

Do Judgments Screen Evidence?

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Setup

- S rationally judges that p on the basis of E .
- J is the proposition that S has judged that p .
- J seems to support p .

Big Question

How many pieces of evidence does the agent have that bear on p ?

- 1 Two - Both J and E .
- 2 One - E subsumes whatever evidential force J has.
- 3 One - J subsumes whatever evidential force E has.

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We're interested in option 3.

I'll call this option JSE, short for **J**udgments **S**creen **E**vidence.

My Conclusions

- ① JSE is sufficient, given some plausible background assumptions, to derive a number of claims that have become prominent in recent epistemology (meaning approximately 2004 to the present day).
- ② JSE is necessary to motivate at least some of these claims.
- ③ JSE is false.

Screening

Reichenbach says that C screens off the positive correlation between B and A if the following two conditions are met.

- ① A and B are positively correlated probabilistically, i.e. $Pr(A|B) > Pr(A)$.
- ② Given C , A and B are probabilistically independent, i.e. $Pr(A|B \wedge C) = Pr(A|C)$.

Screening without Probability

When I say that C screens off the evidential support that B provides to A , I mean the following.

- 1 B is evidence that A .
- 2 $B \wedge C$ is no better evidence that A than C is, and $\neg B \wedge C$ is no worse evidence for A than C is.

Screening Example

Detective Det is trying to figure out whether suspect Sus committed a certain crime.

A = Sus is guilty

B = Sus's fingerprints were found at the crime scene

C = Sus was at the crime scene when the crime was committed.

Then C screens off the support that B provides for A .

Motivating JSE

An Inconsistent Triad?

These three claims seem to be true, and seem to be inconsistent.

- ① J is evidence for p .
- ② It is impermissible 'double counting' for S to take both E and J to be evidence for p .
- ③ It is wrong for S to simply ignore E .

An Advantage of JSE

It lets us accept all three of the points on the previous slide.

The agent doesn't *ignore E*, any more than the detective who knows that Sus was at the crime scene ignores the fingerprint evidence.

She just regards it as no better evidence than the evidence she already has.

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The agent doesn't *ignore E*, any more than the detective who knows that Sus was at the crime scene ignores the fingerprint evidence.

She just regards it as no better evidence than the evidence she already has.

Note that this is no argument for JSE over ESJ.

Disagreement

Elga on Equal Weight

Upon finding out that an advisor disagrees, your probability that you are right should equal your prior conditional probability that you would be right. Prior to what? Prior to your thinking through the disputed issue, and finding out what the advisor thinks of it. Conditional on what? On whatever you have learned about the circumstances of the disagreement.

JSE → Equal Weight

It's easy to see how JSE can motivate Equal Weight.

If your evidence for p is your judgment, then it seems balanced by your peer's judgment.

Here's something that Elga wants to rule out:

- S has some evidence E that she takes to be good evidence for p .
- She thinks T is an epistemic peer.
- She then learns that T , whose evidence is also E , has concluded $\neg p$.
- She decides, simply on that basis, that T must not be an epistemic peer, because T has got this case wrong.

It's not obvious why we should rule that out.

But JSE offers a reason.

S is illicitly using screened-off evidence.

JSE ↔ Equal Weight

So without JSE, there's a good objection to Equal Weight.
And with JSE, there's a natural motivation for Equal Weight.
So plausibly, Equal Weight stands and falls with JSE.

White on Permissiveness

Roger White argues that there cannot be a case where it could be epistemically rational, on evidence E , to believe p , and also rational, on the same evidence, to believe $\neg p$.

One of the central arguments in that paper is an analogy between two cases.

- Random Belief
- Competing Rationalities

Random Belief

S is given a pill which will lead to her forming a belief about p . There is a $1/2$ chance it will lead to the true belief, and a $1/2$ chance it will lead to the false belief. S takes the pill, forms the belief, a belief that p as it turns out, and then, on reflecting on how she formed the belief, maintains that belief.

Competing Rationalities

S is told, before she looks at E , that some rational people form the belief that p on the basis of E , and others form the belief that $\neg p$ on the basis of E . S then looks at E and, on that basis, forms the belief that p .

A Good Analogy?

At first blush, these two cases seem worlds apart.

One agent forms a rational belief, the other an irrational belief.

But given JSE, it is a very close analogy.

So I conclude JSE is necessary to White's argument.

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So I conclude JSE is necessary to White's argument.

Perhaps there are other arguments against Permissiveness – that's outside the scope of this paper. So we don't have $JSE \leftrightarrow \neg \text{Permissiveness}$, just that JSE is necessary and sufficient for one argument against Permissiveness.

Christensen on Higher-Order Evidence

Higher-Order Evidence

David Christensen argues that evidence about our computational and epistemic capacities can be evidence for or against propositions that are not about those capacities.

Here's an example of the kind of case he has in mind.

- S knows that $\forall x(Fx \rightarrow Gx)$.
- S also knows that $\neg(Fa \wedge Ga)$.
- S then infers deductively that $\neg Fa$.
- S is then told that she's been given a drug that dramatically impairs abilities to draw deductive conclusions.
- Christensen's view is that this testimony is evidence against $\neg Fa$, which I assume implies that it is evidence that Fa .

Varieties of Undermining Evidence

This is very odd.

- S has evidence that entails $\neg Fa$, and the 'underminer' doesn't tell against that.
- S has reason to believe that this evidence entails $\neg Fa$, and she hasn't been given any reason to believe that it does not.
- So how could it be an underminer?

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- So how could it be an underminer?

Answer: It is an underminer if we assume JSE.

JSE and Higher-Order Evidence

- If S 's evidence that $\neg Fa$ is ultimately just her judgment that it is entailed by her other evidence;
- And that judgment is revealed to be unreliable because of her recent medication;
- Then S does lose evidence that $\neg Fa$.

So JSE suffices to show that higher-order evidence is really evidence.

- But if we thought the original evidence, i.e., $\forall x(Fx \rightarrow Gx)$ and $\neg(Fa \wedge Ga)$, was still available to S ;
- Then there is a good reason to say that her evidence conclusively establishes that $\neg Fa$.

So JSE is necessary and sufficient for Christensen's argument.

Other Applications of JSE

In the interests of time, I won't go through the other ways in which JSE is integrated into contemporary epistemology.

I'm skipping three longer discussions.

- 1 An argument that JSE is necessary and sufficient for some of the arguments that Andy Egan and Adam Elga make about self-doubt.
- 2 An argument that it is possible to justifiably believe p while not being in a position to justifiably believe that one justifiably believes p . (The main target here is Richard Feldman, who not coincidentally accepts most of the conclusions I think JSE motivates.)
- 3 An argument that in many cases where people appeal to JSE, the natural position we get in cases where JSE is applied (e.g., peer disagreement, 'higher-order' evidence) is that what we can justifiably believe comes apart from what we justifiably believe we can justifiably believe.

We can discuss these points more in Q&A if you're interested.

JSE and Practical Action

Christensen's Case Studies

Christensen motivates his views on higher-order evidence with a couple of case studies.

Since his views on higher-order evidence are so closely tied to JSE, the kind of cases he uses are reasonable tests for JSE as well.

We'll look at two cases:

- Sleepy Hospital
- Tipping

In each case I've taken them almost, but not quite, verbatim from Christensen.

Sleepy Hospital

I'm a medical resident who diagnoses patients and prescribes appropriate treatment. After diagnosing a particular patient's condition and prescribing certain medications, I'm informed by a nurse that I've been awake for 36 hours. I reduce my confidence in my diagnosis and prescription, pending a careful recheck of my thinking.

Tipping

My friend and I have been going out to dinner for many years. We always tip 20% and divide the bill equally, and we always do the math in our heads. We're quite accurate, but on those occasions on which we've disagreed in the past, we've been right equally often. This evening seems typical, in that I don't feel unusually tired or alert, and neither my friend nor I have had more wine or coffee than usual. I get \$42 in my mental calculation, and become quite confident of this answer. But then my friend says she got \$45. I dramatically reduce my confidence that \$42 is the right answer, and dramatically increase my confidence that \$45 is correct, to the point that I have roughly equal confidence in each of the two answers.

The Effects of JSE

Note something important about each of these cases.

The narrator, who does what Christensen wants, in each case *decreases* her confidence in some proposition that she previously believed.

That suggests the cases are not completely general; we should also be looking for cases where 'higher-order evidence' leads to an increase in confidence.

We'll come back to this point.

In **Tipping**, Christensen has the narrator lose confidence in a simple arithmetic truth.

The underlying point, after all, is just that $70 \times 0.6 = 42$. Christensen thinks his narrator should doubt **that**.

That doesn't seem particularly rational. Indeed, by Bayesian lights it is incoherent. If JSE is to recommend this, it better have something powerful to make up for this decent into arithmetic incoherence.

Christensen's 'something powerful' is an argument about decision making.

Or consider the variant where my conclusion concerns the drug dosage for a critical patient, and ask yourself if it would be morally acceptable for me to write the prescription without getting someone else to corroborate my judgment. Insofar as I'm morally obliged to corroborate, it's because the information about my being drugged should lower my confidence in my conclusion. (Christensen, pg 11)

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I think the last line of this is wrong.

JSE and Practical Action

Let's make the case a little more precise, and set out what we do and don't know about it.

- The medical evidence suggests that the prescription should be, let's say, $100\mu g$.
- The narrator initially intends to prescribe just that.
- But the narrator is worried that he's been awake too long, so he's unreliable.
- I think we should all agree that gives him a reason to double check the prescription.

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And I think that premise is false.

Action and Second-Order Justification

I think that premise is false because I think an incompatible premise is true.

- If

- ① Doing ϕ would harm someone you owe a duty of care to unless p is true; and
- ② You can't justifiably believe that you justifiably believe that p is true;

then you can't justifiably do ϕ .

In this case, I think Christensen's narrator **does** justifiably believe that prescribing $100\mu g$ will produce the best outcome. After all, he's processed the relevant evidence correctly, and that evidence shows that prescribing $100\mu g$ will produce the best outcome. But his tiredness means he can't justifiably believe that he justifiably believes it.

The simplest motivation for my diagnosis of the case is that it offers us a nice analysis of what's going on in a case that is the mirror-image of **Sleepy Hospital**.

I call this case **Cautious Hospital**

Cautious Hospital

A doctor has been on duty for 12 hours. In the world of the story, at that stage in a shift, doctors are typically excessively cautious about their diagnosis. The initial feelings of drowsiness cause them to second-guess themselves even though they are capable of making reliable confident judgments. Helen, a doctor, knows these facts, and has been on duty for 12 hours. Helen is in fact immune to this general tendency of over-caution, though she does not have any prior reason to believe this. She looks at the symptoms of a patient who is in some discomfort, and concludes that probably he should be given $100\mu\text{g}$ of drug X, although more tests would confirm whether this is really the best action.

(Continued on next slide)

Cautious Hospital

That's the right reaction to the medical evidence; there are realistic explanations of the symptoms according to which $100\mu\text{g}$ of X would be harmful, and the tests Helen considers would rule out these explanations. Had she only just come on duty, she would order the tests, because the risk of harming the patient if the probably correct diagnosis is wrong is too great. But Helen now has reason to worry that if she does this, she is being excessively cautious, and is making the patient suffer unnecessarily. What should Helen do?

What to do in Cautious Hospital

It seems clear that Helen should order more tests.

The alternative is that she does something that might, given her evidence, harm her patient.

I think it's easy to say why she should order more tests - she doesn't justifiably believe that drug X won't harm her patient.

Christensen and Cautious Hospital

But it's not clear how Christensen can say this.

- Before considering the quality of her judgment, Helen had evidence that prescribing $100\mu g$ of X would probably help the patient.
- Then reflection on her initial judgment gives her a little extra 'higher-order evidence' that this is the welfare-maximising prescription.
- So it seems she should do it.
- Or, more cautiously, we have as much reason to believe that she should make this prescription as we had to believe that the narrator in **Sleepy Hospital** should not believe her initial diagnosis.

JSE and Cautious Hospital

More generally, it's hard to see how any believer in JSE could avoid saying the same thing.

- In this case J is that Helen judged that $100\mu g$ of X would probably help the patient.
- Given that evidence, and our background knowledge about Helen (she's very probably too cautious), it seems we should believe that $100\mu g$ of X would indeed help the patient.
- And in the absence of any defeating reason, we should therefore prescribe $100\mu g$ of X.
- And since Helen is, given JSE, in just the position we are in with just her judgment and knowledge about the circumstances of her judgment as evidence, she should do the same thing.
- But that's absurd - it would be a horrible dereliction of duty to prescribe $100\mu g$ of X when the evidence leaves open a serious possibility this will harm the patient.

JSE and Under-Confidence

More generally, JSE says that whenever we have reason to believe we are under-confident, we should increase our confidence in our initial judgments.

And that's true even in cases where our initial judgment correctly reflected some uncertainty in the evidence.

But in any such case, it is horrible to act on the judgment whose confidence is increased via JSE.

JSE and Under-Confidence

That leaves just two possibilities:

- 1 JSE is giving the wrong advice in this case, and hence is false.
- 2 In cases where JSE suggests changing our confidence, there is no easy connection between what we should believe and what we should do. In that case, there is no motivation from Christensen-style cases for JSE.

So JSE is false or undermotivated. Since JSE was saying counterintuitive things to start with, if it isn't motivated by cases like **Sleepy Hospital**, that seems reason to believe it is false.

Regress Arguments

Equal Weight and Regress

The Equal Weight View has an uncomfortable asymmetry in how it treats different 'levels' of disagreement.

- If two peers disagree about first-order facts, it recommends that they adjust their views so as to take each other's original position as equally likely to be true.
- If they disagree about how to respond to disagreement, it recommends that the one who has the incorrect view defer to the one who has the correct view.

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- Her evidence has changed, so she should make a newer judgment.
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- And so on

It seems that

- 1 She's left with no evidence; and
- 2 We have an infinite regress.

I'm going to look at responses to objection (2). Objection (1) looks worrying for proponents of JSE, but I'm frankly unsure how to evaluate it, so I won't lean on it.

Two Responses to the Regress

I'll consider two defences that a proponent of JSE might make in order to avoid the regress.

- 1 Argue that each of the judgments in the sequence should have the same content, and so the regress is not vicious.
- 2 Argue that the second (and subsequent) judgments do not screen the earlier judgments, so the regress does not get going.

A Virtuous Regress?

Here's a possible constraint on rational judgment.

Ratifiability An agent S can only rationally make a judgment G if the rational judgment for S to make, conditional on the evidence that she has made G , has the same evidence as G .

The name is chosen because of its similarity to Richard Jeffrey's decision-theoretic principle.

Note that Ratifiability does not require that the agent regard herself as infallible.

It does not say that whatever judgment she makes, she must on reflection regard that judgment as correct.

Rather, it says she can only make those judgments that she will on reflection regard as correct.

Ratifiability

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It does not say that whatever judgment she makes, she must on reflection regard that judgment as correct.

Rather, it says she can only make those judgments that she will on reflection regard as correct.

The thought is that if the agent starts at such a judgment, then she can never be led into an infinite regress. So if agents must start at such judgments, then the regress objection to JSE can never get going.

Problems for Ratifiability

There are two kinds of cases where Ratifiability seems to lead to the wrong answer.

- ① Cases where there is no ratifiable judgment.
- ② Cases where there are few ratifiable judgments, and they seem far removed from the rational judgments.

No Ratifiable Judgment

Imagine that when I'm trying to decide whether p , for any p in a certain field, I know

- ① That whatever judgment I make will usually be wrong; and
- ② If I conclude my deliberations without making a judgment, then p is usually true.

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If we also assume JSE, then it follows there is no way for me to end deliberation.

- ① If I make a judgment, I will have to retract it because of (1).
- ② But if I think of ending deliberation, then because of (2) I'll have excellent evidence that p , and it would be irrational to ignore this evidence.

No Ratifiable Judgment

This is puzzling, but not obviously false.

It is plausible that there are some epistemic dilemmas, where any position an agent takes is going to be irrational.

That a case like the one I've described in the previous paragraph is a dilemma is perhaps odd, but no reason to reject the theory.

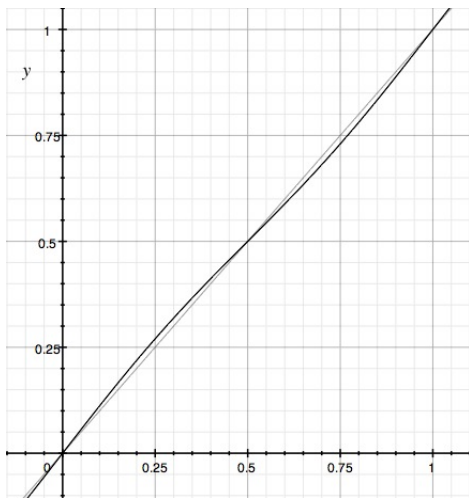
Odd Ratifiable Judgments

This case I think raises deep problems for Ratifiability, not least because it's surprisingly plausible for a philosophical example.

- Assume that I'm a reasonably good judge of what's likely to happen in baseball games, but I'm a little over-confident.
- And I know I'm over-confident.
- So the rational credence, given some evidence, is usually a little closer to $1/2$ than I admit.
- At risk of being arbitrarily precise, let's say that if p concerns a baseball game, and my credence in p is x , the rational credence in p , call it y , for someone with no other information than this is given by:

$$y = x + \frac{\sin(2\pi x)}{50}$$

To give you a graphical sense of how that looks, the dark line in this graph is y , and the lighter diagonal line is $y = x$.



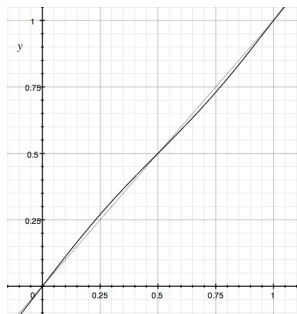
No Good Ratifiable Choice

Note that the two lines intersect at three points: $(0, 0)$, $(1/2, 1/2)$ and $(1, 1)$.

So if my credence in p is either 0, $1/2$ or 1, then my judgment is ratifiable.

Otherwise, it is not.

So the ratifiability constraint says that for any p about a baseball game, my credence in p should be either 0, $1/2$ or 1.



No Good Ratifiable Choice

But that's crazy. It's easy to imagine that I know

- 1 That in a particular game, the home team is much stronger than the away team;
- 2 That the stronger team usually, but far from always, wins baseball games; and
- 3 I'm systematically a little over-confident about my judgments about baseball games, in the way just described.

In such a case, my credence that the home team will win should be high, but less than 1.

That's just what the ratificationist denies is possible.

Lessons from Game Theory

Various constraints (space, time, knowledge etc) prevent me going into this in more detail, but it's interesting to play through the connections between this argument and some important arguments (by Pettit and Sugden, and by Stalnaker) in game theory concerning backward induction arguments.

Note that backward induction arguments, like the ratifiability principle I've discussed here, can rule out all but some clearly awful outcomes.

I think there are some premises we can write down that do not on their own justify backward induction reasoning, but which combined with ratifiability do justify backward induction reasoning.

But that's for another talk.

A Privileged Stopping Point?

Here's an idea for how to avoid the regress - say that the **second** judgment the agent makes is privileged.

- This is similar to a move Adam Elga makes in “How to Disagree about How to Disagree”
- He argues that we should adjust our views about first-order matters in (partial) deference to our peers, but we shouldn't adjust our views about the right response to disagreement in this way.

Motivation?

Such a position is hard to motivate, and leads to odd results in simple cases.

I don't think it's a bad idea to try to avoid the regress.

I think it's a better idea, however, to stop at the **first** level rather than the **second**.

We'll see this first with disagreement, and then with screening.

A Toy Example

It's common knowledge that there are two apples and two oranges in the basket, and no other fruit. And that no apple is an orange.

Two people disagree about how many pieces of fruit there are in the basket.

- *A* thinks there are four.
- *B* thinks there are five.
- Both of them are equally confident.

A Toy Example

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Two other people, *C* and *D*, disagree about what *A* and *B* should do in the face of this disagreement.

- *C* has the correct view about the right response to peer disagreement.
- *D* has an incorrect view.
- We won't judge here what the correct view is.

A Toy Example

All four people regard the others as peers.

What should they all do?

A Toy Example

Elga's view is that A and B should partially defer to each other, becoming uncertain whether there are four or five pieces of fruit.

But D should defer entirely to C , acknowledging that she has the correct view on peer disagreement.

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But *D* should defer entirely to *C*, acknowledging that she has the correct view on peer disagreement.

This seems back-to-front to me.

A has evidence that immediately and obviously entails the correctness of her position. *C* is making a complicated judgment about a philosophical question where there are plausible and intricate arguments on each side.

If anyone should be modest and defer here, it's *C*, not *A*.

Screening and the Toy Example

Change the example a little, dropping B , C and D from the picture.

Lets' say that A has some evidence that

- 1 She has made some mistakes on simple sums in the past; but
- 2 She tends to massively over-estimate the likelihood that she's made a mistake on any given puzzle.

What should she do?

Screening and the Toy Example

Here are three options.

- 1 Believe there are four pieces of fruit in the basket, since that's what her evidence obviously entails.
- 2 Be fairly uncertain that there are four pieces of fruit in the basket, since she's been wrong about simple sums in the past.
- 3 Be pretty confident (if not completely certain) that there are four pieces of fruit in the basket, because if she were not very confident about this, this would just be a manifestation of her over-estimation of her tendency to err.

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The 'solution' to the regress we're considering here says that the second of these three reactions is the uniquely rational reaction.

But this seems unstable. Either we should just follow the evidence, and believe there are four pieces, or we should keep correcting for errors. The latter path leads to ratificationism, which we saw leads to mistakes. The former path leads, correctly in my view, to ESJ.

Conclusion

Summing Up

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Summing Up

The failure of JSE suggests a kind of externalism, though not of the traditional kind.

- It does not suggest, or at least does not require, that evidence be individuated in ways in principle inaccessible to the agent.
- It does not suggest, or at least does not require, that the force of evidence be determined by contingent matters, such as the correlation between evidence of this type and various hypotheses.
- But it does suggest that there are facts about which hypotheses are supported by which pieces of evidence, and that rational agents do well when they respond to these epistemic facts.

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Summing Up

Moreover, it suggests these facts retain their normative significance even if the agent has reason to believe that she's made a mistake in following them.

- That is, if an agent's judgment conforms to the correct norms of judgment, then even if she has evidence that she is not good at judging, she should stick to her judgment.
- In such a case she could not defend her judgment without appeal to the evidence that judgment is based on.
- But that's not a bad position to be in; judgments should be defensible by appeal to the evidence they're based on.