

The Practical Dogmatist

A nation, weary of irrationality, has elected a group of expert reasoners to congress. As a world authority in both epistemology and psychology, you had bipartisan support within Indiana's 9th congressional district. You are about to vote on a matter that presupposes the truth of global warming. There is a packet marked URGENT on your desk. Before you can open it, you receive a phone call from your trusted aide, a seasoned political professional:

Don't open the packet! It is from a lobbyist who sends last minute evidence. This late-breaking news will undermine your belief in global warming. The lobbyist knows you are rational. He never lies. Nevertheless, he plies congressmen with misleading truths. For instance, he might quote someone named Al Gore in the hope you will infer this is the prominent environmental activist Al Gore.

Your aide admits that she does not know what is in the packet. She is confident that the contents will convincingly explain away her warning. For instance, it may contain evidence that she made a mistake about the source of packet.

You ask your aide how she discovered who sent the packet. She reports that the lobbyist just *told* her. He also

had the nerve to predict that she would make the call to warn you. This lobbyist has an excellent track record.

You would like to continue the conversation. But to vote, you must enter the United States Capitol subway system. On the way to the congressional chamber, there will be just enough time to study the contents of the packet. Should you open the packet or burn it?

The Case for Discarding the Packet

The purpose of consulting evidence is to get truth and avoid error. Your present evidence suggests that studying the packet's contents would lead you to lose the truth. So your intellectual goals are best served by discarding the packet.

So says your colleague from Colorado. She has counseling experience from her days at Planned Parenthood. She makes the above reasoning vivid with a figure from decision theory: "*A maximally informed well-wisher would hope you will not read the packet. You should do what such a well-wisher hopes you would do.*"

You object: "Wouldn't my hypothetical, more widely informed, future self disagree about what advice would be given by the maximally informed well-wisher?". Her reply is down to earth: "You need to draw conclusions on the basis of your *actual, present* evidence. That is the only evidence you have!".

If you open the packet, you will be glad you did. But *potential* ratification is an indiscriminate form of

justification. She draws an analogy to reproductive decisions: "The choice to have a baby is normally self-ratifying; the mother rejoices in the children she actually bears. But the anticipation of this ratification is compatible with the rationality of not having the child. After all, a mother will also rejoice in having the particular child she actually has rather than another possible child. Our future selves are like our children. Each of us must choose which of our potential selves should be actualized. To paraphrase Martin Heidegger, 'Every woman is born many women. But she dies one woman.'"

Her colleague from Alaska is a former trapper: "I caught animals by thinking like they do. I did not depend on them being irrational. I counted on them being rational. The same goes for people. Think of how we get merchants to compete against each other. The government sets up a prisoner's dilemma and undermines all of the vendors' cooperative solutions. It's a rationality trap."

You are reminded of David Lewis' well-titled essay "The Prisoner's Dilemma is a Newcomb's Problem". Lewis contends that the prisoner's dilemma is merely a game-theoretic version of Newcomb's problem – two Newcomb's problems laid side to side. In "Why Ain't You Rich?" Lewis defends the two boxer by characterizing Newcomb's problem as prejudiced against rational agents. If there weren't rationality traps, then Thomas Schelling couldn't give us

advice on how to escape them by limiting our rational responses.

The Case for Studying the Packet's Contents

"The Principle of Total Evidence" was the opening chapter of your best seller Logic and Psychology: An Integrated Approach. This principle instructs us to base judgment on all the available evidence. Does misleading evidence count as evidence?

Falsehoods strike you as pseudo-evidence. You take 'misleading evidence' to consist of truths that suggest a falsehood. For instance, transcripts of police interrogations are evidence despite containing many misleading remarks. Standards of legal evidence suggest that misleading evidence is evidence.

Despite this loyalty to the principle of total evidence, you are enough of a psychologist to counsel irrational people to discard misleading evidence. Ignore advertisements. Ignore the National Inquirer. Ignore the pitches of salesmen. Indeed, you counsel harried thinkers to also discard non-misleading evidence when it threatens to clutter their thinking.

You often take your own advice when tired or emotionally vulnerable. But now you are well-rested, calm, and eager to execute your duties as a legislator. Global warming requires careful application of statistical training rather than intuition . . . Perhaps you should gingerly

sample the evidence. After all, you are not going to forget your aide's warning.

The Alaskan trapper points out that you defeat the purpose of a spam filter if you read the messages anyway. When a camper comes across poisoned food he should not nibble.

You ask the congressman from Delaware, a former toxicologist, to assess the analogy between misleading evidence and poison:

The analogy may be more apt than the trapper realizes! All poisons are relative to a dose. The more ethanol you ingest, the worse your symptoms. Just as most food has tiny amounts toxins, most evidence is comprised of some misleading elements. Medical researchers protect the privacy of some patients with details that misdirect attempts to identify them. The authors sometimes frankly admit to doing this in their prefaces.

The Alaskan trapper objects: "The threat is that the packet contains a *big* dose of poison."

The toxicologist replies that a small amount of misleading evidence often suffices for persuasion. Just as effective liars lie as little as possible, effective misleaders minimize their distortions. If the packet is

deceptive, the lobbyist probably slanted the evidence just enough to achieve the purpose at hand.

The toxicologist then introduces a synergistic theme:

Mixtures of distinct toxins need not be toxic.

Combining sodium with chloride yields the non-poison sodium chloride. Mixtures of misleading evidence need not misleading.

The toxicologist once attended a party in which the three congressmen from Nebraska became tipsy:

My wife and I bet made a bet with the Congressman from Reno, Nevada: All three of the Nebraskans mixed up each other's hats. While in the men's room, I learned that the first Nebraskan took the second Nebraskan's hat. That gave me evidence that all of the Nebraskan congressmen mixed up each other's hats. While in the women's room, my wife learned that the second Nebraskan took the first Nebraskan's hat. That gave her evidence that all of the Nebraskans mixed up each other's hats. But when we shared evidence, we realized that the third Nebraskan must be wearing his own hat. Thus pooling misleading evidence *against* a hypothesis led to conclusive evidence *in favor* of that hypothesis.

The toxicologist concludes: 'In view of this synergistic effect, any principle that permits you to discard misleading evidence entails loss of some non-misleading evidence.'

The Meta-Evidential Dissolution

A New York congressman breaks into the conversation: "As a former stock market trader, I learned the importance of "discounting" news. When I get a tip that good news will be announced, I buy the stock before the announcement. Since other investors may also get the tip, the price of stock may not rise after the good news is announced. Bottom-line: your aide's warning backfired! When you learned that there is evidence against global warming in the packet, you must have lowered your confidence."

You find yourself squeezing the packet to check whether there is anything in it. Senator Joseph McCarthy often had no evidence for his charges of communist spying. (He failed to catch a single spy.) But he would provide evidence that he had evidence (holding up files, envelopes, and so forth). McCarthy hoped that this would frighten the witness into providing some genuine evidence.

This existential concern makes you think twice about Richard Feldman's slogan "Evidence of evidence is evidence". This slogan is correct for the special case of *conclusive* evidence. But on the weaker reading, evidence of evidence is compatible with there being no first order evidence.

You also recall Brandon Fitelson's criticism of Feldman's slogan. Given that probability-raising suffices for evidence, there will be counterexamples that exploit the intransitivity of 'makes probable'. Fitelson (2012, 85) gives the following example: The fact that a randomly chosen card from a deck is black raises the probability that the card is the Ace of Spades. And it being the Ace of Spades raises the probability that it is an ace. But the fact the card is black does not raise the probability of it being an ace. Fitelson adapts this intransitivity to various narrowings of the slogan.

But perhaps the most powerful objection to Richard Feldman's slogan is the example of misleading evidence itself. Evidence that someone has misleading evidence against global warming is not evidence against global warming. This holds independently of how well the misleading evidence is crafted. News that the case is so well crafted that anyone who examined it would be rationally persuaded should have no impact. All you need to know is that the evidence is misleading.

The Reflection Dissolution

The congressman from Princeton, New Jersey is a former student of Bas van Fraassen. He offers another dissolution: "The reflection principle requires you to believe what you anticipate believing in the future. You believe that after you open the packet you will no longer regard the packet's

evidence as misleading. So your present belief should be that the packet does not have misleading evidence. This conflicts with the puzzle's stipulation that you now believe that the evidence is misleading. A rational agent cannot have contradictory beliefs about whether the evidence is misleading. So the packet puzzle is incoherent."

The congressman from Colorado complains that it is the dissolution that is incoherent: "The packet puzzle involves only a *possible* future-you. To activate the reflection principle, you must decide to open the packet. But then the putative problem-dissolver is presupposing that the puzzle has a correct solution: open the packet. In addition to begging the question, the problem is dissolved only if it is solved."

The Moorean Dissolution

A congressman from Cambridge, Massachusetts recalls how G. E. Moore persuaded most philosophers that one cannot rationally believe 'It is raining but I do not believe it'. Moore observed that the past version is unproblematic. But the congressman recalls, "In 1995, Luc Bovens claimed that the future tense version is as problematic as the present tense version. This should make Bovens deny the coherency of the packet puzzle. For the puzzle implies the credibility of an analogue of the future tense Moorean sentence. 'p but maybe I will not believe p.' (where p equals 'The earth is warming'). After all, the present tense counterpart is odd:

`p but maybe I do not believe p'. The future tense modal version is envisaging a possible failure of the reflection principle. If the principle holds, it holds necessarily."

The congressman from Colorado is also a former a teacher. She notes that one solution to the surprise test paradox does assume that these future tense modalized sentences are credible – even knowable. Consider the teacher's announcement that there will be a surprise test next week. The students know the announcement is true because of the teacher's authority (add a nice track record if that is not enough). So a clever student begins an elimination argument: "If there is no test after Thursday, then we will know that the test is on Friday.". The student is mistakenly assuming that he will continue to know the announcement. But the announcement is a disjunction of error statements:

A: Either the test is on Monday but you do not believe it before Monday, or the test is on Wednesday but you do not believe it before Wednesday, or the test is on Friday but you do not believe it before Friday.

Combining knowledge of announcement with there being no test by Thursday entails an instance of Moore's paradox: `The test is on Friday but you do not believe it before Friday'. Since that statement cannot be rationally believed, one

cannot believe anything that rationally entails it. Thus the student cannot continue to know the announcement (given that he continues to know his memory of testless days is correct.)

The Massachusettsan objects: "If there is no test on Thursday, there would be disagreement between ideal thinkers. The conjunction of the announcement and the record of testless days implies the last disjunct of (A). Since this a Moorean sentence to the student but not his mother, she is free to believe it."

The Coloradan is defiant: "Indeed, mom may believe it because her son cannot believe it. If he comes to doubt that there will be test, he is vulnerable to being surprised by the test."

Personalized Epistemic Landscapes

A congressman from California concurs with the Coloradan: "Each individual has a unique set of accessible propositions. We are sagebrushes poised on different terrains. The same gust of evidential wind can cause one of us roll to right and the other to roll to the left. We should only expect movement in the same direction when there happens to be no difference in terrain."

The Californian picture of epistemic space suggests perspectival pluralism about rational belief changes. Peers can disagree simply because they are distinct individuals.

What applies between people also applies between different stages of the same person – and especially between a person and his potential continuations. Even when evidence is conserved over time, our ability to fruitfully marshal that evidence can decline. These declines can occur without any decline of rationality. So we are entitled to circumvent declines through the kind of gate keeping techniques applied by journalists and judges. Their rationales for gate keeping do not require them to attribute irrationality to readers or jurors. Your rationale for gatekeeping can be equally concessive to the rationality of your potential future selves.

The subway ride is nearing its destination. The conversation is over. Need a light?

References

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