

# Evidence and facts about incoherence: Reply to Schmidt\*

Aleks Knoks

`aleks.knoks@uni.lu`

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8384-0328>

University of Luxembourg

## Abstract

In her recent ‘Facts about incoherence as non-evidential epistemic reasons’ Eva Schmidt defends the claim that not all epistemic reasons are provided by evidence. Schmidt presents three cases describing agents with incoherent beliefs and argues that, in each case, the fact that an agent’s beliefs are incoherent provides her with a non-evidential epistemic reason to suspend judgment on the issue that her beliefs are about. While I find the suggestion that facts about incoherence can play positive roles in our cognitive lives intriguing, I have three reservations about Schmidt’s view: the first concerns her conceptual framework—I think it is less neutral than it appears to be—the second concerns the view’s behavior in certain kinds of scenarios involving higher-order evidence, and the third has to do with some implausible consequences of the view. I also hint at an alternative account of the positive role of facts about incoherence.

**Keywords:** evidentialism, epistemic reasons, suspending judgment, coherence, higher-order evidence

---

\*Forthcoming in *Asian Journal of Philosophy* (Article symposium contribution on Eva Schmidt’s ‘Facts about incoherence as non-evidential epistemic reasons’). Please, cite the published version.

## **Contents**

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Suspension of judgment and evidence</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Suspension and higher-order evidence</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Problematic consequences</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>What incoherence-based reasons could be</b>	<b>10</b>
	<b>References</b>	<b>13</b>

# 1 Introduction

In her recent ‘Facts about incoherence as non-evidential epistemic reasons’, Eva Schmidt defends the claim that not all epistemic reasons are provided by evidence. The claim has been defended by others, but Schmidt doesn’t find the examples that have been proposed in the literature convincing and puts forward three new cases. All of these describe agents with incoherent beliefs, and it is argued that, in each case, the fact that an agent’s beliefs are incoherent—incoherence fact, for short—provides her with a non-evidential epistemic reason to suspend judgment on the issue that her beliefs are about.<sup>1</sup>

I find Schmidt’s paper interesting and insightful. I appreciate its scope, as well as its ambition to provide answers to a handful of important questions that include the following. What epistemic reasons are there? How does one go about forming doxastic attitudes on the basis of one’s epistemic reasons? And what role does one’s realizing that one’s doxastic state is incoherent play in one’s overall cognitive economy? However, I also have three major reservations about the view presented in the paper. The first concerns the conceptual framework within which the argument for the view unfolds: I suspect that it implies that any reason to suspend judgment must be non-evidential, stacking the cards in favor of Schmidt’s conclusion. My second reservation has to do with Schmidt’s overly optimistic view of suspension: like others, I see no reason to think that suspension of judgment is immune to the effects of higher-order evidence. Finally, my third reservation has to do with some problematic consequences of Schmidt’s view.

The structure of this short paper is straightforward. Sections 2–4 explain the reasoning behind my reservations, while Section 5 hints at an alternative to Schmidt’s view of incoherence facts and

---

<sup>1</sup>Following Schmidt, I’m going to rely on an intuitive understanding of incoherence between doxastic attitudes. I’m also going to take it as given that having inconsistent doxastic attitudes—that is, having attitudes whose contents can’t jointly be true—is one way of being in an incoherent state. Compare to (Schmidt 2023, p. 7, fn. 8).

their positive role in our cognitive economy.

## 2 Suspension of judgment and evidence

Suspension of judgment plays a crucial role in the context of Schmidt's paper, since all three of her examples of non-evidential epistemic reasons are examples of reasons to suspend. I have two major worries relating to suspension of judgment. In this section, I discuss the first one: the conceptual framework that Schmidt uses may imply that *any* reason to suspend must be non-evidential.

Schmidt follows Friedman (2013) in characterizing suspension of judgment on whether  $p$  as “.. an attitude of being unsettled with regard to the question of whether  $p$ , that is, [as] a question-directed attitude” (Schmidt 2023, p. 1). Evidence, in turn, is characterized as “.. that which justifies doxastic attitudes *by indicating the truth or falsity of their contents*” (Schmidt 2023, p. 2, my emphasis). Unfortunately, it is never made explicit how these characterizations combine. Thus, while one is, presumably, justified to suspend judgment on  $p$  when one's evidence with regard to  $p$  is equally balanced, it's not immediately clear how we are to think about what one's evidence *indicates with regard to the truth or falsity of  $p$* —or whatever the content of suspending on  $p$  happens to be—in such a case. Similarly, it's not immediately clear how to link the indication of truth and falsity to the question-directed character of suspension. Thus, Schmidt begins by putting together a rich conception of suspension of judgment with (the probabilistic reading of) the claim that evidence indicates the truth or falsity of propositions, but doesn't explain how they integrate.<sup>2</sup> She takes this combination to be a neutral starting point, but for all we know, it might have unforeseen implications.

One question that we need to have a clear answer to here is this: what are the conditions under which suspending judgment on whether  $p$  is justified? And the one answer to it that I can think

---

<sup>2</sup>Schmidt (2023) explicitly states that her focus is on the probabilistic reading of the claim in fn. 3.

of—which is straightforward, prima facie plausible, and compatible with Schmidt’s characterizations of both suspension and evidence—is that suspending judgment on whether  $p$  gets justified *indirectly*, namely, when neither a belief in  $p$ , nor a disbelief in  $p$  are justified.<sup>3</sup> Notice, however, that combining this answer with Schmidt’s notion of evidence yields the following result: strictly speaking, there can be no evidence justifying suspension of judgment. What’s more, a closely related result seems to follow from the *probability-raising conception of evidence*—which Schmidt explicitly adopts later in the paper. According to this conception,  $e$  qualifies as a piece of evidence for  $\varphi$ , against some body of evidence  $b$ , just in case  $b$  includes  $e$  and the conditional probability of  $\varphi$  given  $e$  is higher than its prior probability.<sup>4</sup> Presumably, if  $e$  qualifies as evidence for  $p$ , then  $e$  indicates the truth of  $p$  and justifies (possibly, only pro tanto) a belief that  $p$ ; and if  $e$  qualifies as evidence for  $\neg p$ , then  $e$  indicates the falsity of  $p$  and justifies (pro tanto) a disbelief that  $p$ . It is, however, difficult to see how  $e$  might qualify as a piece of evidence that justifies suspending judgment toward  $p$  on this conception. Presumably, we should be able to point to some formula  $\varphi$  such that, first,  $p$  would be a subformula of  $\varphi$ , and second, the conditional probability of  $\varphi$  given  $e$  would be higher than the prior probability of  $\varphi$ . However, it is not clear what this formula  $\varphi$  might be.

Once we translate these observations into reasons talk, we get the surprising result that there can be no evidential reasons for suspension, and, thus, that any reason for suspension would have to be non-evidential.<sup>5</sup> This result trivially entails the claim that incoherence-based reasons to suspend

---

<sup>3</sup>Cf. (Lord & Sylvan 2022, Sec. 2.1).

<sup>4</sup>See (Williamson 2002, p. 186ff).

<sup>5</sup>An anonymous reviewer wonders why Schmidt couldn’t appeal to evidence about evidence here and hold that it provides evidential reasons for suspension. They describe the following scenario. At time point  $t_1$  one has evidence against  $p$ . Then at time point  $t_2$  one learns from a reliable source that the evidence for and against  $p$  is equally balanced. The reviewer’s suggestion, then, is that the evidence that one acquires at  $t_2$ —call it  $e^*$ —is both a sufficient reason to suspend and a pro tanto, but insufficient, reason to believe. Perhaps, Schmidt can use this suggestion to her advantage,

have to be non-evidential, and, if correct, it would have some far-reaching consequences for the dialectics of the paper. First, it would show that the paper's argument has the wrong focus: while Schmidt argues, at length, that the incoherence facts in her cases are non-evidential reasons, it would be more important to establish that they are (normative) reasons to suspend. Second and more importantly, it would reveal that Schmidt's conceptual framework stacks the cards against evidentialists, and, thus, that evidentialists need not accept it, nor, for instance, grant Schmidt the assumption that there are epistemic reasons for suspension that can be weighed against reasons for belief and disbelief.

All in all, I think that we need a better grasp of the way Schmidt's conceptions of suspension and evidence integrate, as well as of the way suspension gets justified (by evidence), if the dialectical force of her argument is to become fully transparent.

### 3 Suspension and higher-order evidence

My second worry is that Schmidt's view of suspension is overly optimistic. In particular, this concerns the functioning of suspension in cases involving higher-order evidence. Let's start by looking at one of Schmidt's examples:

**Marple and Poirot.** Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot team up investigating a murder.

Master detective Miss Marple is first on the scene and takes in all the evidence, forming but I doubt that it can be done without departing from her general characterizations of evidence and suspension. In the end, my worry concerns the latter and does not seem to depend on the special character of  $e^*$ . Thus, this character notwithstanding, it's still not clear how  $e^*$  might justify suspending on  $p$  *by indicating the truth or falsity of the content of suspending on  $p$*  (whatever this content is). It's also not clear how it follows from the probability-raising conception of evidence that  $e^*$  does indeed qualify as a piece of evidence justifying suspending on  $p$ . I, for my part, can see that  $e^*$  qualifies as evidence for  $p$  on this conception, and, thus, that  $e^*$  can justify a *belief* that  $p$ . However, when it comes to *suspending* on  $p$ , I am puzzled. In particular, I have trouble finding a formula  $\varphi$  for which we would have  $P(\varphi|e^*) > P(\varphi)$  and which could also be plausibly held to express the content of suspending on  $p$ .

the (for once, mistaken) belief that the evidence indicates that the vicar did it ( $v$ ), and she tells Poirot so. That Miss Marple provides this testimony is a sufficient reason for Poirot to believe that the evidence indicates that  $v$ , and he forms the belief for that reason. Next, Poirot himself takes in the evidence at the crime scene, which as a matter of fact indicates that the vicar did not do it; he therefore has sufficient reason to disbelieve  $v$ , and disbelieves  $v$  for that reason. Poirot now has incoherent doxastic attitudes, belief that the evidence indicates that  $v$  and disbelief that  $v$ . They are incoherent because by virtue of his belief about the evidence, he accepts that there is sufficient evidence and thus reason to believe that  $v$ , and thus that belief that  $v$  is the correct doxastic response; but nonetheless, he disbelieves  $v$ .<sup>6</sup>

Schmidt holds that the fact that Poirot has the belief that the evidence indicates that  $v$  and the disbelief that  $v$  provides him with a genuine epistemic reason to suspend judgment on whether the evidence indicates that  $v$ , as well as on whether  $v$ . She also holds that this reason is non-evidential, that it can be weighed against the evidential reasons to believe that the evidence indicates that  $v$  and the evidential reasons to disbelieve that  $v$ , as well as that it effectively outweighs them. What's more, this incoherence-based reason is meant to bear on all involved doxastic attitudes equally, enabling "a genuine inquiry into the relevant matters" (Schmidt 2023, p. 14). The idea here seems to be something like this. Assuming Poirot reasons correctly, the moment he becomes aware that his doxastic attitudes are incoherent, he realizes that something isn't quite right, and that there's no immediate way of telling which of the two relevant propositions—"the evidence indicates that  $v$ " and  $\neg v$ —is the problematic one. So, he suspends judgment on both. Then he reopens the inquiry, reassesses his epistemic situation, and eventually comes to the conclusions that—contrary to Miss Marple's assertion—the evidence doesn't indicate that  $v$ , and that  $\neg v$ . With that, Poirot's reason to suspend disappears and he can justifiably believe that the evidence doesn't indicate that  $v$ , as well

---

<sup>6</sup>(Schmidt 2023, p. 10).

as disbelieve that  $v$ .<sup>7</sup> (Schmidt holds that incoherence-based reasons and the status of suspension that they support have a specific “temporal profile”: they remain only until the incoherence is resolved.<sup>8</sup>)

Unfortunately, there’s a problem with this picture. If we take the possibility of higher-order evidence seriously—as Schmidt aims to do—then nothing would seem to stand in the way of the following possibility.<sup>9</sup> As Poirot is happily reassessing his epistemic situation, he receives evidence casting doubt on the *rationality* of his doxastic response, that is, evidence indicating that it may not be rational to suspend judgment on “the evidence indicates that  $v$ ” and  $v$ .<sup>10</sup> For instance, there might be a drug that makes people see incoherences in their doxastic states when in fact there aren’t any, and Poirot learns that he’s been given this drug. How is he to respond? Well, it’s not

---

<sup>7</sup>See (Schmidt 2023, p. 11).

<sup>8</sup>See (Schmidt 2023, p. 14).

<sup>9</sup>As a side remark, I wasn’t entirely happy with Schmidt’s characterization of higher-order evidence. Following Christensen (2010), Lasonen-Aarnio (2014), and others, I think of it as, roughly, evidence about one’s response to the evidence or evidence about the normative status of one’s response to the evidence.

<sup>10</sup>An anonymous reviewer suspects that Schmidt won’t be happy with my case. They provide the following rationale: a reasons-first framework (like Schmidt’s) wouldn’t allow for evidence about the rationality of an attitude to be part of the ultimate analysis of normative notions, since it mentions the notion of rationality, rather than merely the notion of a reason. I submit that I do not fully understand why the rationale casts doubts on the case. One possibility is that there is an issue with terminology here, and that the reviewer’s suspicion can be calmed by re-describing Poirot’s evidence as evidence that casts doubt on the *correctness* of his doxastic response, or as evidence indicating that his response to his epistemic reasons was not correct. Another possibility is that the reviewer’s idea is that it somehow follows from reasons-first approaches that it’s impossible for one to receive evidence casting doubt on the correctness of one’s response to one’s reasons. Assuming this is the point, I have two things to say in reply. First, I think it’s a non-trivial exercise to show that this is indeed a consequence of reasons-first approaches—and Schmidt’s approach in particular. Second, if it were a consequence, I don’t think it would be a particularly welcome one. It would mean that reasons-firsters cannot appeal to what looks like a straightforward and attractive analysis of a whole range of cases discussed in the literature on higher-order evidence.



entirely clear. Schmidt's diagnosis of the hypoxia case would seem to suggest that Poirot acquires evidence that he failed to settle the issue of whether his doxastic attitudes are incoherent, and that this evidence provides him with a (decisive) reason to suspend.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Poirot would seem to have a decisive reason to suspend on whether his doxastic response is incoherent. Once this is paired with the fact that Poirot has sufficient reason to believe that the evidence indicates that *v* and a sufficient reason to disbelieve *v*—as per the original description of the case—it would seem that Poirot can *justifiably* hold the following combination of doxastic attitudes: a disbelief that *v*, a belief that the evidence indicates that *v*, and a suspension on whether the disbelief that *v* and the belief that the evidence indicates that *v* are incoherent. But this combination of attitudes is itself incoherent. (Notice how Poirot is, as it were, unsettled with regard to the question of whether it's okay to have both the belief and the disbelief, as well as settled—since he has them.) Surely, Poirot will realize this discrepancy himself. Unfortunately, this realization will not put him in the position to reopen the inquiry and reassess his epistemic situation. After all, Poirot is well aware of the way the drug works and the fact that there's no way he can be sure that his realization tracks genuine incoherence.

While one might find the example contrived, I doubt that much hinges on the details here. Like many others, I think that there is little reason to think that suspension of judgment is immune to the effects of higher-order evidence, and I doubt that suspending on all relevant matters is going to work as a get out of jail free card for all cases.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, I think that more needs to be said about the behavior of non-evidential reasons to suspend in cases involving higher-order evidence—in particular, cases in which one would seem to have reasons to suspend judgment on the existence of such reasons—before we can concede that they exist.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup>See (Schmidt 2023, p. 6).

<sup>12</sup>Cf., for instance, (Pryor 2018, p. 134).

<sup>13</sup>I have another related worry. Schmidt seems to take it for granted that holding incoherent doxastic attitudes is never justified—or, at least, that no agent can ever justifiably remain in a doxastic state that involves incoherent atti-

## 4 Problematic consequences

My final worry concerns two seemingly problematic consequences of Schmidt's view.

The first of these has to do with the normative effects of improperly-formed doxastic attitudes, such as beliefs formed through wishful thinking. Cases involving agents with such attitudes are not difficult to come by. Thus, consider Marjorie who believes (correctly, I hope) that the 2020 United States presidential elections were *not* rigged, but desires that they were. Now suppose that, through wishful thinking, Marjorie forms the belief that her evidence doesn't indicate that the 2020 United States presidential elections weren't rigged. Now she is in an epistemically akratic state: her beliefs are incoherent. What now seems to follow, on Schmidt's view, is that Marjorie has a reason to suspend judgment on whether the 2020 elections were rigged, that this reason is to be weighed against her evidential reasons to believe that the 2020 elections weren't rigged, and, perhaps, that it might even outweigh them. It would seem that, through wishful thinking alone, Marjorie managed to provide herself with a normative reason to suspend. But this sounds utterly implausible. In particular, it seems that one cannot alter the normative landscape of one's situation by forming beliefs in an improper way and conjure up reasons into existence by wishful thinking.<sup>14</sup>

However, this point is highly contested in the literature on higher-order evidence and neighboring debates, and many authors hold that, in some cases, epistemic akrasia and other forms of incoherence are perfectly justified—see, e.g., Christensen (2020); Coates (2012); Knoks (2021); Lasonen-Aarnio (2020); Pryor (2018). These authors' views may well be wrong, but the worry I have has to do with cases in which agents have overwhelming evidence indicating that they are on the right track. Thus, there's a version of Marple and Poirot where Poirot has overwhelming—although possibly misleading—evidence that epistemic akrasia is perfectly rational, and where he has formed the corresponding belief. Schmidt suggests that Poirot's incoherence-based reason bears on *all* involved doxastic attitudes equally, and that it outweighs the evidential reasons for holding them. What I'm not exactly sure about is whether this reason also bears on Poirot's belief that akrasia can be rational, and whether it can outweigh the evidential reasons for holding this belief. Trying to answer these questions leads to a host of new ones.

<sup>14</sup>The worry I discuss in this paragraph overlaps with the *bootstrapping problem* which has played a prominent

The second problematic consequence is that Schmidt's view forces a discrepancy in the analyses of perfect and imperfect agents. The point can be illustrated using Schmidt's third case, History vs. Philosophy. Unlike the other two cases—which exhibit well-known puzzles and may be difficult to analyze for independent reasons—History vs. Philosophy describes a fairly mundane scenario: its protagonist Basna starts off forming the belief that historical facts are relative, then forms the belief that relativism is false, then comes to realize that her beliefs are inconsistent, suspends judgment, reassess her epistemic situation, and, finally, forms the belief that relativism is false again.

Schmidt seems to hold that Basna's doxastic responses are impeccable.<sup>15</sup> I, for my part, don't find this plausible: it seems to me quite intuitive that Basna acts in a suboptimal fashion when she forms the belief that relativism is false the first time around. But let's take Schmidt's claim on board and compare Basna to her epistemically ideal counterpart—roughly, someone with Basna's evidence, but unlimited cognitive powers. What would the counterpart—let's call her iBasna—do if she found herself in Basna's shoes? Intuitively, depending on the actual evidential situation, iBasna would either not form the belief that relativism is false, or she would form it, but only after dropping the belief that historical facts are relative. That is, iBasna would notice the inconsistency and avoid forming inconsistent beliefs. Similarly, were iBasna to find herself in Basna's shoes at a later point—with Basna's inconsistent beliefs, that is—she would immediately revise her doxastic state, adjusting it to the evidence. (And while it's hard to talk about ideal agents having inconsistent beliefs with much confidence, it doesn't seem that iBasna would be weighing her incoherence-based reason against the evidential ones.) We, thus, have the following result: Basna and iBasna

---

role in the debate about the normativity of (structural) rationality—see, e.g., (Kiesewetter 2017, Ch. 4) for a good overview. Bratman (1981) appears to have been the first to discuss a version of this worry.

<sup>15</sup>I take it that this is a direct consequence of Schmidt's explicit claim that the subjects' reasoning is flawless in her three cases—see (Schmidt 2023, p. 16).

have the same evidence, but it sanctions different doxastic responses, implying that the normative landscapes of Basna and iBasna are different.

This result strikes me as strange and *prima facie* undesirable. What's more, it also immediately commits Schmidt to *permissivism*, or, roughly, the controversial view that there are some bodies of evidence that sanction holding different doxastic attitudes toward the same proposition.<sup>16</sup> Admittedly, the fact that Schmidt's view has this strange and controversial commitment does not provide a knock-down objection to it. However, it does provide a reason against the view, and this reason gets amplified by the fact that other views like Schmidt's do not have this commitment. Thus, consider the alleged examples of non-evidential epistemic reasons made popular by Schroeder (2012), such as the fact that the agent's evidence concerning *p* is equally balanced; the fact that she has zero evidence concerning *p*; and the fact that more evidence concerning *p* is forthcoming.<sup>17</sup> Whether these reasons be evidential or not, they are reasons for ideal agents as much as they are reasons for imperfect ones.

## 5 What incoherence-based reasons could be

Let's take stock. We saw three reasons for concern about Schmidt's view that incoherence facts are non-evidential reasons to suspend. First, the conceptual framework within which the argument for the view unfolds seems to entail that any reason to suspend must be non-evidential. Second, the view relies on an overly optimistic view of suspension. And third, it seems to lead to problematic consequences. In spite of these concerns about the view, I found Schmidt's paper interesting and insightful. In particular, I think it deserves credit for identifying an important and underexplored phenomenon, namely, the fact that one's having incoherent doxastic attitudes—or, perhaps, one's realizing that one has incoherent doxastic attitudes—can play a *positive* role in one's overall cog-

---

<sup>16</sup>See, e.g., White (2005, 2014) for more on permissivism and objections against it.

<sup>17</sup>See also (Schroeder 2021) and the discussion in (Schmidt 2023, p. 4ff).

nitive economy. While much has been written about the apparent unreasonableness of incoherence and the normative effects of bad attitudes, relatively little has been said about ways in which having incoherent attitudes might do something good for the agent.<sup>18</sup> Yet clearly, Basna's *realizing* that her relativism-related beliefs are incoherent leads to an improvement of her epistemic state.

In light of my three concerns, I doubt that views on which incoherence facts provide non-evidential epistemic reasons give us the right explanation here. So, in the remaining pages, I'm going to point at an alternative account of the positive role of incoherence facts. As a first step toward it, I want to consider a case from the moral domain that has the same structure as *History vs. Philosophy*.

**Presents.** The birthdays of your two kids, Alma and Ben, are approaching. You have bought two items that could serve as presents, a doll and a toy car. As a matter of fact, both Alma and Ben would be happy to receive the doll as a present. What's more, Alma would, while Ben would not be happy to receive the toy car as a present. If you had enough time to reflect on your children's preferences, you would realize this much. Alas, you have a paper to finish, a class to teach, and a project deadline to meet, and so you never find time to think about the situation carefully. Alma's birthday comes first, and you give her the doll as present. Ben has his birthday the next day and you gift him the toy car. Later that day you reflect on Ben's lack of excitement. It makes you reassess the situation and see it more clearly. You realize that the doll would still make Ben happy, and that Alma would be as happy with the toy car as she is with the dolls. So, you take the items away from your kids, but only to give the toy car to Alma and the doll to Ben. Now both are happy.

Here's a quick-and-dirty analysis of the case that seems to me to be on the right track. The fact that

---

<sup>18</sup>See the vast literature on the normativity of (structural) rationality, including the seminal (Kolodny 2005) and (Broome 2013).

either of the toys would make Alma happy while only the doll would make Ben happy provides a decisive reason for you to give the doll to Ben and the toy car to Alma. What's more, this fact—or something very close to it—provides a decisive reason for you to swap the presents. Now let's consider Ben's lack of excitement, along with the closely related fact that Ben could've easily been more happy than he is. It doesn't seem to provide you with a reason to swap the presents. Rather, its function appears to be epistemic: it helps you realize that your response to the situation wasn't morally optimal. It provides you with a reason to reassess the situation which eventually leads you to rectify your original response.

Returning to History vs. Philosophy, Basna's realization that her relativism-related beliefs are inconsistent—along with the closely-related fact that they are inconsistent—seems to play a similar role: because of it, Basna realizes that some of her doxastic attitudes cannot be justified, and, thus, that her overall doxastic state cannot be an optimal response to her epistemic situation.<sup>19</sup> Thus, she learns something about the normative status of her doxastic response to her evidence. Seen in this light, the incoherence fact starts to look a lot like a piece of higher-order evidence. And I'm tempted to think that this apparent similarity may be indicative of a deeper connection. Accordingly, I'd like to put forward the following idea as a working hypothesis: incoherence facts are a type of higher-order evidence for imperfect agents, and the positive role that they play in our cognitive economies is akin to the positive role associated with other types of higher-order evidence.

Of course, it remains to be seen whether this idea can be developed into a full-fledged account. However, there are grounds for guarded optimism. First off, this account is more conservative than Schmidt's; it is compatible with many different ideas on higher-order evidence (and related issues) from the literature; and it doesn't depend on an overly optimistic view of suspension. Second,

---

<sup>19</sup>Those who believe that epistemic akrasia can be rational will want to qualify the claim as follows: the incoherence fact helps Basna realize that it is *very likely* that her doxastic state is not an optimal response to her epistemic situation.

the example from Section 3 doesn't cause it any trouble—or, at least, no trouble going beyond the standard puzzles raised by higher-order evidence. Third, while the proposal doesn't entirely avoid the implausible consequences of Schmidt's view, it does seem to mitigate them. Thus, with regard to the problem of improperly-formed doxastic attitudes, we can point out that the proposal doesn't commit one to any particular view on how one is to respond to higher-order evidence, and, in particular, that it doesn't commit one to the claim that I'm to suspend judgment on the presidential election-related matters in the example from Section 4. It also pays noting that the proposal makes an intuitive prediction about the example: once I form a belief through wishful thinking in the example, I acquire evidence that my doxastic response isn't optimal. As for the second problematic consequence—the discrepancy between the normative landscapes of agents and their ideal counterparts—we can say that incoherence facts constitute higher-order evidence for ideal agents as much as they do for imperfect ones. It's just that the ideal agents won't have much use for this higher-order evidence—not in scenarios like History vs. Philosophy anyway—since their unlimited cognitive powers will let them figure out what their first-order evidence indicates.<sup>20</sup>

But whatever the prospects of this particular proposal, I find Schmidt's observation of the positive role of incoherence captivating, and I'd like to see a full-fledged view shedding light on it.

## **Acknowledgments**

This work was supported by the Luxembourg National Research Fund (FNR) through the project Deontic Logic for Epistemic Rights (OPEN O20/14776480). I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer of this journal for a generous set of helpful comments.

---

<sup>20</sup>Note that I do not mean to suggest that ideal agents have no use for higher-order evidence and are never affected by it. Rather, my (tentative) proposal is that an incoherence fact may have an effect on an imperfect agent that is similar to the effect that, say, evidence of peer disagreement has on any kind of agent.

## References

- Bratman, M. (1981). Intention and means-end reasoning. *The Philosophical Review*, 90(2), 252–62.
- Broome, J. (2013). *Rationality through Reasoning*. Wiley Blackwell Publishing.
- Christensen, D. (2010). Higher-order evidence. *Philosophy and phenomenological research*, 81(1), 185–215.
- Christensen, D. (2020). Akratic (epistemic) modesty. *Philosophical Studies*, 178, 2191–214.
- Coates, A. (2012). Rational epistemic akrasia. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 49(2), 113–124.
- Friedman, J. (2013). Question-directed attitudes. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 27(1), 145–74.
- Kiesewetter, B. (2017). *The Normativity of Rationality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Knoks, A. (2021). Misleading higher-order evidence, conflicting ideals, and defeasible logic. *Ergo*, 8(6), 141–74.
- Kolodny, N. (2005). Why be rational? *Mind*, 114, 509–60.
- Lasonen-Aarnio, M. (2014). Higher-order evidence and the limits of defeat. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 88(2), 314–45.
- Lasonen-Aarnio, M. (2020). Enkrasia or evidentialism? Learning to love mismatch. *Philosophical Studies*, 177, 597–632.
- Lord, E. & Sylvan, K. (2022). On suspending properly. In L. Oliveria & P. Silva (Eds.), *Propositional and Doxastic Justification*. Routledge.
- Pryor, J. (2018). The merits of incoherence. *Analytic Philosophy*, 59(1), 112–41.



- Schmidt, E. (2023). Facts about incoherence as non-evidential epistemic reasons. *Asian Journal of Philosophy*, 2(22), 1–22.
- Schroeder, M. (2012). The ubiquity of state-given reasons. *Ethics*, 122, 457–88.
- Schroeder, M. (2021). *Reasons First*. Oxford University Press.
- White, R. (2005). Epistemic permissiveness. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 19(1), 445–59.
- White, R. (2014). Evidence cannot be permissive. In M. Steup, J. Turri, & E. Sosa (Eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (pp. 312–323). John Wiley and Sons.
- Williamson, T. (2002). *Knowledge and its Limits*. Oxford University Press.