

# Level separation in epistemology

## Abstract

This paper introduces and defends the approach of level separation within epistemology. Roughly put, level separation holds that the rationality of inquiry does not determine the rationality of the attitudes that inquiry produces. Instead, the rationality of both inquiry and the resulting attitudes must be separately determined by distinct applications of the norms governing each. I show how level separation is already used within epistemology to protect state norms from procedural defeat as well as to relocate wrong-kind reasons for doxastic attitudes. Then I show how level separation can be used to give attractive treatments of transitional attitudes and rational delay. I address an objection to level separation due to Susanna Rinard, then conclude with lessons for future research.

## 1 Introduction

Consider three questions raised by recent work in epistemology:

**(Rational delay)** May agents rationally delay updating their beliefs in response to new evidence on the grounds that it takes time to think through the implications of new evidence? (Meacham 2015; Na'aman 2021a; Podgorski 2017)

**(Transitional attitudes)** What attitudes may agents rationally take towards the targets of active inquiry? (Friedman 2017; Palmira 2020; Staffel forthcoming)

**(The epistemic and the zetetic)** Could rational inquiry ever produce beliefs which violate traditional epistemic norms? (Flores and Woodard 2023; Friedman 2020; Thorstad 2021)

My aim in this paper is to suggest that all of these questions can be given a unified, principled and explanatorily powerful answer. That answer invokes a strict *level separation* between normative questions about rational attitudes and normative questions about rational processes of inquiry. Roughly put, level separation holds that the rationality of inquiry does not determine the rationality of the attitudes that inquiry produces. Instead,

the rationality of both inquiry and the resulting attitudes must be separately determined by distinct applications of the norms governing each.

Although level separation is commonly invoked in practical philosophy (Driver 2012; Kagan 2000; Parfit 1984), it is less commonly invoked within epistemology and is sometimes overlooked entirely in epistemological discussions. Recent work by David Thorstad (2021) gives a preliminary statement of level separation and applies the view to problems in bounded rationality (Thorstad 2022a,b, 2024) as well as to the relationship between epistemic and zetetic norms (Thorstad 2021, forthcoming). My aim in this paper is to give a full statement of level separation and make the case for more expansive use of level separation within epistemology.

Here is the plan. Section 2 introduces and motivates level separation. Section 3 illustrates two ways in which level separation is already invoked within practical and theoretical philosophy: to protect state norms from procedural defeat (Section 3.1) and to relocate wrong-kind reasons for attitudes (Section 3.2). Sections 4-5 show how level separation can be used to give attractive treatments of transitional attitudes (Section 4) and rational delay (Section 5). Section 6 addresses an objection due to Susanna Rinard (2019). Section 7 concludes.

## 2 Level separation

In the 1970s, many philosophers held that consequentialism is self-refuting.<sup>1</sup> To see the problem, suppose you are shopping for coffee beans. There are many varieties of beans on the shelf. One, the Sumatra, is slightly better than the others. Let *A* be the action of buying the Sumatra. Consequentialists say that you ought to intend to do *A*.

How should you deliberate about which coffee beans to buy? Consequentialists typically deny that you should explicitly calculate the expected utilities of each option (Parfit 1984; Railton 1984). Instead, you might employ a simpler procedure, perhaps choosing

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<sup>1</sup>See (Bales 1971) for a good discussion of early arguments, and (Parfit 1984; Railton 1984) for the orthodox response.

the first in-budget single-origin beans that smell nice and are familiar to you. If you deliberate in this way, you will often choose a high-quality option. But sometimes, you will pick something other than the Sumatra — perhaps the Yirgacheffe. Let  $B$  be the action of buying the Yirgacheffe.

Here we have a puzzle since consequentialism says that you should intend to do  $A$ , but deliberate in a way that will sometimes lead you to intend  $B$  instead. This has seemed self-undermining or self-refuting to many critics. How could it be that rational inquiry leads you to intend  $B$ , yet you are rationally required to intend  $A$  and rationally forbidden from intending  $B$ ? We will see in Section 6 how this argument might be extended to an argument that consequentialism violates the principle that ought implies can. Checkmate, consequentialists?

Most consequentialists have thought that this criticism is too hasty. To see why, we will need a bit of machinery (Kagan 2000). There are various *evaluative focal points*, or objects of normative assessment, including intentions and deliberation procedures. At each focal point, we can apply *evaluative terms* such as ‘rational’, ‘ought’ or ‘blameworthy’.

We might represent the facts about rationality in our coffee-buying case as in Figure 1. Here the agent’s deliberation procedure is rational, because expected utility maximizing, but her resulting intention is irrational, because not expected utility maximizing. There is something troubling about this situation, but what is it?

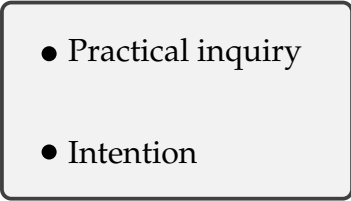


Figure 1: Intention and practical inquiry

We might expand Figure 1 to represent other focal points, such as belief, in Figure 2. It may turn out that the agent’s coffee-related beliefs are rational, or that they are irrational. But neither verdict seems to be in tension with our judgments about the rationality of the agent’s intentions or practical inquiries. We don’t bat an eye at saying that someone had

rational beliefs about coffee but intended or acted irrationally anyways. For this reason, Figure 2 represents belief as orthogonal to intention, but practical inquiry as bearing some hierarchical relationship to intention. This hierarchical relationship is what makes us uncomfortable about a mismatch between rationality at the evaluative focal points ‘intention’ and ‘practical inquiry’, but not uncomfortable about mismatch between either of these focal points and ‘belief’. But what does this hierarchical relationship represent?

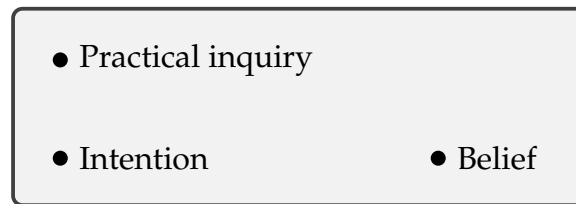


Figure 2: Belief, intention and practical inquiry

Consequentialists have not always theorized explicitly about the relationship in question, but in this paper I adopt a proposal due to David Thorstad (Thorstad 2021). Say that focal point  $X$  *governs* focal point  $Y$  if members of the governed class  $Y$  are typically produced and modified by members of the governing class  $X$ . Practical inquiry governs intention because practical inquiry is the process through which intentions are typically produced and modified. However, belief does not govern intention: although beliefs enter into practical deliberation, it would not be right to say that typical intentions are directly produced and modified by beliefs. That role belongs to practical inquiry.

Thorstad proposes that the tension which troubles us occurs when the same evaluative term occurs with different valence across governing focal points. For example, our coffee buyer inquires rationally but intends irrationally, giving rise to tension across governing focal points. This seems troubling, because the very same process of practical inquiry through which intentions are typically produced and modified led through fully rational inquiry to an irrational intention. Thorstad calls tension of this sort *level tension* because governing focal points are diagrammatically represented a level above the focal points they govern.

Traditionally, consequentialists have reacted to level tension in one of two ways. In-

direct consequentialists have reacted by linking the normative status of governed focal points, such as intention, to the normative status of governing points, such as practical inquiry (Adams 1976; Brandt 1959; Harsanyi 1977). For example, we might say that an intention is rational just in case it results from a rational process of practical inquiry (Figure 3).

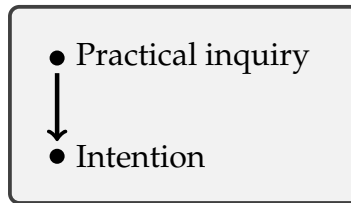


Figure 3: Indirect consequentialism

By contrast, direct consequentialists have reacted by retaining level tension, arguing that level tension is not a contradiction but rather an important fact about normative theory (Driver 2012; Kagan 2000; Parfit 1984). On this view, there is some tension between the statements that our coffee buyer inquired rationally and intended irrationally. However, this tension is not a contradiction and should be treated as an important feature of the normative landscape.

Direct consequentialism allows us to directly apply normative theories at each focal point. For example, we can say as I did above that a practical inquiry is rational just in case it is expected utility maximizing, and that an intention is rational just in case it is expected utility maximizing as well. Or, if we like, we can apply different normative theories directly at each focal point. We could, for example, couple a fittingness-based account of rational attitudes with a consequentialist account of rational inquiry.

Direct consequentialism is one of many ways to apply a strict *level separation* between governing focal points. Level separation involves postulating separate normative theories governing each focal point, then directly applying the relevant normative theory at each focal point, rather than evaluating the normative status of some focal points in terms of the normative status of other focal points.

Thorstad (2021) notes that theoretical inquiry governs belief in exactly the same way

that practical inquiry governs intention (Figure 4). Just as seemingly rational practical inquiry can give rise to seemingly irrational intentions, seemingly rational theoretical inquiry can give rise to seemingly irrational beliefs (Friedman 2020). Thorstad (2021) recommends we apply a strict level separation not only to practical inquiry and intention, but also to theoretical inquiry and belief. This allows us to retain traditional normative theories of rational belief, such as evidentialism or coherentism, while adopting any theory of rational inquiry on offer (Falbo 2023; Kelp 2021; Willard-Kyle 2023), including an instrumentalist (Cowie 2014; Friedman 2018; Steglich-Petersen forthcoming) or consequentialist theory (Stich 1990; Thorstad 2024; Schurz and Hertwig 2019).

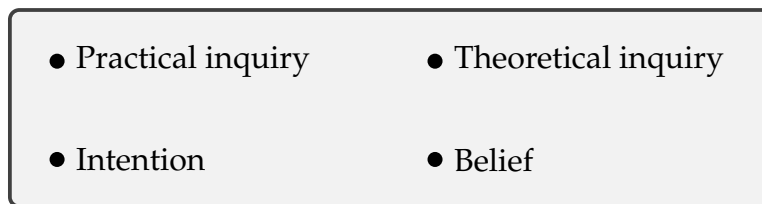


Figure 4: Belief, intention and their governing points

I think that level separation is a productive approach that should be judged in large part by what it can do for epistemology. My primary project in this paper is to illustrate two new areas of epistemology in which level separation gives plausible and explanatorily powerful results (Sections 4-5). However, it is worth recalling that level separation already plays an important role in epistemology paralleling its role in practical philosophy.

### 3 Traditional applications of level separation

In this section, I give two examples to illustrate what level separation currently does for epistemology. Many readers may already accept the applications in question, in which case they may already have reason to accept level separation. In each example, I show how the same application is realized in both practical and theoretical philosophy in order to draw support from practical applications of level separation as well.

### 3.1 Protecting state norms from procedural defeat

Many approaches to practical rationality allow that an inquiry can be rational even if it leads to an irrational intention. We saw one case of this phenomenon in Section 2, where mainline consequentialists allow that an expected-utility-maximizing practical inquiry need not produce an expected-utility-maximizing intention. Without level separation, this leads to a quick charge that consequentialism is self-defeating, and in fact the same charge has been leveled against many non-consequentialist views (Stocker 1976). However, we saw that level separation removes the danger of self-defeat by allowing consequentialists and others to say without contradiction that the rationality of inquiries may differ from the rationality of the intentions they produce.

In the theoretical domain, Jane Friedman (2020) has made the parallel observation that plausible norms of rational inquiry come apart from received theories of rational belief. For example, while you are busy counting windows it may be irrational to inquire about other matters because this would distract from your larger inquiry. This verdict follows from norms such as:

**(Zetetic Instrumental Principle (ZIP))** If one wants to figure out  $Q^?$ , then one ought to take the necessary means to figuring out  $Q^?$ . (Friedman 2020, p. 503)

Inquiring about unrelated matters is irrational, according to ZIP, because focusing on the question at hand is a necessary means to answering it.

However, if you were to irrationally interrupt your window-counting to form evidentially supported beliefs about other matters, those beliefs would count as rational by the lights of evidentialism and many other theories of rational belief. This verdict follows from norms such as:

**(EP<sub>a</sub>)** If one has excellent evidence for  $p$  at  $t$ , then one is permitted to judge  $p$  at  $t$ . (Friedman 2020, p. 504)

So long as you have excellent evidence for unrelated propositions, EP<sub>a</sub> permits you to judge them true.

Friedman (2020) suggests that these verdicts show a deep tension between plausible norms of rational inquiry and traditional norms of rational belief. Friedman suggests that this tension should plausibly be resolved by rejecting traditional norms of rational belief.

By contrast, Thorstad (2021) notes that level separation allows us to capture both verdicts in Friedman's cases without revising traditional norms of rational belief. Given level separation, it is not a contradiction to say that a wasteful inquiry would be irrational, even if it would lead to a belief that is rational because evidentially supported. Norms of inquiry such as ZIP are fully compatible with traditional epistemic norms so long as they are understood in their traditional sense as norms governing belief.

For example, we might hold:

**(EP<sub>b</sub>)** If one has excellent evidence for  $p$  at  $t$ , then one is permitted to believe  $p$  at  $t$ .

By ZIP, an agent who interrupted their window-counting would inquire rationally, even if the belief that she formed was evidentially supported and thereby rational by  $EP_b$ . This is not a contradiction so long as we do not read evidentialism as a norm governing inquiry, along the lines of:

**(EP<sub>i</sub>)** If one has excellent evidence for  $p$  at  $t$ , then one is permitted to initiate some process of inquiry at  $t$  terminating in the belief that  $p$ .

$EP_i$  would permit an agent to initiate the same irrelevant inquiry that ZIP forbids. However,  $EP_b$  does not permit this or any other inquiry.

Following evidentialist orthodoxy (Feldman 2000), a level-separated approach denies  $EP_i$  because it interprets evidentialism as a claim about rational belief rather than a claim about rational inquiry. The fact that a wastefully irrational and distracting inquiry would terminate in a rational belief does not change the fact that this inquiry is irrational.

In this way, Thorstad argues, level separation protects traditional norms of rational belief from procedurally driven challenges in exactly the same way that it protects traditional norms of rational intention from the same challenges.



### 3.2 Relocating wrong-kind reasons

What reasons bear on whether I should intend to drink a bottle of toxins (Kavka 1983)? Two categories of reasons suggest themselves. On the one hand, there are unproblematic reasons such as the fact that toxins will harm me and the fact that they taste bad. On the other hand, we can conjure up strange apparent reasons for intending to drink toxins, such as the fact that you will pay me a million dollars for intending to drink them or that my so intending will make you happy. There is something intuitively more problematic about reasons in the second class, which has led philosophers to label them as reasons of the wrong kind, as opposed to the reasons in the first class, which appear to be of the right kind to rationalize intention (Gertken and Kiesewetter 2017; Hieronimi 2005; Parfit 2011).

Much ink has been spilled on the nature and importance of the distinction between right- and wrong-kinds of reasons (Gertken and Kiesewetter 2017; Hieronimi 2005; Schroeder 2012). But one prominent tradition has it that:

**(WKR Skepticism)** Apparent wrong-kind reasons for attitudes are actually reasons for something else. (Gibbard 1990; Kolodny 2005; Way 2012)

WKR skeptics press this case by noting that wrong-kind reasons for intention lack some features we might expect reasons for intention to have. For example, wrong-kind reasons cannot easily motivate intention, do not figure directly in deliberation about what to intend, and seem intuitively less apt to be reasons for intention (Schroeder 2012).

Instead, skeptics hold, apparent wrong-kind reasons for intention are actually reasons to *get oneself to intend* to drink a toxin. This is accomplished through various processes, including inquiry. I might, for example, reflect on the good features of the toxin or the bad features of life in order to help myself acquire an intention to drink the toxin. Applying level separation, we may admit that such an inquiry is rational while denying that the resulting intention to drink a toxin is rational.

Similar questions arise in epistemology. What reasons bear on whether I should believe that I am a good dancer? On the one hand, there are unproblematic reasons such as my

knowledge of dancing or the compliments I have received on my dancing. On the other hand, there are more controversial reasons such as the fact that believing I am a good dancer will make me confident and happy. Traditionally, epistemologists have held that these apparent practical reasons for belief are not, in fact, reasons to believe I am a good dancer, but rather reasons to get myself to believe I am a good dancer. They have held this on much the same grounds as in the practical case: apparent practical reasons for belief may not play the right role in motivation (Kelly 2002, 2003) or deliberation (Shah 2003, 2006), and seem intuitively less apt to be reasons for belief (Firth 1956).

As before, this view applies level separation to allow that it may be rational to inquire in a way that leads me to believe that I am a good dancer, while denying that it is rational for me to believe I am a good dancer, since I have abundant evidence that I am a terrible dancer. This line of argument has been viewed as an integral part of the defense of evidentialism and other traditional epistemic norms, providing a principled reason for the traditional view that apparent practical reasons for belief are actually reasons to get oneself to believe and thereby avoiding pragmatic encroachment on rational belief (Kelly 2003; Singh 2021). And here the appeal to level separation is unavoidable, since inquiry governs belief, yet it may be rational to inquire in a way that leads me to believe something which is irrational for me to believe. If we want to retain this traditional argument, we need to appeal to level separation.

### **3.3 Taking stock**

So far, we have seen how level separation can be applied within theoretical and practical philosophy to protect state norms from procedural defeat and to relocate apparent wrong-kind reasons for attitudes as right-kind reasons to get oneself to hold attitudes. But these applications are familiar. What else can level separation do for us? In the next two sections, I show how level separation can be applied to give attractive treatments of transitional attitudes (Section 4) and rational delay (Section 5).

## 4 Transitional attitudes

### 4.1 Two types of rationality

Julia Staffel distinguishes between *transitional attitudes* held towards the objects of ongoing deliberation and *terminal attitudes* held as conclusions of deliberation (Staffel 2019, 2021a,b, forthcoming). On Staffel's view, the function of terminal attitudes is to represent the world. By contrast, transitional attitudes function as mere placeholders for the agent's position in an ongoing process of reasoning. This functional difference between transitional and terminal attitudes gives rise to descriptive and normative differences between them.

Staffel holds that transitional attitudes typically differ from terminal attitudes in three descriptive respects. Terminal attitudes are relatively stable, are used to guide action and to update other attitudes. By contrast, transitional attitudes are relatively less stable, are less available to guide action, and may not be used to update other attitudes until deliberation has been completed.

Staffel also holds that transitional attitudes differ from terminal attitudes in other respects. Consider:

**(Framed)** Manny has committed a murder, and tries to frame Fred for it. Detective Fletcher, upon initially inspecting the evidence, responds as Manny has planned, and becomes 90% confident that Fred committed the murder. However, as she evaluates the evidence more carefully, she discovers incongruencies that ultimately lead her to conclude that Fred was framed, so she reduces her confidence that Fred is the murderer to 5%. (Staffel 2021a, p. 387)

Staffel takes it as a datum that Manny's initial 90% credence in Fred's guilt is rational given Manny's current stage of reasoning. However, leading theories of epistemic rationality imply that Manny's initial credence is irrational, for example because it is not supported by Manny's total evidence. To explain the datum requires a new normative theory.

Staffel holds that transitional attitudes are governed by a distinctive type of *pro tem*

rationality, to be distinguished from the *pro toto* rationality governing terminal attitudes. Although traditional theories may give correct accounts of *pro toto* rationality, Staffel holds that they are inadequate accounts of *pro tem* rationality because they wrongly classify the beliefs of agents such as Manny as irrational.

Staffel offers the following account of *pro tem* propositional rationality:

**(Pro Tem Propositional Rationality)** A doxastic transitional attitude  $d$  is *pro tem* rational for an agent to adopt towards an answer to some question  $q$  at some time  $t$  just in case

- (I) The agent adopts  $d$  while using a permissible cognitive process to settle the question  $q$ , where a permissible cognitive process (or combination of processes) is one that gives the agent a sufficiently high probability of reaching a doxastically rational terminal attitude, given the input attitude to the process(es); and
- (II) At  $t$ ,  $d$  is supported by the combination of (a) the truth-relevant evidence the agent has considered up to  $t$ , (b) the agent's take on the logical and probabilistic relevance of this evidence for  $q$  at  $t$ ; and
- (III) Evidence regarding the quality of the agent's reasoning up to  $t$  is factored into  $d$  when level-merging [combined consideration of first- and higher-order evidence] is beneficial. (Staffel forthcoming)

Staffel shows how this account may be extended to a theory of *pro tem* doxastic rationality, although the details fall beyond the scope of this paper.

Below, I offer (Section 4.2) and evaluate (Section 4.3) an alternative level-separated approach.

## 4.2 A level-separated alternative

If we accept level separation, then we may readily grant the datum that:

**(Something Rational in Framed)** There is an important sense in which Manny cognizes rationally in Framed.

But we cannot treat as an uncontroversial datum the claim that:

**(Credence Rational in Framed)** Manny's initial credence is rational in Framed.

Credence Rational in Framed is not an uncontroversial datum, since it directly contradicts most leading theories of rational credence including evidentialism. Instead, a level-separated alternative vindicates Something Rational in Framed by holding that Manny's process of inquiry is rational. Just as a rational process of inquiry may produce irrational attitudes at the conclusion of inquiry, it may likewise produce irrational attitudes during the course of inquiry. We may argue that these attitudes are blamelessly irrational, but they remain irrational nonetheless.

On this alternative view, both terminal and transitional attitudes play a unified function: to represent the world. Doxastic attitudes are intentional attitudes with a world-to-mind direction of fit. Doxastic attitudes succeed in their function when they correctly represent the world. While attitudes may become more likely to serve their representational function successfully as inquiry proceeds, it remains true that the agent's earliest transitional attitudes are her best attempt to represent the world as it is. This view concedes the causal fact that an agent's doxastic attitudes are determined by her current place in reasoning. However, it does not equate this causal fact with the representational function of doxastic attitudes, which is to represent their intentional objects and not their own causal origins.

A level-separated approach draws on traditional explanations for the descriptive data marshaled by Staffel, rather than explaining these data in terms of a novel functional role for transitional attitudes. While the correct explanation of each datum remains an object of ongoing debate, there are good options for a level-separated approach to explain each datum.

Begin with stability. A level-separated approach offers three reasons to expect terminal attitudes to be more stable than transitional attitudes. First, transitional attitudes are the targets of ongoing processes of inquiry whose typical effect is to modify agents' attitudes towards the question under consideration. Second, because terminal attitudes are formed at the conclusion of inquiry, they tend to be better supported and hence more difficult to overturn. Finally, on many views the attitudes that conclude inquiry come with a commitment to resist reopening inquiry without good reason (Bratman 1987; Fraser forthcoming; Holton 2014). This commitment contributes additional stability to terminal attitudes.

Turn next to action guidance. A level-separated approach can explain at least two ways in which transitional attitudes are less available to guide action than terminal attitudes are. First, agents who hold transitional attitudes may prefer to postpone decisionmaking until deliberation is concluded. This is traditionally explained by the fact that agents have the option to postpone decisionmaking rather than choosing immediately, and should take this option when the expected value of information yielded by additional deliberation exceeds expected costs.

A second way in which transitional attitudes are less available to guide action is that agents may be more willing to treat terminal attitudes as premises in deliberation about how to act. In the case of belief, this can be explained if we take on board two premises. First, it is appropriate for agents to take full beliefs, but not non-beliefs as premises in practical deliberation (Ross and Schroeder 2014; Williamson 2000). Second, inquiry is descriptively or normatively incompatible with full belief (Fraser forthcoming; Friedman 2019; Millson 2021). It follows that appropriate premises for practical deliberation must be full beliefs, and hence must be terminal attitudes. This explanation is, of course, controversial, but readers who deny one or more premises may wish to deny the datum.

Turn finally to updating. It is not uncontroversial to say that transitional attitudes are less apt to be used to update other beliefs than terminal attitudes are. Many leading approaches in Bayesian cognitive science such as hierarchical Bayesian approaches (Friston

2010; Howhy 2013) and even leading theories of resource-rationality (Icard ms; Lieder and Griffiths 2020) often treat updating as relatively costless, rapid, and continuously performed. However, those who wish to deny that attitudes formed during reasoning are always used to update other beliefs have many explanations at their disposal. They may point to limits on cognitive resources and updating abilities, the expectation that beliefs will soon change and require further updates, or the lack of pressing practical need to perform a full update. Staffel herself appeals to many of these same factors. But precisely for this reason, there are ample resources to explain why transitional attitudes might be less apt to be used during updating without positing a functional or normative difference between transitional and terminal attitudes. We might for example hold that given scarce resources and abilities, agents must update rarely, and given the relatively high likelihood that transitional attitudes will be revised soon, it would be irrationally wasteful to update upon transitional attitudes unless there were an immediate and pressing need to do so.

### **4.3 Evaluating the alternative**

The level-separated explanation of the function, norms and descriptive characteristics of transitional attitudes has three important advantages. First, it is parsimonious. We do not need to posit a new type of attitude, a new type of rationality, a new normative theory, or a new functional role for doxastic attitudes in order to accept the level-separated view.

Second, the view is continuous with existing normative and descriptive theories. Normatively speaking, level separation retains compatibility with traditional epistemological theories such as evidentialism by separating the rationality of deliberative processes from the rationality of attitudes formed during deliberation. Level separation also preserves a traditional view on which doxastic attitudes have a world-to-mind direction of fit, function to represent the world, and succeed in their function when they correctly represent the world.

Descriptively speaking, level separation draws on a number of descriptive views that many philosophers already accept, including views about the role of belief in reasoning,

the attitudes and commitments that settle inquiry, and the option to postpone decision-making in order to gather further evidence. If Staffel takes these explanations to be descriptively adequate, then there is no need for further explanation, and if they are taken to be descriptively inadequate, then there is a real risk of producing descriptive theories which force revision of existing descriptive views.

Finally, Staffel (forthcoming) notes that transitional attitudes do not always differ categorically from terminal attitudes in their stability, action-guidance, and role in updating. First, there is often a graded structure whereby transitional attitudes begin to function increasingly like terminal attitudes as the end of deliberation nears. Second, in edge cases some transitional attitudes may play many descriptive roles more strongly than some terminal attitudes do. It would be good to have a principled explanation for these data. Why do the descriptive differences between terminal attitudes seem to come in degrees? Why do they lessen as the end of inquiry nears? And why can they reverse in edge cases? The descriptive explanations offered by a level-separated view give plausible explanations of the graded differences between transitional and terminal attitudes which explain why these differences tend to lessen as inquiry progresses, and why they sometimes reverse.

Consider, for example, stability. Let *B* be a transitional attitude formed near the end of a very rigorous, demanding, and lengthy inquiry. Plausibly, *B* becomes increasingly stable as inquiry nears its end, since ongoing inquiry is less likely to reveal new insights. Now let *C* be a terminal attitude formed at the conclusion of a less-demanding, everyday inquiry. *C* has some stability advantages over *B*, since *C* may come with a commitment to resist reopening inquiry, whereas *B* is the target of ongoing inquiry.

However, these advantages may well be offset by the fact that *B* results from the more careful consideration of a greater quantity of dispositive evidence, such that it is unlikely that anything could come to light that would significantly revise *B*. This explanation follows naturally from the idea that the typical instability of transitional attitudes is driven by their being the targets of active inquiry, resulting from less thorough consideration of less-dispositive evidence, and lacking a commitment to reopen inquiry.



At least one of these drivers, thoroughness of evidence and consideration, can come apart from the distinction between transitional and terminal attitudes. When it does, transitional attitudes may be more stable than terminal attitudes are.

If this is right, then level separation offers an attractive alternative to Staffel's theory of transitional and terminal attitudes. This alternative allows beliefs to retain their traditional functional role of representing the world and to be subject to traditional normative theories. A level-separated alternative explains why there is something importantly rational in cases such as Framed, while also offering a nuanced and traditional descriptive explanation of the differences between transitional and terminal attitudes. This explanation has the advantage of allowing us to explain the graded structure of the descriptive data as well as edge cases in which the descriptive data reverse.

In the next section, I show how level separation can be applied to account for another phenomenon: rational delay. Importantly, level separation will offer an attractive re-interpretation not only of the original phenomenon (Sections 5.1-5.2), but also of applications to which this phenomenon has been pressed (Sections 5.3-5.4).

## **5 Rational delay**

In a series of papers, Abelard Podgorski has defended a process-oriented view on which all fundamental epistemic norms are norms governing processes (Podgorski 2016a,b,c,d, 2017). Podgorski has applied this view to formulate novel versions of traditional views such as epistemic conservatism (Podgorski 2016a) and epistemic permissivism (Podgorski 2016b). Podgorski's arguments have been extended by others to develop a procedural account of rational emotions (Na'aman 2021a,b).

In this section, I present Podgorski's view and an application of that view to epistemic conservatism. I give a level-separated alternative and argue that it has important advantages over Podgorski's process-oriented approach.

## 5.1 Rational delay

Abelard Podgorski argues that theories of rational attitudes should accommodate:

**(Rational Delay)** It takes time for agents like us to update our attitudes in response to changes in our mental state. (Podgorski 2017, p. 1)

However, Podgorski argues, norms governing attitudes cannot easily accommodate rational delay.

Consider, for example, the synchronic requirement to hold the attitudes we have most reason to hold:

**(Synchronic State-Oriented Reasons)** If an agent's reasons favor attitude  $X$  at  $t$ , she is rationally required to have  $X$  at  $t$ . If her reasons disfavor attitude  $X$  at  $t$ , she is rationally required not to have  $X$  at  $t$ . (Podgorski 2017, p. 3)

For example, evidentialists hold that reasons for belief are provided by an agent's total evidence. It follows from Synchronic State-Oriented Reasons that agents are rationally required to believe what their current evidence supports.

As Podgorski notes, Synchronic State-Oriented Reasons makes no room for rational delay. When an agent's reasons change, for example because she receives new evidence, the attitude that it is rational for her to hold immediately changes. No grace period is allowed for attitudinal adjustment. Podgorski argues that other leading synchronic norms likewise fail to make room for rational delay.

Perhaps diachronic norms fare better? We might, for example, build an interval of rational delay into a diachronic version of Synchronic State-Oriented Reasons. We might account for the interval of delay in terms of the agent's cognitive abilities. And we might include a placeholder for events which change or delay the requirements of rationality in the interim. We would then arrive at something like the following:

**(Diachronic State-Oriented Reasons\* (DSR\*))** An agent is rationally required, if her reasons favor attitude  $X$  at  $t_1$  and  $t_2 - t_1$  is a duration appropriate to

the agent's cognitive abilities as applied to the problem under consideration, and no cancelling or delaying event happens between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  to preclude or forestall the need to form  $X$ , to have attitude  $X$  at  $t_2$ . (Podgorski 2017, p. 12)

For example, agents might be required to conditionalize on new evidence in an interval of time equal to the duration required for them to feasibly conditionalize.

However, Podgorski argues, DSR\* does not look like a good candidate for a fundamental epistemic norm. When we ask questions about the parameters in DSR\*, these questions are increasingly answered by citing procedural norms. For example, I might equally well have begun by stating the procedural norm that agents are rationally required to apply a cognitive process of conditionalization in order to update their beliefs, whose duration is as short as feasible. Agents who follow this procedural norm would also conform to DSR\*, with the interval  $t_2 - t_1$  read directly from the interval of the rational process. Other parameters in DSR\*, such as the nature and importance of cancelling and delaying events, would likewise be read off from the procedural norm.

But if compliance with diachronic state norms follows automatically from compliance with norms governing processes, and if fundamental parameters in state norms are read directly off of procedural norms, it becomes increasingly tempting to view norms governing processes as the fundamental epistemic norms. Therefore, Podgorski proposes a process-oriented picture of rationality:

**(Process-oriented picture)** Rationality does not fundamentally govern states of mind like belief or intention at all. It governs processes such as reasoning and deliberation. (Podgorski 2017, p. 12)

On the process-oriented picture, there are no fundamental epistemic norms governing belief. We can, perhaps, say in some derivative sense that beliefs are rational when they result from rational processes. But this should be understood as a weak and non-fundamental shadow of the more fundamental norms governing attitudes.

Podgorski notes that the process-oriented picture has at least two advantages. First, it accommodates rational delay since rational processes take time to execute. Second, it allows us to explain and derive norms governing belief. There is no need to directly specify parameters such as the interval of rational delay in diachronic state norms. We can simply ask after the duration of the rational process, then put this as the interval of rational delay.

## 5.2 Process norms without process-orientation

Advocates of level separation can agree with Podgorski in emphasizing the existence of norms governing processes of belief formation and revision, as exemplified by recent work in the epistemology of inquiry (Friedman 2020; Kelp 2021). They might even argue for one sense in which epistemology should be process-focused: in cases where procedural and attitudinal norms come apart, procedural norms often provide a more complete, charitable and grounded picture of the epistemic lives of agents like us (Morton 2017; Simon 1976; Thorstad 2022b, 2024, forthcoming). However, level separation allows us to say these things without rejecting the existence or fundamentality of norms governing belief.

Although Podgorski states rational delay as a descriptive fact, presumably it is meant to be glossed as a normative datum. As with Staffel's motivating examples, we cannot take the datum to be that *beliefs* are sensitive to rational delay, since this would beg the question against received epistemological views. But we can readily accommodate the datum that there is *something* importantly rational in cases of rational delay. That something will be the processes of deliberation through which agents produce and modify their attitudes. Since ought implies can, rational processes must be processes that agents can execute. Since processes that agents can execute take time, all rational processes exhibit delay.

In this way, level separation accommodates rational delay. It also has three further advantages. First, the account is faithful to linguistic and philosophical practice. In our philosophical lives as well as our daily interactions, we regularly speak in normative terms

about belief, often saying directly of a belief that it is rational or justified. On a process-oriented picture, this talk cannot be taken at face value as expressing fundamental norms of rationality. Instead, it must be re-glossed, perhaps as a useful way of getting traction on processes of belief-formation which are difficult to directly introspect or discuss. By contrast, level separation allows us to take ordinary talk and philosophical theorizing at face value. When we say that a belief is rational, this is because there is a genuine standard of rationality governing belief that the belief has met.

Second, just as level separation poses no obstacle to the existence of norms governing belief, it also poses no obstacle to their fundamentality. Because level separation does not incorporate rational delay into attitudinal norms, we are not forced to posit unsightly and seemingly non-fundamental norms such as Diachronic State-Oriented Reasons\*. Instead, we might defend norms such as the following:

**(Diachronic State-Oriented Reasons)** An agent is rationally required, if her reasons favor attitude  $X$  at  $t_1$ , to have attitude  $X$  at  $t_2$  (some appropriate time after  $t_1$ ). (Podgorski 2017, p. 10)

There is nothing in the form of Diachronic State-Oriented Reasons to suggest it must be derivative on some further procedural norm.

Finally, level separation is non-revisionary. It allows us to write down and defend synchronic attitudinal norms such as evidentialism or diachronic attitudinal norms such as conditionalization and Diachronic State-Oriented Reasons in their standard forms. By contrast, a process-oriented view not only denies the fundamentality of these norms, but also revises them to forms such as Diachronic State-Oriented Reasons\*.

Together, these advantages lend some support to level separation in response to rational delay. We can further assess the case for level separation by considering applications of Podgorski's process-oriented view. A good alternative to process-orientation should continue to yield fruit in areas where Podgorski's process-oriented view has been put to work. Let us see if level separation will do the trick.

### 5.3 Dynamic conservatism

Podgorski asks how we should best formulate epistemic conservatism:

**(Epistemic Conservatism)** The mere fact that one already believes something can positively affect an agent's rationality in believing it going forward. (Podgorski 2016a, p. 349)

Podgorski notes that conservatism is often glossed as a kind of non-evidential justification for belief:

**(Standard Conservatism)** The mere fact that one already believes  $P$  can positively affect whether  $P$  is worth believing in a non-evidential way. (Podgorski 2016a, p. 354)

Podgorski notes that Standard Conservatism faces a number of challenges, of which I will mention three.

First, Standard Conservatism clashes with even weak versions of evidentialism such as the following:

**(Evidence Restriction)** The only considerations that, from the perspective of epistemic rationality, contribute to  $P$ 's being worth believing are *evidential* — they bear positively on the belief's truth. (Podgorski 2016a, p. 355)

Standard Conservatism violates Evidence Restriction by allowing the fact that an agent believes  $p$  to bear on the beliefworthiness of  $p$ .

Second, Standard Conservatism leads to bootstrapping. Suppose that I have nearly enough evidence to support  $p$ . I'm not justified in believing  $p$ . But suppose I believe  $p$  anyways. Now the fact that I believe  $p$  counts in favor of believing  $p$ , perhaps enough to make my belief that  $p$  justified. This strikes many theorists as implausible (Foley 1983; Vogel 2008; White 2006).

Third, Standard Conservatism conflicts with our practices of explicit justification. Many epistemologists think that if some fact counts in favor of my belief that  $p$ , then I should be able to cite that fact in justifying my belief to others. But it would not be appropriate to cite the fact that I believe  $p$  in justifying my belief that  $p$  to others. Many have taken this to suggest that the fact that I believe  $p$  does not count in favor of my belief that  $p$  after all.

Podgorski diagnoses the problem with Standard Conservatism in terms of its commitment to a principle linking rationality to beliefworthiness:

**(State-Oriented Worth Believing)** It is irrational to believe something that is not worth believing (from one's perspective). (Podgorski 2016a, p. 359)

Podgorski suggests that we can do better by replacing State-Oriented Worth Believing with a dynamic principle governing the rational conclusion of deliberation:

**(Dynamic Worth Believing)** It is irrational to conclude consideration of whether  $P$  by forming or reaffirming the belief that  $P$  if  $P$  is not worth believing (from one's own perspective). (Podgorski 2016a, p. 363)

Dynamic Worth Believing accepts that it would be irrational to close inquiry with a belief that is not worth believing, but leaves open the possibility that it may be rational to retain beliefs which are no longer worth believing, so long as those beliefs are not the targets of active inquiry.

Podgorski argues that Dynamic Worth Believing is compatible with Epistemic Conservatism if agents are not always rationally required to reopen deliberation when their evidence changes. This means that agents may rationally form beliefs that are, at the time, worth believing from their own perspective, then rationally fail to revisit them even in some cases where those beliefs are no longer supported by the agent's total evidence. Here the resistance of settled beliefs to reopened deliberation (Fraser forthcoming; Holton 2014) enforces a conservative bias towards those beliefs.

Podgorski argues that Dynamic Worth Believing avoids the drawbacks of Standard Conservatism. First, Podgorski notes that Dynamic Worth Believing allows us to square Epistemic Conservatism with Evidence Requirement if we let beliefworthiness come apart from rationality. That is, Podgorski holds that a belief which is no longer supported by the agent's total evidence may no longer be beliefworthy, but that the agent may rationally continue to hold the belief if she is not rationally required to reopen deliberation. On this reading, evidentialism tells a complete story about beliefworthiness but an incomplete story about epistemic rationality, because it may be rational to believe propositions that are no longer beliefworthy.

Second, Podgorski argues that his version of Epistemic Conservatism avoids objectionable bootstrapping. On Podgorski's picture, beliefs enjoy *passive inertia*: they persist through changes in beliefworthiness while not the targets of active deliberation. However, beliefs do not enjoy *active inertia*: they are not favored during redeliberation simply based on the fact that the agent holds them. Podgorski notes that the most objectionable forms of bootstrapping involve active inertia. For example, active inertia may allow the dogmatic argument 'I believe  $p$ , therefore  $p'$ '. Passive inertia, by contrast, does not allow such dogmatism.

Third, Podgorski notes that his dynamic view captures practices of explicit justification. Because explicit justification occurs in the context of deliberation, only beliefs which show active inertia could be cited in explicit justification. We saw above that Podgorski is not committed to the rationality of active inertia.

## 5.4 A level-separated alternative

Advocates of level separation can accept Dynamic Worth Believing as a correct norm governing rational deliberation. They can also accept State-Oriented Worth Believing as a norm on rational belief.<sup>2</sup> This position allows us to disambiguate two readings of

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<sup>2</sup>For my own part, I would like to remove the restriction of beliefworthiness to the agent's own perspective, but this is easily done.



Epistemic Conservatism, one of which advocates of level separation can accept and one of which they can reject.

In saying that:

**(Epistemic Conservatism)** The mere fact that one already believes something can positively affect an agent's rationality in believing it going forward. (Podgorski 2016a, p. 349)

the phrase 'an agent's rationality in believing it going forward' can be interpreted in two ways. The phrase can be given a procedural reading on which the mere fact of belief affects rational processes of belief formation, maintenance and revision. Alternatively, the phrase can be given an attitudinal reading on which the mere fact of belief affects the rationality of future belief states.

Advocates of level separation may reject the attitudinal reading of Epistemic Conservatism, but can happily accept the procedural reading on exactly the grounds that Podgorski gives for it. For example, they might agree with Podgorski that:

**(Inconsiderate)** One is not always rationally required to initiate consideration whether  $p$  when one believes that  $p$  and one's evidence does not make  $p$  worth believing (from one's own perspective). (Podgorski 2016a, p. 363)

Principles such as Inconsiderate ground a rational conservative bias in cognitive processing, but do not force a conservative bias in attitudinal justification. We can admit that it is not always possible or advisable for agents to reopen inquiry without denying that a belief is rational only if it is supported by an agent's total evidence.

In the same way that Podgorski's dynamic conservatism fares better against traditional criticisms than Standard Conservatism does, level separation may fare better than Podgorski's dynamic conservatism on the same criticisms. Begin with evidentialism. Although Podgorski correctly notes that his view is consistent with weak versions of evidentialism such as Evidence Restriction, it is inconsistent with many traditional versions of evidentialism including Feldman and Conee's original statement of the view:

**(Evidentialism<sub>CF</sub>)** Doxastic attitude  $D$  toward proposition  $p$  is epistemically justified for  $S$  at  $t$  if and only if having  $D$  toward  $p$  fits the evidence  $S$  has at  $t$ .  
(Feldman and Conee 1985, p. 15)

Podgorski's dynamic conservatism agrees with evidentialist orthodoxy in taking belief-worthiness to be determined by the agent's total evidence, but disagrees with Evidentialism<sub>CF</sub> in allowing non-evidential factors to affect a belief's rationality or justification. By contrast, level separation is consistent with traditional versions of evidentialism including Evidentialism<sub>CF</sub>.

Moreover, level separation does not force us to posit a split between beliefworthiness and rationality in order to accept Evidence Restriction, let alone Evidentialism<sub>CF</sub>. Dynamic conservatism accepts Evidence Restriction on the grounds that evidence fully determines beliefworthiness, but not rationality. By contrast, a level-separated approach is compatible with the view that both the beliefworthiness of a proposition and the rationality of believing it are determined by the agent's total evidence.

Second, level separation avoids all forms of bootstrapping, not merely the most objectionable. While Podgorski correctly notes that his dynamic conservatism removes the most controversial active forms of inertia, many bootstrapping objections have also been concerned by the fact of passive inertia (Weisberg 2012). While it seems especially egregious to pull ourselves actively up from a belief that  $p$  into a warrant for that very belief, it may not be untroubling that we could passively pull ourselves up from a belief that  $p$  into a warrant for further beliefs and actions which rely on the belief that  $p$  even as the evidence begins to tell against  $p$ . To the extent that those concerns are warranted, level separation will have the advantage of not permitting passive inertia.

Third, level separation accounts not only for practices of explicit justification but also for practices of normative criticism. Many authors take practices of epistemic criticism to provide important data for theories of epistemic rationality (Flores and Woodard 2023; Kauppinen 2018; Kelp and Simion 2021). But consider the following criticism and response:

(1) Donald, your belief that  $p$  is irrational. There simply isn't enough evidence to support it.

(2) # My belief that  $p$  is perfectly rational, since I also believe that  $p$ .

Podgorski correctly accounts for the inappropriateness of (2) by denying the rationality of active inertia. Yet dynamic conservatism does not directly explain why the criticism (1) is appropriate. After all, on dynamic conservatism, Donald's belief may well have been rational at the time that (1) was uttered. Perhaps dynamic conservatives can explain the appropriateness of (1) through some fancy footing, but it remains an advantage of level separation that we can explain the appropriateness of (1) in the natural way. By Evidence Restriction,  $p$  is not beliefworthy for Donald since it is not supported by Donald's total evidence. By State-Oriented Worth Believing, it is irrational for Donald to believe  $p$  since  $p$  is not beliefworthy for Donald.

## 5.5 Taking stock

In this section, we have seen how level separation provides an alternative to Podgorski's process-focused approach, focusing on the original view and its application to conservatism. We saw that a level-separated alternative has the advantages of capturing discourse about rational belief, permitting the existence of fundamental attitudinal norms, and avoiding revision to traditional epistemic norms. We also saw that level separation allows us to capture a moderate version of Epistemic Conservatism in the neighborhood of Podgorski's dynamic conservatism while retaining compatibility with evidentialism, linking rationality to beliefworthiness, avoiding bootstrapping, and explaining practices of epistemic criticism.

Together with the arguments of Sections 4, this provides some positive evidence in favor of level separation. However, level separation is not without challenges. In the next section, I address a challenge to level separation due to Susanna Rinard.

## 6 Agglomeration

Susanna Rinard (2019) objects to level separation on the grounds that it violates a principle of agglomeration.

**(Unrestricted Deontic Agglomeration)** For all agents  $S$  and all options  $A, B$  for  $S$ , if  $S$  ought to  $A$  and  $S$  ought to  $B$  then  $S$  ought to  $(A \wedge B)$ .

For example, consider:

**(Pascal's Wager)**  $S$ 's total evidence supports the claim that God does not exist. However, if  $S$  comes to believe that God exists, this will increase her chance of going to heaven.

The classic level separationist response to Pascal's Wager holds that  $S$  should  $A$ , get herself to believe that God exists, but should also  $B$ , not believe that God exists. It follows from unrestricted deontic agglomeration that  $S$  ought to take the combined option  $A \wedge B$  of getting herself to believe that God exists and not believing that God exists.

This leads to contradiction under two assumptions. The first assumption is that ought implies can:

**(Ought Implies Can)** For all agents  $S$  and all options  $A$  for  $S$ , if  $S$  ought to  $A$  then  $S$  can  $A$ .

From this, it follows that  $S$  can perform  $A \wedge B$ . The second assumption is that  $S$  cannot perform  $A \wedge B$ . This is because the combined option  $A \wedge B$  involves both coming to believe that God exists and believing that God does not exist, which we might take to be impossible. After all, coming to believe that God exists entails believing that God exists, which is incompatible with the belief that God does not exist.

An immediate problem for this objection is that Unrestricted Deontic Agglomeration is ill-formed unless options also agglomerate. That is, Unrestricted Deontic Agglomeration requires:

**(Option Agglomeration)** For all agents  $S$  and all options  $A, B$  for  $S$ ,  $A \wedge B$  is an option for  $S$ .

If Option Agglomeration fails, then it does not always make sense to say that  $S$  ought to  $A \wedge B$ , since  $A \wedge B$  is not always a genuine option.

However, Option Agglomeration is not a plausible principle. Consider:

**(Crossroads)**  $S$  is being chased by a tiger. She comes to a crossroads with two paths leading left and right. The tiger will follow her down whichever path she chooses and block her retreat.

In Crossroads,  $S$  has the option to take the left path and the option to take the right path. But  $S$  does not have the option to (take the left path and take the right path). Even if we creatively shuffle time indices to make sense of this compound option, it is ruled out by the presence of a tiger who will block the way back to the second path. Crossroads is therefore a counterexample to Option Agglomeration.

We can remove the dependence on Option Agglomeration by restricting Unrestricted Deontic Agglomeration to cases in which Option Agglomeration holds. That is:

**(Restricted Deontic Agglomeration)** For all agents  $S$  and all options  $A, B$  for  $S$ , if  $S$  ought to  $A$  and  $S$  ought to  $B$  and  $A \wedge B$  is an option for  $S$ , then  $S$  ought to  $(A \wedge B)$ .

At this point, defenders of level separation have two options. First, they could lean on existing challenges to agglomeration principles, most of which would, if successful, falsify Restricted Deontic Agglomeration (Williams 1965; van Fraassen 1973; Brown 2005). Second, they could accept Restricted Deontic Agglomeration and deny that the combined option  $A \wedge B$  of, say, getting oneself to believe that God exists while also believing that God does not exist is in fact an option. While I prefer the second route, it is worth saying a few words about why agglomeration principles are controversial.

Some global consequentialists have taken the very cases at issue to show why Restricted Deontic Agglomeration is wrong. For example, it is very natural to imagine cases in which someone ought to love her child, but ought to benefit a stranger's child rather than her own, though she cannot do both (Parfit 1984; Railton 1984). Because such cases violate agglomeration principles, some global consequentialists have suggested that we would be within our rights to take them as counterexamples to agglomeration principles unless those principles can be given strong independent motivation (Brown 2005).

Others outside the consequentialist tradition have argued that it is *prima facie* plausible that there could be irresolvable ethical conflicts, in which an agent ought to *A* and also ought to *B*, where *A* and *B* are incompatible options (Williams 1965; van Fraassen 1973). For example, Bernard Williams draws our attention to the tragic Agamemnon who, according to legend, would be prevented from reaching Troy unless he sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia. Williams argues that to further his responsibilities as a military commander, Agamemnon ought to sacrifice Iphigenia, but to further his duties as a father, Agamemnon ought not to sacrifice Iphigenia (Williams 1965). Van Fraassen draws our attention to a variety of further cases of this kind (van Fraassen 1973). Both Williams and van Fraassen recommend rejecting agglomeration principles in order to accommodate such cases.

While I have some sympathy for this response, I think we can make do with the second strategy of arguing that the combined action  $A \wedge B$  is not, in fact, a genuine option. I suspect that even Rinard herself may agree with this claim, since it is hard to make sense of what the act  $A \wedge B$  would be. In the case of Pascal's wager, the combined action involves both coming to believe that God exists and believing that God does not exist. But as we saw above, coming to believe that God exists entails believing that God exists, which is incompatible with the belief that God does not exist. So it is unclear that there is a genuine option described by the compound act  $A \wedge B$ . Indeed, if Rinard thought that there were such an option, she would need to say something to explain what taking this option involves. Rinard has not attempted this task, in my view for good reason.

And in fact, when we examine leading accounts of the metaphysics of options, most accounts hold directly that options are things that agents can do. For example, Brian Hedden holds that options are decisions, which are necessarily things that the agent can bring about.

**(Options-as-Decisions)** A set of propositions is a set of options for agent  $S$  at time  $t$  iff it is a maximal set of mutually exclusive propositions of the form  $S$  decides at  $t$  to  $\phi$ , each of which  $S$  is able to bring about. (Hedden 2012, p. 352)

Similarly, Richard Jeffrey holds that “an act is . . . a proposition which is within the agent’s power to make true if he pleases” (Jeffrey 1965, p. 84), and this definition is explicitly followed by many theorists (Joyce 1999; Solomon 2019). Indeed, the leading alternative picture on which options are arbitrary functions from states to outcomes (Savage 1954) has been criticized precisely on the grounds that it admits options which agents cannot perform (Broome 1991; Joyce 1999). However, if options are things that agents can do, then it follows immediately from Rinard’s contention that the agent cannot  $A \wedge B$  that  $A \wedge B$  is not a genuine option.

Even if we remove from these accounts the stipulation that options are things that agents can do, we may nevertheless be able to make do with their contention that options are propositions.<sup>3</sup> On this view, the option  $A$  becomes the proposition that  $S$  gets herself to believe that God exists and the option  $B$  becomes the proposition that  $S$  believes that God does not exist. The joint option becomes the conjunctive proposition  $A \wedge B$ . But since coming to believe that God exists involves believing that God exists,  $A \wedge B$  entails  $\neg B$ . As a matter of first-order logic,  $A \wedge B$  entails  $B$ , which means that  $A \wedge B$  expresses a contradictory proposition. On this view, there is no option described by  $A \wedge B$  any more than there is an option described by the proposition that you both sit and stand at the same time. The problem here is not about what agents can do, as though some other agent might be able

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<sup>3</sup>Indeed, Hedden follows many theorists in requiring that *all* options be mutually exclusive, so that agglomeration over an agent’s options at a given time will never produce a well-defined option. While this is a common stipulation, we do not need to accept it in order to see that the propositions involved in this case are inconsistent.

to both sit and stand at the same time, or both believe and disbelieve something at the same time. The problem is rather that there is no such thing for any agent to do.

So far, we have seen that agglomeration principles are controversial, and that leading theories of options tend to imply twice over that the compound options purported to cause trouble for level separation are not genuine options. I hope that many readers will be satisfied with this line of response to agglomeration-based challenges. To those who are not, I would urge that the shoe always pinches somewhere. If this is the place where level separation pinches, then I think that the pinch is relatively mild and worth bearing when compared to the explanatory benefits of level separation.

## 7 Conclusion

This paper introduced and motivated the strategy of level separation (Section 2) between normative questions about attitudes and normative questions about the processes of inquiry that govern them. We saw how level separation is already applied within several areas of practical and theoretical philosophy (Section 3). We also saw how level separation can be used to give a unified, principled, and explanatorily powerful of transitional attitudes (Section 4) and rational delay (Section 5), as well as how the view meets an agglomeration-based objection due to Susanna Rinard (Section 6).

These results join earlier applications (Section 3) of level separation in lending support to the adoption of level separation as a strategy throughout practical and theoretical philosophy. Further work might productively address applications of level separation to evaluative focal points beyond inquiry and the attitudes that inquiry produces. It might also be productive to explore the extent of analogies between the motivations for, and applications of level separation across practical and theoretical philosophy. Finally, there is scope to explore in further detail the implications of level separation for a broad range of recently proposed norms governing inquiry.



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