

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 possibility of higher-order defeat. That is to say, if akratic beliefs of the form “ p , but I should not believe that p ” are always irrational, rational belief states cannot be defeasible by misleading higher-order evidence suggesting that they are irrational. In this paper, I argue that Titelbaum’s argument rests on a subtle but crucial misunderstanding of the enkratic principle. The mistake is to think that the enkratic principle amounts to the claim that there are certain false propositions about the requirements of rationality that it can never be rational to believe. Properly understood, the enkratic principle says something quite different, namely that there are certain epistemic situations that one cannot *occupy* while being rationally permitted to believe certain false propositions about the requirements of rationality. Once this misunderstanding is removed, it becomes clear that the enkratic principle is fully consistent with the possibility of higher-order defeat. It also becomes clear that the enkratic principle does not have the kinds of puzzling consequences for the possibility of justified false beliefs about the requirements of rationality that, for example, Greco (2014) and Littlejohn (2015) have supposed.

1. Introduction

Two theses about epistemic rationality have attracted a lot of attention recently. First, the so-called *enkratic principle*, according to which it can never be rational to have akratic beliefs of the form “ p , but I should not believe that p .” Second, the thesis that *higher-order defeat* is possible, that is, the thesis that even a fully rational belief state can be defeated by sufficiently strong misleading higher-order evidence suggesting that it is rationally flawed.

In his recent article “Rationality’s Fixed Point” (2015), Michael Titelbaum argues that the enkratic principle is incompatible with the possibility of higher-order defeat. That is to say, if akratic beliefs are always irrational, rational belief states cannot be defeasible by misleading higher-order evidence. In this paper, I argue that Titelbaum’s argument rests on a subtle but crucial misunderstanding of the enkratic principle. The mistake is to think that the enkratic principle amounts to the claim that there are certain false propositions about the requirements of rationality that it can never be rational to believe. Properly understood, the enkratic principle says something quite different, namely that there are certain epistemic situations that one cannot *occupy* while being rationally permitted to believe certain false propositions about the requirements of rationality. Once this misunderstanding is removed,

it becomes clear that the enkratic principle is consistent with the possibility of higher-order defeat. It also becomes clear that the enkratic principle does not have the kinds of puzzling consequences for the possibility of justified false beliefs about the requirements of rationality that, for example, Greco (2014) and Littlejohn (2015) have supposed.

Here is the plan for the rest of the paper. In §2 I define some terms that will be useful for reasoning about epistemic akrasia and higher-order defeat. In §§3-4 I motivate and refine the enkratic principle and the thesis that higher-order defeat is possible. In §5 I lay out Titelbaum's argument for the claim that higher-order defeat is impossible if the enkratic principle is true. In §6 I argue that Titelbaum's argument fails, and show that the enkratic principle, properly understood, is consistent with the possibility of higher-order defeat. In §7 I conclude.

2. Preliminaries

On a familiar picture of rational belief, the recommendations of epistemic rationality describe a function R from possible epistemic situations to sets of doxastic states, where a doxastic state corresponds to a set of doxastic attitudes.¹ If s is an epistemic situation, $R(s)$ represents the set of doxastic states that an agent who occupies s is rationally permitted to adopt. We can then 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 $d \in R(s)$.

Intuitively, on this model, a doxastic attitude A is rationally permitted in an epistemic situation s just in case A is part of at least one of the doxastic states that it would be rational to adopt if one were to occupy s . Likewise, A is rationally required in s just in case A is part of every doxastic state that it would be rational to adopt if one were to occupy s . If A is not rationally permitted in s , I will say that A is rationally forbidden in s . Henceforth, I will drop

¹ This way of reasoning about rational recommendations resembles that of standard model-theoretic approaches to deontic logic; see McNamara (2014) for a survey. Titelbaum (2015, p. 263) introduces roughly the same model to frame his discussion.

the prefixes, and simply speak of ‘attitudes’ being ‘permitted, required, or forbidden’ in various ‘situations’.

I will make two simplifying assumptions about the function R . First, I will assume that required attitudes are always permitted, which amounts to the assumption that every situation permits at least one doxastic state. Second, I will assume (along with Titelbaum) that doxastic attitudes are categorical ‘all-or-nothing’ attitudes, representing either belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgment. Neither assumption is strictly needed, but they will ease the exposition considerably. Otherwise, I will not make any assumptions about R . In particular, I will not assume any of the following theses, which have been subject to considerable controversy recently:²

Evidentialism: For any situation s and attitude A , s permits A iff the total evidence available in s speaks sufficiently strongly in favor of A .

The Uniqueness Thesis: For any situation s and proposition p , s permits at most one attitude towards p .

No Epistemic Dilemmas: For any situation s , if A and A' are incompatible attitudes, s does not require both A and A' .

By staying neutral on controversial theses like these, there should be no risk of begging any relevant questions by using the present model to reason about epistemic rationality. With these preliminaries in place, let us turn to the enkratic principle.

3. The Enkratic Principle

Philosophers have long discussed and, for the most part, endorsed a principle of *practical akrasia*, according to which it is never rational to intend to perform an action that one judges one should not (all things considered) perform, or fail to intend to perform an action that one judges one should (all things considered) perform.³ If, for example, I intend to sell my house despite judging that I should not (all things considered) sell my house, my intention seems

² For discussions of Evidentialism, see, e.g., Conee and Feldman (1985; 2004) and Shah (2006). For discussions of The Uniqueness Thesis, see, e.g., Levinstein (2015), Schoenfield (2014), Schultheis (forthcoming), Titelbaum and Kopec (2016), and White (2005). For discussions of epistemic dilemmas, see, e.g., Christensen (2007b; 2010; 2014), Lasonen-Aarnio (2014), and Worsnip (2015).

³ See Hare (1952) and Davidson (1970) for early discussions of practical akrasia.

irrational. Likewise, if I do not intend sell my house despite judging that I should (all things considered) sell my house, my lack of intention seems irrational. In general, someone who acts against his or her own best overall judgment intuitively fails to be rational “by his or her own lights,” and such a failure has seemed to many like an obvious case of irrationality.⁴

Recently, a number of authors have drawn attention to an analogous principle of *epistemic enkrasia*, according to which it is never rational to have a belief that one believes to be rationally forbidden, or fail to have a belief that one believes to be rationally required. If, for example, I believe that it is raining, despite believing that I am rationally forbidden to believe that it is raining, my belief seems irrational. Likewise, if I do not believe that it is raining, despite believing that I am rationally required to believe that it is raining, my lack of belief seems irrational. Just as it seems irrational to *act* against one’s best judgment, it seems irrational to *believe* against one’s best judgment.

Using the terminology from §2, we can formulate the prohibition against epistemic akrasia as follows:

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

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

This principle consists of two constraints. According to (i), it is never rational to have an attitude while believing that the attitude is forbidden in one’s situation. For example, it is never rational to believe that it is raining while believing that one’s situation forbids believing that it is raining. Conversely, according to (ii), it is never rational to believe that an attitude is required in one’s situation while not having the attitude. For example, it is never rational to believe that one’s situation requires believing that it is raining while not believing that it is raining.

How plausible is the Enkratic Principle? Most people seem to share the intuition that epistemic akrasia is irrational. Statements like “it is raining, but I should not believe it” seem incoherent in much the same way that Moorean statements like “it is raining, but I do not

⁴ Though see Arpaly (2000), Audi (1990), and McIntyre (1990) for authors who have questioned whether practical akrasia need always be irrational.

believe it” seem incoherent.⁵ Yet, philosophers have reacted very differently to the intuitive oddness of epistemic akrasia. Some have taken intuition at face value and accepted the Enkratic Principle largely without argument; see, e.g., Scanlon (1998), Bergmann (2005), Feldman (2005), and Broome (2007). Others have tried to back intuition up by substantive argument; see, e.g., Greco (2014) and Kolodny (2005, pp. 521-27). Yet others have argued that intuition is mistaken, and that we should reject the Enkratic Principle. 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 an agent’s total evidence to support a proposition of the form “ p , but my total evidence does not support p ” or “not- p , but my total evidence supports p .” If so, there is pressure to accept that epistemic akrasia can be rational (although Worsnip himself resists this conclusion). Christensen (2016) argues that agents who rationally believe themselves to be *anti-reliable*—that is, agents who rationally believe that their best overall judgment of their total evidence is incorrect—will sometimes have to be akratic in order to maximize the expected accuracy of their beliefs. If so, and if accuracy trumps akrasia, the Enkratic Principle at least does not hold without exception.

I will not take issue with these (and other⁶) arguments for or against the Enkratic Principle. My aim here is not to discuss whether the Enkratic Principle is ultimately a plausible constraint on rational belief, but to show that the Enkratic Principle is consistent with the possibility of higher-order defeat. Let us then turn to the thesis that higher-order defeat is possible.

4. Higher-Order Defeat

As Christensen (2010, p. 185) points out, there is a trivial sense in which all evidence is *defeating* evidence. Whenever one gets new evidence that rationalizes a change of one’s belief state, one’s initial belief state has been defeated. Ordinarily, such defeat does not indicate that one’s initial belief state was irrational given one’s initial evidence. If I believe that tomorrow’s class will start at 8am as usual, but then receive an e-mail saying that tomorrow’s class has been cancelled, I may well be required to give up my belief that tomorrow’s class will start at 8am. But this obviously does not show that it was irrational of me to believe as I did before

⁵ 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).

⁶ For various other attempts at challenging the Enkratic Principle, see Coates (2012), Weatherson (ms.), Wedgwood (2012), and Williamson (2000).

receiving the cancellation. When a rational belief state is defeated in this way by evidence that does not indicate that the belief state was initially irrational, let us say that the belief state has been subject to *first-order defeat*.

Not all cases of defeat are cases of first-order defeat, so understood. Sometimes one's belief state is defeated precisely because one gets evidence, which indicates that one's current belief state is irrational. 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 causes them to overestimate their children on a wide range of desirable qualities and abilities, including intelligence, musical talent, and social competences.

Here it seems that, although Mary's initial evaluation of Peter's abilities on the piano was in fact unbiased, she should nevertheless lower her evaluation of Peter upon learning about the study on the parental bias. After all, even if Mary does not *in fact* suffer from the parental bias, she has strong reasons to think that she *does*. The recent literature on higher-order evidence contains many similar cases in which a fully rational agent seems required to revise her belief state, because she gets misleading higher-order evidence suggesting that her belief state is rationally flawed.⁷ When a rational belief state is defeated in this way by misleading higher-order evidence, let us say that the belief state has been subject to *higher-order defeat*.

Using the terminology from §2, we can formulate the view that higher-order defeat is possible as follows:

Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat: It is possible for a permitted state to be defeated by (sufficiently strong) misleading higher-order evidence suggesting that it is forbidden.

Notice that only *misleading* higher-order evidence can have defeating force. This is because non-misleading higher-order evidence will either (i) indicate that a rational belief state is rational, in which case the belief state is not defeated, or (ii) indicate that an irrational belief state is irrational, in which case the belief state is already irrational, and hence not defeasible.

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

So while first-order evidence need not be misleading to have defeating force, higher-order evidence must be misleading to have defeating force.

How plausible is the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat? One prominent line of defense, due to David Christensen (2007; 2010; 2011), aims to show that those who deny the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat are committed to an implausible form of dogmatism about our own cognitive abilities. If, for example, Mary disregards the study on the parental bias, it must be because she takes the study to be misleading. But the study is only misleading insofar as Mary's initial evaluation of Peter was unbiased. So if Mary disregards the study, it must be because she assumes that her initial evaluation of Peter was unbiased. Yet, in doing so, she seems to beg a relevant question, much like someone who disregards a body of evidence on the grounds that it opposes his or her prior opinion. To avoid this sort of dogmatic reliance on her own cognitive abilities, Christensen concludes, Mary should lower her evaluation of Peter upon learning about the study on the parental bias.⁸

Another line of defense of the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat comes from Elga's (2007) well-known "bootstrapping" objection to 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 "right"—that is, the peer who initially judged the shared evidence bearing on p correctly—is permitted to retain her initial attitude towards p upon disclosed disagreement. Elga's objection to this view takes the form of a *reductio*: suppose that, in a case of disagreement between two epistemic peers a and b , the peer who is right, say a , is permitted to stick to her initial opinion concerning the matter of dispute. Presumably, this means that a is justified in concluding that b is wrong, and hence epistemically inferior to a on the relevant subject matter. 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 .⁹ So, Elga concludes, the Rights Reasons View must be false.

⁸ As Christensen (2010, pp. 196-97) points out, it is not immediately clear how we should understand the kind of question-begging reasoning that Mary engages in if she ignores the study on the parental bias. Yet, it remains intuitively plausible that there is *something* irrational about ignoring the study. Analogously, Harman (1973, pp. 148-49) notes that it is not immediately clear what is wrong with disregarding a body of evidence on the grounds that it speaks against a proposition that one knows to be true. Yet, it remains intuitively plausible that there is *something* irrational about disregarding new evidence in this way.

⁹ As Elga points out, we can make the absurdity even more pronounced by supposing that a disagrees with a large number of peers, all of whom happen to be in the wrong, and all of whom a ends up deeming epistemically inferior upon disagreement.

If we understand evidence of disagreement as a kind of higher-order evidence—as many have done¹⁰—the Right Reasons View amounts to the claim that a particular sort of misleading higher-order evidence does not have defeating force. Thus, if the Right Reasons View is false, as Elga argues, there is at least one kind of higher-order evidence that has defeating force. This, in turn, suffices to establish the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat. So anyone who denies the Right Reasons View—including virtually everyone in the peer disagreement debate¹¹—is committed to the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat.

Despite the intuitive pull of these arguments, some philosophers remain doubtful that rational belief states are really sensitive to higher-order defeat. For example, Lasonen-Aarnio (2014) argues that there is no satisfactory way of accommodating higher-order defeat within a broader picture of epistemic justification, and she takes this to constitute a *reductio* against the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat. Whiting (2016) argues, in a more general vein, that there do not exist any higher-order reasons for belief or action, in which case the distinction between first-order and higher-order defeat rests on a mistake in the first place. I have argued elsewhere that Lasonen-Aarnio’s arguments should not worry proponents of higher-order defeat.¹² But again, my aim here is not to defend the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat, but merely to argue that the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat is consistent with the Enkratic Principle.

5. Titelbaum Against Higher-Order Defeat

In this section, I will lay out Titelbaum’s argument for the claim that the Enkratic Principle is incompatible with the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat. I will reconstruct his argument in three steps. My reconstruction will deviate to some extent from Titelbaum’s own exposition, but it should amount to a charitable interpretation of his argument.

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

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

¹⁰ See, e.g., Kelly (2010), Christensen (2010), and Rasmussen et al. (forthcoming).

¹¹ Among those who reject the Right Reasons View of disagreement are proponents of various forms of “conciliationism,” including Elga (2007), Christensen (2007), Feldman (2006), and Rasmussen et al. (forthcoming), as well as proponents of various 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.

¹² See [omitted for review].

- (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].

According to this thesis, it cannot be rational to be mistaken about which attitudes one's own situation requires or forbids. If, for example, my situation requires believing that it is raining, my situation does not permit believing that [my situation forbids believing that it is raining]. Likewise, if my situation forbids believing that it is raining, my situation does not permit believing that [my situation requires believing that it is raining].

I call the Substantive Enkratic Principle "substantive" because it constrains which *individual* attitudes it may be rational to adopt. By contrast, the Enkratic Principle is a "coherence" constraint, governing which *combinations* of attitudes it may be rational to adopt. But despite this difference, it is easily verified that the Enkratic Principle implies the Substantive Enkratic Principle: suppose, contra the Substantive Enkratic Principle, that there is a situation s and 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 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 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. So the Enkratic Principle implies the Substantive Enkratic Principle.¹³

The Substantive Enkratic Principle is a generalized version of Titelbaum's so-called "Special Case Thesis," according to which "there do not exist an attitude A and 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 a particular kind of mistake, namely the mistake of believing

¹³ As Titelbaum (2015, p. 268) points out, it might seem surprising that a mere coherence requirement turns out to constrain which individual attitudes it may be rational to adopt. Notice, however, that the phenomenon is well-known from the domain of logic. Compare:

Non-Contradiction: There is no situation s and state $d \in R(s)$ such that d contains both the belief that p and the belief that $\sim p$.

Substantive Non-Contradiction: There is no situation s such that s permits believing $p \wedge \sim p$.

Assuming that rational belief is closed under conjunction elimination, it is easily seen that Non-Contradiction implies Substantive Non-Contradiction. So Non-Contradiction, like the Enkratic Principle, is a coherence requirement that has substantive implications.

that one's own situation forbids an attitude that it in fact requires. The Substantive Enkratic Principle is a slightly stronger thesis in that it prohibits an additional kind of mistake: the mistake of believing that one's own situation requires an attitude that it in fact forbids. In what follows, I will work with the Substantive Enkratic Principle rather than the Special Case Thesis, partly for reasons of generality, and partly because it allows for the strongest reconstruction of Titelbaum's argument.

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

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

According to this thesis, it can be rational to have a false belief about which attitudes are required or forbidden in a situation that one does not occupy. If, for example, I occupy a situation s that requires believing that it is raining, a different situation s' may well permit believing the false proposition that [s forbids believing that it is raining]. Likewise, if s forbids believing that it is raining, s' may well permit believing the false proposition that [s requires believing that it is raining].

The label "No Fixed Point Thesis" alludes to Titelbaum's so-called "Fixed Point Thesis," according to which "no situation rationally permits an a priori false belief about which overall states are rationally permitted in which situations" (Titelbaum 2015, p. 261). As Titelbaum puts his thesis in slogan form: "[all] mistakes *about* the requirements of rationality are mistakes *of* rationality" (Titelbaum 2015, p. 253). Using our present terminology, the Fixed Point Thesis amounts to the claim that, for any false proposition p about which attitudes a situation s permits, requires or forbids, one is forbidden to believe that p , regardless of whether one occupies s or not. The No Fixed Point Thesis denies this claim: according to this thesis, one may well be rationally mistaken about which attitudes a situation requires or forbids, so long as one does not occupy that situation.

To see why the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat implies the No Fixed Point Thesis, consider again Mary from the Parental Bias case. Let s be Mary's situation before having read the study on the parental bias, let s' be her situation after having read the study, and let p be the proposition that [s forbids believing that Peter is a brilliant pianist]. Since Mary's initial evaluation of Peter was in fact unbiased, she is required in s to believe that Peter is a brilliant

pianist (assuming that she has sufficiently strong first-order evidence that Peter is a brilliant pianist). Thus, p is a false proposition about which attitudes s requires or forbids. Yet, Mary is permitted in s' to believe that p . For assuming, as we do, that Parental Bias is a case of higher-order defeat, Mary is forbidden in s' to believe that Peter is a brilliant pianist; and the *reason* for this is that the study on the parental bias suggests that her belief was never rational *in the first place*. As such, Mary is permitted in s' to believe that p . That is, Mary is permitted in s' to believe a falsehood about which attitudes s requires or forbids. So the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat implies the No Fixed Point Thesis.

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. Given the first two steps of the argument, it follows that the Enkratic Principle is incompatible with the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat. I will eventually argue that this third step of Titelbaum's argument is unsound, and that the Substantive Enkratic Principle is in fact fully consistent 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 true or false propositions about which attitudes various situations permit, require, or forbid. We can think of the propositions in P_{rat} in terms of statements of the form "situation s permits/requires/forbids attitude A ." As we saw above, the Substantive Enkratic Principle says that one cannot be rationally mistaken about those propositions in P_{rat} that concern which attitudes one's own situation requires or forbid. We also saw that the No Fixed Point Thesis says that one can be rationally mistaken about those propositions in P_{rat} that do not concern which attitudes one's own situation requires or forbids. Thus, someone who endorses both the Substantive Enkratic Principle and the No Fixed Point Thesis is committed to the following thesis:

Current Situation Thesis: One cannot be rationally mistaken about those propositions in P_{rat} that concern which attitudes one's own situation requires or forbids, but one can be rationally mistaken about those propositions in P_{rat} that do not concern which attitudes one's own situation requires or forbids.

In other words, the Current Situation Thesis says that it can never be rational to have a false belief about which attitudes one's current situation requires or forbids, whereas it *can* be rational to have a false belief about which attitudes are required or forbidden in situations that one does *not* currently occupy. The third step of Titelbaum's argument effectively purports to

show that the Current Situation Thesis cannot be true, in which case either the Substantive Enkratic Principle or the No Fixed Point Thesis must be false.

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 attitudes one's current situation requires or forbids, and those that do not? Without such an explanation, says Titelbaum, 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; " $2+2=7$ ", " $3\times 7=21$ ", and so on. Now, suppose that someone makes a claim to the effect that there are certain propositions in P_{math} that one cannot be rationally mistaken about, but certain other propositions in P_{math} that one *can* be rationally mistaken about. Such a claim seems 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 propositions in P_{math} that one *cannot* be rationally mistaken about. Without such an explanation, it seems *ad hoc* to suppose that one can be rationally mistaken about some propositions in P_{math} , but not others.¹⁴ Likewise, says Titelbaum, unless the proponent of the Current Situation Thesis can point out an epistemically relevant difference between those propositions in P_{rat} that concern which attitudes one's own situation requires or forbids, and those that do not, it seems *ad hoc* to suppose that one can be rationally mistaken about the former class of propositions, but not the latter.

The problem for the proponent of the Current Situation Thesis, says Titelbaum, is that it is hard to see what epistemically relevant difference there could be between those propositions in P_{rat} that concern which attitudes one's current situation requires or forbids, and those that do not. To see why, Titelbaum asks us to consider what might justify our attitudes towards propositions in P_{rat} . One potential source of justification for propositions in P_{rat} is *a priori*: arguably, one can reflect *a priori* on epistemically relevant features of a situation, and thereby come to be justified in adopting certain attitudes towards propositions about which attitudes that situation permits, requires, or forbids. For example, I might imagine myself climbing

¹⁴ Of course, one might try to come up with a principled reason why rational mistakes are only possible for a certain subset of propositions in P_{math} . For example, one might argue that it cannot be rational to be mistaken about fairly simple arithmetic statements such as " $2+2=4$ ", whereas it can be rational to be mistaken about complex arithmetic statements like " $\sqrt{513} < 5^2$ ". The point here is just that, in the absence of such a reason, it seems *ad hoc* to claim that rational mistakes are possible for certain propositions in P_{math} , but not others.

Mount Everest and come to realize that, in that situation, I would be permitted to believe that I am above sea level. Or I might imagine myself scuba diving and come to realize that, in that situation, I would be forbidden to believe that I am above sea level.

If this is how we acquire justification for propositions in P_{rat} , says Titelbaum, it seems that the justification that one can in principle acquire for a given proposition in P_{rat} does not depend on which situation one currently 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. And just as I can learn that I *am* forbidden to believe that I am above sea level, when I *am* scuba diving, I can learn that I *would* be forbidden to believe that I am above sea level, if I *were* scuba diving. More generally, if p is a proposition in P_{rat} about a situation s , the justification that one can in principle acquire for adopting such-and-such attitude towards p would not depend on whether one currently occupies s or not.

Obviously, says Titelbaum, one might try to come up with alternative accounts of how we acquire justification for propositions in P_{rat} . But he submits that, regardless of what the correct account turns out to be, it seems implausible to suppose that the justification one can in principle acquire for a proposition in P_{rat} about a situation s should depend on whether one currently occupies s or not. In turn, says Titelbaum, it seems implausible to suppose that the question of whether one can be rationally mistaken about a given proposition in P_{rat} should depend on whether that proposition concerns one's current situation or not. Yet, this is precisely what the Current Situation Thesis implies. So the Current Situation Thesis must be false, which means that the Substantive Enkratic Principle and the No Fixed Point Thesis cannot both be true.

This completes Titelbaum's argument for the claim that proponents of the Enkratic Principle cannot consistently endorse the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat. In the next section, I will argue that the argument is unsound, and show that the Enkratic Principle is in fact fully consistent with the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat.

6. Reconciling Enkrasia and Higher-Order Defeat

The first two steps of Titelbaum's argument should be uncontroversial: it is easily verified that the Enkratic Principle implies the Substantive Enkratic Principle, and it seems equally clear that proponents 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 purports to show that the Substantive Enkratic Principle is inconsistent with the No Fixed Point Thesis. As I hope to

show, Titelbaum's argument for this claim rests on a subtle but crucial misunderstanding of the Substantive Enkratic Principle.

The mistake is to think that the Substantive Enkratic Principle amounts to the claim that there are certain propositions in P_{rat} —namely those propositions that concern which attitudes one's current 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 situation permits believing. But the Substantive Enkratic Principle implies no such thing. Properly understood, the Substantive Enkratic Principle is fully compatible with the claim that, for any false proposition in P_{rat} , some situation permits believing that proposition. That is, the Substantive Enkratic Principle does not say that there is a certain class of propositions in P_{rat} that one can never be rationally mistaken about. What the Substantive Enkratic Principle *does* say is that there are certain situations that one cannot *occupy* while being permitted to believe certain false propositions in P_{rat} . More specifically, if p is a falsehood in P_{rat} about which attitudes a situation s requires or forbids, the Substantive Enkratic Principle says that one cannot occupy s while being permitted to believe p . This does not mean that an agent who occupies s cannot become permitted to believe p . It just means that the agent's situation must *change* before she can be permitted to believe p . And such a change of situation is precisely what the right kind of misleading higher-order evidence can bring about.

To illustrate, consider again Mary. As before, let s be Mary's situation prior to reading the study on 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 notice that when Mary learns about the study on the parental bias, she transitions to a new situation, call it s' , in which she *is* permitted to believe that p . So there *is* a situation in which Mary is permitted to believe the falsehood p about which attitudes s requires or forbids. It's just that since the belief in p is rationalized by a higher-order defeater that issues a *shift* in Mary's situation, Mary no longer occupies s when being permitted to believe that p , and hence does not end up with a false belief about which attitudes her *current* situation requires or forbids. More generally, let p be any falsehood in P_{rat} about which attitudes a situation s requires or forbids. According to the Substantive Enkratic Principle, s forbids believing p . But if an agent who occupies s receives the right kind of higher-order defeater consisting of sufficiently strong misleading higher-order evidence in favor of p , the agent will transition to a new situation s' , in which the agent is permitted to believe p . So there

is a situation in which the agent is permitted to believe the falsehood p about which attitudes s requires or forbids. It's just that since the belief in p is rationalized by a higher-order defeater that issues a shift in the agent's situation, the agent no longer occupies s when being permitted to believe that p , and hence does not end up with a false belief about which attitudes the agent's *current* situation requires or permits.

We can use this clarification of the Substantive Enkratic Principle to defuse Titelbaum's explanatory challenge to the proponent of the Current Situation Thesis. Despite appearances to the contrary, the Current Situation Thesis does not imply, as Titelbaum assumes, that the justification one can in principle acquire for a proposition in P_{rat} about a situation s depends on whether one currently occupies s or not. The temptation to think so derives from a misinterpretation of the Substantive Enkratic Principle to the effect that there are certain propositions in P_{rat} —namely those that concern which attitudes one's current situation requires or forbids—that enjoy a special epistemic status, making it impossible to be rationally mistaken about them. But as we have seen, the Substantive Enkratic Principle does not have this implication. Thus, the Current Situation Thesis does not imply that there are certain propositions in P_{rat} that enjoy a special epistemic status. Rather, the Current Situation Thesis is fully compatible with the claim that the kind of justification one can get for any given proposition in P_{rat} does not depend on whether the proposition concerns one's current situation or not. So Titelbaum's case against the Current Situation Thesis is ill-founded; it rests on a misunderstanding of the Substantive Enkratic Principle. The upshot is that the Substantive Enkratic Principle is consistent with the No Fixed Point Thesis, which means that the Enkratic Principle is consistent with the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat.

7. Conclusion

I have argued, contrary to Titelbaum (2015), that proponents of the Enkratic Principle may consistently endorse the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat. This obviously does not show that either thesis is true. For all I have said, there might be independent reasons for rejecting either or both the Enkratic Principle and the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat. But in light of the intuitive attractions of both theses, I consider it to be good news that they do not conflict.

While I have centered my discussion around Titelbaum's argument, a number of other authors have invoked the same misinterpretation of the Enkratic Principle. For example, Daniel Greco (2014) describes the Enkratic Principle as “puzzling” on the grounds that

the 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)

Likewise, Clayton Littlejohn (2015) takes the Enkratic Principle to amount to the claim 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 as a “surprising” result since:

[y]ou 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)

Like Titelbaum, Greco and Littlejohn take the Enkratic Principle as saying that there are certain false propositions about the requirements of rationality that it cannot be rational to believe. If this were the case, the Enkratic Principle would indeed be a puzzling or surprising thesis, at least for those who are inclined to think that justified false beliefs are possible across all domains or subject-matters.¹⁵ 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 situations that one cannot *occupy* while being permitted to believe certain false propositions in P_{rat} . And there is nothing puzzling about constraining which situations agents may occupy while being permitted to believe such-and-such propositions; that's just what the requirements of rationality are supposed to do.

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¹⁵ 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). But such philosophers must in any case deny the Possibility of Higher-Order Defeat, because the No Fixed Point Thesis claims that a particular kind of justified false belief is possible.

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