Adler 2002a, 16, 19.

⁴¹ For such an account, see Chislenko 2021.

⁴² Chislenko, 13939–40.

⁴³ Sensitivity to reasons, recall, felt conviction, reporting or assension, and use in further reasoning (Chislenko, 13932).

The problem, however, is not that these marks cannot be used to determine belief but rather that they can also be used to determine other doxastic states. What would differentiate between doxastic states when these marks are detectable in many of them? Clearly, the mark of *self-attribution* of belief, the only mark that cannot correctly belong to other states, depends on the co-presence of other marks; otherwise, self-attribution would be arbitrary. If so, the latent admission that these other marks are co-present with my self-report does not make the self-reported state necessarily a *belief*, as these co-existing marks are not exclusive to belief. Arguably, the folk concept of *belief* encompasses various doxastic states and is generally self-reported without attitudinal discrimination. Even in more nuanced contexts, the self-ascription might be too crude. Therefore, self-reporting should not be treated as a diacritic of belief because it is based on marks that may characterize a different doxastic state. Self-reporting of akratic belief may be better explained as a misinterpretation of the genuine attitude.

I will now address an argument that avoids doxastic voluntarism while maintaining the idea that epistemic akrasia lies in the failure to exercise *control* over one's capacity to revise beliefs.

5.2 Reclassifying the doxastic failure

What I have said against epistemic akrasia does not entail that failing to believe according to one's evidential reasons is impossible. As we have seen, Chislenko tries to capture these odd beliefs by identifying them with the pre-theoretical datum of epistemic akrasia. However, epistemic akrasia is one specific theoretical framework for explaining a non-standard way of believing. Other frameworks seem better equipped to capture the complexity of non-standard believing. From my perspective, the doxastic failure to believe according to counted evidence is the 'pre-theoretical datum', while addressing this issue requires a more comprehensive approach than what epistemic akrasia can offer.

Borgoni (2015) claims that the irrationality of holding two incoherent beliefs is predicated on the failure to exercise doxastic agency. She identifies doxastic agency with reasoning and reason transmission among the doxastic levels. When presented with evidence that my object-belief is flawed, I generate a reason to revise it. If this reasoning does not affect my mental state, it is failing. While this explanation sheds some light on the level-splitting accounts of epistemic akrasia, it runs out of steam halfway through. Taken to its full extent, the argument suggests a need to reframe our understanding of the doxastic failure.

Consider two identical cases of first-level belief and higher-order evidence against it. Borgoni argues that, in one of these scenarios, the epistemic subject may

fail to exercise the revising doxastic agency that would rationally weaken the first-order evidence and adjust the doxastic state accordingly. However, simply recognizing the difference between these otherwise equal cases does not provide an explanation for why this occurs. To earn its keep, epistemic akrasia needs to delve deeper into the reason behind this agential failure. Short of this explanation, agential failure is either compelled or mystified.

Regarding the first option, Borgoni's idea of agential idleness is difficult to distinguish from a situation where some mad scientist implants a revision-blocking mechanism in a subject's brain to prevent them from revising a belief even in the face of rebutting higher-order evidence against it. In this case, the subject cannot help but retain the first-order belief. This is hardly a case of epistemic akrasia, though, since the subject *cannot* not believe that *p*. As Owens has noted, lacking the ability to evaluate a belief is not a failure of agency, but rather an absence thereof.

The other option is to demystify the malfunction of our doxastic agency. Let's ask why doxastic agency may fail in some situations but not in others. One possible explanation comes from the externalist explanation of practical akrasia: just as a motivational reason may not align with the agent's evaluation of that reason, a non-epistemic reason to believe as one desire may not align with the subject's epistemic evaluation. In the first case, an akratic action may occur, whereas, in the second, an akratic belief could not occur unless it is responsive to pragmatic reasons. However, as we have previously discussed (sec. 2.1, 3.2), belief is not responsive to pragmatic reasons; and when our doxastic attitude *is* responsive to pragmatic reasons, it is not a belief. Nevertheless, our motivational condition may indeed exert a strong influence on our beliefs. But it does so indirectly by attempting to impair (better: to manipulate) our doxastic agency. Therefore, a simple desire to believe that *p*, even more in the teeth of rebutting evidence, may feature in the etiology of a belief but not as its formal cause. The formal cause is necessarily identified with evidential reasons alone. When belief revision is called for, the ability to perform it may be hindered due to manipulative strategies deployed by oneself against one's own doxastic freedom.⁴⁴ These strategies are deployed to satisfy a desire to form or maintain an unsupported belief. This behavior is typically displayed in avoiding contradictory evidence that could expose the fallaciousness or the weakness of the evidence upon which the desired belief is formed.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ In this context, the concept of *epistemic autonomy* becomes a relevant question.

⁴⁵ For discussion on strategic avoidance as a mark of robust self-deception, see Funkhouser and Barrett 2016. A characteristic illustration can be found in the well-known story of *What the Tortoise Said to Achilles* (Carroll 1895). While the story is usually invoked as an argument against the internalism of theoretical reason, my interpretation suggests that it is precisely because of

At this point, we see the problem with the proposal to acknowledge such cases as akratic. Suppose the failure to exercise doxastic control results from self-deceptive measures to avoid unwelcome evidence. In that case, the failure no longer fits the state of the akratic who must be failing epistemically *by her own lights*. The self-deceived does not clear-headedly retain both beliefs; instead, she attempts to suppress the unwelcome one. Looking into the reason behind the idleness of the doxastic agency reveals features of a doxastic failure that exceed the explanatory sufficiency of epistemic akrasia. By reclassifying this malfunction as a form of *self-deception*, we can overcome the issue of akrasia, as detailed in sec. 2.4, sidestep the objection of compulsive belief,⁴⁶ and *better explain* the failure to exercise our doxastic agency when it is rational to do so.

6. Conclusion

The impossibility arguments (static and dynamic) against epistemic akrasia eliminate the analogy between classic and epistemic akrasia. However, counterexamples to those arguments have motivated the idea that epistemic akrasia is indeed possible. To counter these objections, I presented two arguments: Firstly, the attitude reclassification argument frees reason-responsiveness from the constraints of the evidentialist fetishism and allows for the adoption of conflicting propositions by coherent doxastic attitudes. Secondly, the failure reclassification argument demystifies the loss of doxastic control in purported cases of epistemic akrasia by referring to the more comprehensive phenomenon of self-deception. While self-deception raises a host of its own issues, it gives us a good idea of how to handle the

internalism that the Tortoise tries to manipulate her theoretical reason in order to avoid accepting the conclusion. Her attitude can be seen as a self-directed attempt to avoid a conclusion, which she has inevitably come to believe since she has already accepted the premises of Achilles' *modus ponens*. Her haggling is an attempt to shed the undesired belief.

⁴⁶ I am not touching upon the controversial topic of pathological *delusions* and their relation to more ordinary doxastic failures involved in self-deception. Relatedly, some might argue that *wishful thinking* is a manifestation of epistemic akrasia. Still, the wishful thinkers' passive distortion of the evidence doesn't appear to be occurring against any *non-trivial* higher-order belief that they should not treat their specific evidential items in the inconspicuously biased way they do. A biased belief against one's *trivial* higher-order belief (that one should be epistemically aware of biased reasoning) is not a failure of doxastic agency, but rather a failure to recognize the belief as biased. On the other hand, forming a biased belief against one's non-trivial higher-order belief that their evidence is treated deviously requires using *deceptive* measures against that non-trivial higher-order belief. But the need to overturn the higher-order belief in order to achieve the object-belief is not part of the akratic phenomenon. (While my version of self-deception is anti-deflationist, this is not the place to settle the conflict between motivationalism and intentionalism in the theory of self-deception).

complexities of doxastic failure. I believe that both reclassification attempts support the impossibility arguments in a way that respects the intuitions that motivate the debate about higher-order evidence.

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Ioannis Telios

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