**Disjunctivism and Credence**

Ram Neta

Abstract: The present paper defends a disjunctivist thesis against the objection that it makes false predictions about the difference that perceptual success can make to the rationality of our credences. I argue that the disjunctivist can address this objection so long as she admits what is anyway plausible, i.e., that an agent is not rationally obliged to be certain of her evidence.

1. **Specifying the Disjunctivist Thesis of Interest Here**

The term “disjunctivism” has been used to denote a variety of positions in epistemology and the metaphysics of perception, mind, and action. In this paper, I will use the term to denote the epistemological view that John McDowell and Duncan Pritchard have recently defended: a view according to which an agent’s successful perception of a mind-independent object can provide her with a kind of epistemic ground for belief concerning that object that she cannot possess unless the belief is true. For future reference, I will give this view a label and a canonical formulation (I use the word “basis” in the canonical formulation, but I take it to be equivalent to “ground”):

BETTER BASIS: Successful perception of a mind-independent object can provide a *better basis for belief* about that object than can an indistinguishable illusion or hallucination.

Although disjunctivists like McDowell and Pritchard defend BETTER BASIS, so too do self-professed non-disjunctivists like Timothy Williamson and Susanna Schellenberg. I will therefore refer to proponents of this thesis not as “disjunctivists”, but rather as proponents of BETTER BASIS.

We could say, following Pritchard, that the epistemic ground in question is “factive”[[1]](#footnote-1), so long as this is not taken to imply that the epistemic ground has the metaphysical nature of a fact: describing the epistemic ground in question as “factive” is meant only to signal that a necessary condition of any agent’s having the epistemic ground is that the belief for which it serves as a ground is true. Thus, “factive” denotes a relation between a particular epistemic ground, on the one hand, and a belief for which it serves as a ground, on the other: it is a relation that obtains only if it is impossible for any agent to possess that epistemic ground unless that belief is true. If we individuate epistemic grounds in such a way that the very same epistemic ground can serve as grounds for many different beliefs, then that ground may be factive with respect to some of those beliefs and not factive with respect to others. As long as we keep this in mind, we can express the disjunctivist thesis of interest to us by saying: successful perception of a mind-independent object can at least sometimes provide the perceiver with *factive* grounds for belief concerning that object.

In contrast to Pritchard, McDowell expresses his version of BETTER BASIS by speaking not of factive grounds but rather of indefeasible grounds.[[2]](#footnote-2) But what does “indefeasible” amount to here? McDowell cannot mean that a belief based on such grounds cannot eventually come to be defeated by the acquisition of additional evidence – any belief could be so defeated if the acquisition of that additional evidence necessitates a change in the grounds on which the belief is based (and some of the things that McDowell says grant as much[[3]](#footnote-3)). So McDowell must instead mean that a belief based on such grounds cannot come to be defeated by the acquisition of additional evidence *so long as the belief remains based on those same grounds*. How stringent a condition this is depends upon how finely we individuate epistemic grounds. Consider, for instance, Timothy Williamson’s example of successful perception that supplies defeasible grounds for belief:

“I see one red and one black ball put into an otherwise empty bag [call this ‘e’] … . Now suppose that on the first ten thousand draws a red ball is drawn each time, a contingency which my evidence does not rule out in advance, since its evidential probability is non-zero. But when I have seen it happen, I will rationally come to doubt e; I will falsely suspect that the ball only looked black by a trick of the light.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Williamson takes this example to show that the epistemic grounds supplied by successful perception are always defeasible: the case of seeing one red and one black ball being put into the bag is taken to be representative of cases in which we gain knowledge by means of successful perception. But McDowell could claim that Williamson’s case can be spelled out in either of two ways. Either (a) the perceiver continues to see the red and black ball in the empty bag (this would be the case if the bag were transparent), or (b) the perceiver does not continue to see the red and black ball in the empty bag, but only, at most, remembers having seen them. In case (a), the perceiver could not rationally come to conclude that there is no red ball in the bag: instead, she would wonder why the draws from the bag constantly reach for the black ball instead of the red ball. In case (b), the perceiver would rationally come to conclude that there is no red ball in the bag; but that is because her grounds for believing that there is such a ball in the bag have changed – she originally believed it because she saw the ball in the bag, and now she believes it only because she recalls having seen it. The defeasibility of the second ground does not imply the defeasibility of the first. On neither interpretation does Williamson’s example challenge McDowell’s indefeasibility thesis, but these interpretations are exhaustive.

BETTER BASIS is a thesis with which Williamson himself can agree. For Williamson, our evidence includes only those facts that we know, and successful perception is a way of knowing facts about the mind-independent objects that we perceive. If an agent’s evidence includes all those facts that can serve as her epistemic grounds for belief, then Williamson’s view is not simply consistent with BETTER BASIS, but entails it. Of course, Williamson would not call himself a disjunctivist, but his reasons for refusing the label concern his objection to explaining non-factive states like belief or seeming in terms of a disjunction of a factive state and something else. Such explanatory attempts are completely independent of BETTER BASIS, which says nothing about how non-factive states are to be explained, either metaphysically or conceptually.

BETTER BASIS is also accepted by Susanna Schellenberg. Schellenberg describes a pair of examples that make for the clearest statement of BETTER BASIS, though she speaks not of bases for belief, but rather of evidence (which she takes to constitute a basis for belief): “Percy, the perceiver, accurately perceives a white cup on a desk. Halle, the hallucinatory, suffers a subjectively indistinguishable hallucination as of a white cup on a desk: that is, it seems to her that there is a white cup where in fact there is none.”[[5]](#footnote-5) If we stipulate that Percy occupies a paradigmatically good case of perception (nothing unusual either about the environment or Percy’s state of mind), then we can state BETTER BASIS as follows: Percy’s grounds for believing at least some propositions about the white cup include some grounds that Hallie cannot have, even though Hallie’s state is subjectively indistinguishable from Percy’s. What does it mean to say that Hallie’s state is “subjectively indistinguishable” from Hallie’s? I take it that it is to say at least this much: introspection of her perceptual experience cannot reveal to Hallie that she is not in Percy’s situation. This does not imply that there cannot be some other way for Hallie to discover that she is not in Percy’s situation. Nor does it imply that introspection of her perceptual experience cannot reveal to Percy that she is not in Hallie’s situation. In short, we are under no obligation to interpret claims of “subjective indistinguishability” symmetrically: if Hallie’s experience is subjectively indistinguishable from Percy’s, this does not imply that Percy’s experience is subjectively indistinguishable from Hallie’s.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This point about asymmetry allows us to distinguish two categories of philosopher who accept BETTER BASIS. Recall the thesis: Percy’s grounds for believing at least some propositions about the white cup include some grounds that Hallie cannot have, even though Hallie’s state is subjectively indistinguishable from Percy’s. Schellenberg thinks of this as an “externalist” thesis about evidence, but McDowell and Pritchard both deny that they are externalists. They both take it that, even though Hallie lacks any kind of privileged access to the differences between her perceptual state and Percy’s, Percy enjoys a kind of privileged access to the difference between her perceptual state and Hallie’s. Both McDowell and Pritchard speak of the access in question as “reflective”, but they do so only to mark its similarity to the epistemic access that we enjoy to our various practical and theoretical commitments, as well as to our various reasons for those commitments. Both McDowell and Pritchard insist that Percy does enjoy such access to the fact that she perceives (and does not merely hallucinate) a white cup. In this respect, McDowell and Pritchard disagree with Schellenberg and Williamson. We can thus distinguish the latter as “extenalist” proponents of BETTER BASIS while distinguishing the former as non-externalist proponents of BETTER BASIS. (I don’t call them “internalist” since both of them think that the terminology of “internalism” and “externalism” is itself misleading.) This distinction will become relevant below, since the objection that I consider in the next section may seem to pose a much more serious problem for non-externalist proponents of BETTER BASIS than for its externalist proponents.

1. **An Objection to Better Basis**

I just saw the headline on Bloomberg.com; it says that the S&P 500 fell 6 points today. I therefore believe that the S&P 500 fell 6 points today. My grounds for believing this are that it’s so reported on Bloomberg.com, and while that site does sometimes make mistakes in its reporting, news about S&P movement is not the kind of news about which it would normally make a mistake without almost instantly correcting it. So I have a belief, and I have strong grounds for that belief. If I gain further grounds for the same belief – if, for instance, I see the same news reported on other trustworthy news outlets – then I should become more confident that the S&P 500 fell 6 points today. If I lose grounds for the same belief – if, for instance, I learn that Bloomberg has recently made some mistakes in its reporting of S&P movement – then I should become less confident that the S&P 500 fell 6 points today. In short, one normal effect of gaining or losing grounds for some belief is that my confidence in the truth of the belief increases or decreases. As I have argued elsewhere[[7]](#footnote-7), this relation between evidence and rational confidence is not merely contingent but necessary, and indeed, constitutive of what it is for an agent to *possess* some evidence. But I won’t assume this latter point in what follows. I will assume only that, whether or not it is constitutive or of an agent’s *possessing* some evidence, there is a correlation between evidence and rational confidence.

In the preceding paragraph, I spoke of becoming more or less confident of the truth of a belief. I assume that believing a proposition can persist through such changes in one’s level of confidence: an agent can believe a proposition for years, while being more confident of it on some days than on others. How is belief related to confidence?[[8]](#footnote-8) For an agent A to believe some proposition p requires A to be committed to the truth of p. It requires more than this, since an agent may be committed to propositions that she nonetheless fails to believe. But whatever else belief involves, it involves at least such a commitment to the truth of what one believes. Indeed, it’s only because belief involves such commitments that we can rightly criticize someone’s beliefs by pointing out what propositions she is committed to by virtue of holding those beliefs. In contrast, for an agent A to have some degree of confidence n:(1-n) in a proposition p requires A to be committed to the fairness of a bet on whether p at odds of n:(1-n). Again, having a particular degree of confidence in p may require more than this, but it must require at least this much, or else we could not criticize someone’s degrees of confidence by pointing out those degrees of confidence commit her to the fairness of a Dutch Book.

To believe a proposition is to be committed to its truth. To have grounds for believing a proposition is to have reason to commit oneself to its truth. To be confident to degree n:(1-n) in a proposition is to be committed to the fairness of a bet on the truth of that proposition at odds of n:(1-n). To have grounds for being confident to a certain degree in a proposition is to have reason to commit oneself to the fairness of a bet on the truth of that proposition at corresponding odds. Of course, if you are committed to the truth of a proposition, then you are also committed to the fairness of betting on the truth of that proposition at long odds. But this is just to say that high confidence is necessary for belief, even though – as lottery cases show – high confidence is not sufficient for belief. Thus, having grounds for belief is sufficient for having grounds for high confidence, though having grounds for high confidence is not sufficient for having grounds for belief. These points about the relations between belief and confidence – and between grounds for belief and grounds for confidence – will be important in what follows.

We can use the relation between an agent’s possession of evidence on the one hand, and her grounds for belief on the other, to develop a test for whether or not a particular agent’s grounds for a belief have increased or decreased: if it is rationally incumbent on the agent to become more confident in the belief, this indicates that she has gained grounds for that belief, or else lost some grounds she may have had for not believing, whereas if it is rationally incumbent on the agent to become less confident in the belief, this indicates that she has either lost grounds for that belief, or gained some grounds for not believing. But suppose it is *not* rationally incumbent on the agent to change her level of confidence in either direction: can we draw any conclusions concerning changes in the agent’s grounds from such a supposition? No: if it is not rationally incumbent on the agent to change her level of confidence in some hypothesis, that could be because there was no change in the agent’s grounds, or it could be for other reasons. For instance, suppose that you review 1000 Bloomberg stories and discover 5 errors among them. Given only this information, how confident should you now be that the next Bloomberg story will contain an error? Clearly, you should be .005 confident of this. But now suppose that you review 100,000 more Bloomberg stories and discover 500 errors among them. Now how confident should you be that the next Bloomberg story will contain an error? Once again, you should be .005 confident of this. So it is rationally incumbent on you to keep your confidence at the same level as before, but clearly your grounds for that degree of confidence are much greater in the second case than in the first. From the fact that your rational degree of confidence does not change, nothing can be immediately inferred concerning any change in your grounds for the credal state: your grounds could have increased greatly, as in the example just given, or they could have remained completely unchanged.

The test just offered uses facts about which credal changes are rationally incumbent on an agent to determine how the agent’s grounds have changed. But notice that my example of a case in which no credal change is rationally incumbent on an agent, despite a big change in the agent’s grounds, the grounds at issue were grounds for the agent to hold a particular *credal state* – viz., to be .005 confident that there is an error in the next Bloomberg story. Are there examples of the same phenomenon – examples in which no credal change is rationally incumbent on an agent, despite a big change in her grounds – where the grounds at issue are grounds for a *belief*, and not just for a credal state? It’s not obvious that there are, since the example I offered above works because the grounds it involves are statistical, and it’s not obvious that we can have statistical grounds for a belief, as opposed to a credence.[[9]](#footnote-9) *Typically* at least, if we get additional grounds for a belief, then it is rationally incumbent upon us to become more confident in that belief, and if we lose grounds for a belief, then it is rationally incumbent upon us to become less confident in that belief.

But now consider the situations of Percy and Hallie, and notice that it’s possible for a subject could transition from one of their situations to the other. A subject who’s enjoying paradigmatically successful perceptual access to a mind-independent object could eventually come to be hallucinating, and vice-versa. Of course, it’s possible that such a transition would have to be gradual in order for the subject on either side of the transition to count as well-situated: I leave it open that complete perceptual success requires not only the proper workings of one’s perceptual competence, but also the exercise of that competence in a situation in which one has not just recently been hallucinating, or in which one is not soon to begin hallucinating. Perhaps knowing about mind-independent objects by looking at them requires not only that one’s spatial surroundings be free of facades, but also that one’s temporal surroundings be free of facades as well.[[10]](#footnote-10)

So suppose you are a subject who is transitioning from Percy’s situation to Hallie’s, or vice-versa. When you are in Percy’s situation, you will – at least according to McDowell and Pritchard – know that you are in Percy’s situation. But when you are in Hallie’s situation, you will not know that you are in Hallie’s situation – you will instead believe falsely that you are in Percy’s situation. As you transition from Hallie’s situation to Percy’s, or vice-versa, how should you adjust your confidence that you are in Percy’s situation? The answer to this question seems obvious: since Hallie’s situation is (by hypothesis) subjectively indistinguishable from Percy’s, unless you have some so far unmentioned way of knowing that you are making the transition from one state to the other, you should not alter your confidence that you are in Percy’s situation at all. It is not rationally incumbent on you to alter your confidence that you are in Percy’s situation – indeed, it seems rationally incumbent on you to *not* alter your confidence that you are in Percy’s situation, since the transition itself is, by hypothesis, subjectively undetectable to you. So far as you can tell as you undergo this transition, your situation is not changing in any way that is relevant to the issue of whether you are in Percy’s situation or in Hallie’s situation. If you know (and so believe) that you are in Percy’s situation when you are, then it seems rational for you to continue to hold this same belief, and to hold it with the same degree of confidence, even after you’ve transitioned into Hallie’s situation. Or, if you believe that you are in Percy’s situation when you are not, then it seems rational for you to continue to hold this same belief, and hold it with the same degree of confidence, even after you’ve transitioned into Percy’s situation.

But if the transition from Hallie’s situation to Percy’s involves gaining additional grounds for the belief that you are in Percy’s situation, or if the transition from Percy’s situation to Hallie’s involves losing some grounds for the belief that you are in Percy’s situation, then how can it be rationally incumbent on you to not alter your degree of confidence that you are in Percy’s situation throughout the transition? If transitioning from Percy’s situation to Hallie’s involves losing grounds for believing that you are in Percy’s situation, then why should you not lower your confidence that you’re in Percy’s situation throughout this transition? If transitioning from Hallie’s situation to Percy’s involves gaining grounds for believing that you are in Percy’s situation, then why should you not raise your confidence that you’re in Percy’s situation throughout this transition? The proponent of BETTER BASIS must answer these questions if her view is to be credible. But how can she answer them?

Another way to raise this challenge for the defender of BETTER BASIS is by means of the following argument:

BETTER BASIS: Successful perception of a mind-independent object can provide a *better basis for belief* about that object than can an indistinguishable illusion or hallucination.

BETTER BASIS STRONGER EVIDENCE: For any two subject time-slices, S1 and S2, if S1 has a better basis for p than S2, then, *all else equal*, S1 has stronger evidence for p than S2.

STRONGER EVIDENCE HIGHER RATIONAL CONFIDENCE: For any two subject time-slices, S1 and S2, if S1 has stronger evidence for p than S2, then S1’s rational level of confidence in p is higher than S2’s rational level of confidence in p.

BETTER BASIS HIGHER RATIONAL CONFIDENCE: For any two subject time-slices, S1 and S2, if S1 successfully perceives a mind-independent object and S2 has an indistinguishable hallucination of that object, then*, all else equal*, S1’s rational level of confidence in the existence of that object should be higher than S2’s rational level of confidence in the existence of that object.

The conclusion of this argument appears to be unacceptable, but the argument is valid. If Better Basis is true, then one of the other two premises must be false: but which one?

Neither McDowell nor Pritchard address these questions about rational confidence, nor do they say anything about rational credence that indicates how they would address this question. But Schellenberg 2016 does address a related question (raised by Neta 2016) about rational credence, and what she says in addressing that question indicates how she might address the questions just raised about the agent who transitions from Hallie’s situation to Percy’s, or vice-versa. Specifically, it indicates how she would try to defend the conclusion of the argument above. Here is Schellenberg:

“Neta asks how evidence bears on the rationality of mental states other than beliefs, such as credences. He imagines a case in which one is first perceiving a white cup (cup1) and then starts [also] hallucinating a cup. Neta asks ‘‘what implications does this new hallucination have for the rationality of Percy’s states of comparative confidence, or for her rationality of her degrees of confidence?’’ In response, I would say that the subject in this case has phenomenal and factive evidence for the presence of cup 1 and phenomenal evidence for the cup he is hallucinating. In contrast to Neta, I see no reason for thinking that his evidence for the presence of cup1 changes after he has started to hallucinate an additional cup—while still perceiving cup1. After all, he does not know he is hallucinating an additional cup. So he has no reason to doubt his over all epistemic standing. Moreover, there are good reasons to treat separately the fact that he is veridically perceiving cup1 while hallucinating an additional cup. We do not have to treat these two aspects of his current mental state as interfering with one another.

…I would say that his rational confidence in cup1 being present is 1 (before and after he starts hallucinating the second cup), but that his rational confidence in an additional cup being present is lower. After all, he is hallucinating rather than perceiving that additional cup. Parallel to what I said about evidence above, I see no reason to think that hallucinating an additional cup should lower his rational confidence in the presence of cup1. This approach goes hand in hand with arguing that the rationality of his degree of confidence will change as his environment changes. In that sense, I am following the standard externalist approach about rationality in holding that the amount of rational confidence one has can change due to external factors.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

For Schellenberg then, if an agent enjoys fully successful perception of one cup while simultaneously hallucinating a second cup, then, even if she has no way of telling which apparent cup is perceived and which is hallucinated, it is nonetheless rationally incumbent on her to be more confident of the presence of the perceived cup than about the presence of the hallucinated cup. This suggests that Schellenberg would adopt an equally externalist stance with regards to the perceiver who’s transitioning from Percy’s situation to Hallie’s, or vice-versa: it is rational for such a perceiver to be more confident in the presence of a perceived cup when she’s in Percy’s situation than when she’s in Hallie’s, even though her transition from one situation to the other is not noticeable in any way to her.

This verdict seems obviously wrong: An agent who maintains her level of confidence throughout the transition described is not thereby rationally criticizable in any way. Indeed, an agent who raises or lowers her level of confidence throughout the transition described, despite being unaware of any reason whatsoever for doing so, is thereby rationally criticizable for doing so.

But perhaps I’ve misunderstood Schellenberg’s position: perhaps her position concerns not how it’s rational for an agent to *change* her credences in certain conditions, but rather what synchronic credal states are themselves rational under what conditions. And perhaps, just as it follows from probabilistic views of credence that an assignment of maximum probability to all logical truths is rational under all evidential conditions, perhaps it also follows from disjunctivist views of evidence that an assignment of maximum probability to all truths in our evidence set is also rational under all evidential conditions. On this view, independently of whether the agent is rational to raise or lower her credence during the transition from Percy’s situation to Hallie’s (or vice-versa), the credal state that is rational while she’s in Percy’s situation differs from the credal state that is rational while she’s in Hallie’s situation: if the act of transitioning from one to the other is itself not rational, that means only that an agent who finds herself in such a situation is not in a position to comply with all the demands of rationality – but all probabilists must issue verdicts of this sort about some cases (e.g., those who become more or less confident about some proposition being a logical truth). If this is how to understand Schellenberg’s view, then it makes no implausible predictions about how an agent should adjust her credences, because it makes no predictions whatsoever about how an agent should adjust her credences.

But now let’s consider whether this view about the rationality of synchronic credal states is correct. The case *against* the view is simple and obvious: maximal confidence concerning the presence of a white cup *does not appear* to be more rational for an agent in Percy’s situation than for an agent in Hallie’s situation – rather, it appears to be no more rational. Of course, this simple, obvious argument against the view is defeasible: perhaps the case in favor of the view can explain away the aforementioned appearance. But then what is the case in favor of the view? McDowell, Pritchard, and Schellenberg don’t address this question at all, or even say anything to suggest how they might answer it. Does Williamson say anything to suggest an answer?

It may at first appear that he does. Sometimes, he treats evidential probabilities as measures of “how well off a proposition is on the evidence.”[[12]](#footnote-12) So construing evidential probabilities, Williamson’s claim would then be that propositions concerning the presence of a white cup are *better off* on Percy’s evidence than on Hallie’s evidence. Better off *how*? To judge from remarks that Williamson makes elsewhere[[13]](#footnote-13), it seems that evidential probability measures how strongly evidentially supported a proposition is for an agent at a time. Whatever we think of evidential probability as a measure of evidential support, this has no obvious implications for the degree of confidence that it is rational for an agent to have in a particular proposition. In fact, Williamson explicitly allows that a proposition may be maximally evidentially supported, even if an agent should not have a maximal degree of confidence in it.[[14]](#footnote-14) This suggests what is anyway clear from much of Williamson’s writings on this issue, which is that the degree to which a proposition is evidentially supported for an agent at a time, and the degree of confidence that it is rational for the agent to invest in that proposition at that time, needn’t in general be proportional – at least rationality does not (on Williamson’s view) require any such proportionality. So Williamson’s discussion of evidential support doesn’t tell us anything directly about the degrees of confidence that it is rational for our transitioning subject to invest in propositions about the white cup – either before or after the transition. Williamson says nothing to provide needed support for the view (concerning differences in rational synchronic credence) that I considered above on Schellenberg’s behalf.

Williamson does, however, indicate that there is some relation between the degree of evidential support that a proposition has, on the one hand, and what he calls the rational degree of “outright belief”, on the other. To believe a proposition is to occupy a particular mental state – but just as states in general can be occupied more or less fully (the car may be almost red, somewhat red, very red, etc.), so too can belief-states be occupied more or less fully. But the degree to which one believes a proposition is not the same as the degree of confidence that one invests in the proposition. As Williamson points out, one may invest confidence of ½ that a fair coin will lands heads on the next toss – but to invest such confidence is not to half-believe that it will lands heads. On the contrary, it is to *not believe at all* that it will lands heads. Perhaps Williamson would apply this notion of rational degree of outright belief to explain what is rationally incumbent on our transitioning subject: when she’s in Percy’s situation, it is rationally incumbent on her *fully* to believe propositions about the white cup, whereas once she’s transitioned to Hallie’s situation, it is rationally incumbent on her to believe these same propositions less than fully. This could be understood either diachronically – as claiming that it is rationally incumbent on her to lower her degree of outright belief – or synchronically – as claiming nothing about what process it is rationally incumbent on her to undergo, but rather as claiming something about a difference in the degree of outright belief that it is rationally incumbent on her to have at each moment.

But once again, this verdict is not credible. If the subject’s transition is not detectable to her in any way at all, and it is rationally incumbent on her to fully believe some propositions about the white cup when she’s in Percy’s situation, it must also be rationally incumbent on her to fully believe those same propositions when in Hallie’s situation. Or, at the very least, it is not rationally incumbent on her to believe those same propositions to a lower degree when in Hallie’s situation.

Williamson might wish to resist this judgment about our transitioning subject on the grounds that it is a manifestation of the internalist prejudice that completely undetectable differences cannot make a difference to what is rationally incumbent on a subject. This is a prejudice that Williamson takes himself to have called into question by means of his famous argument to the effect that no non-trivial mental state is “luminous” to its subject, i.e., no non-trivial mental state is such that, whenever you’re in it, you’re in a position to know that you’re in it. But even if we grant the soundness of Williamson’s anti-luminosity argument, the conclusion of that argument is consistent with the claim that completely undetectable differences cannot make a difference to what is rationally incumbent on a subject. For the claim

(ANTI-LUMINOSITY) No non-trivial mental state is such that, *whenever* you’re in it, you’re in a position to know that you’re in it

is consistent with the conjunction of

(KNOWABILITY) Some non-trivial mental states are such that, on *some* of the occasions when you’re in them, you’re in a position to know that you’re in them,

and

(ACCESSIBILIST MENTALISM) Mental states fix what is rationally incumbent on a subject – but they do so on *only* those occasions in which the subject is in a position to know that she’s in them.

Williamson’s anti-luminosity argument does nothing to tell against the common judgment that completely undetectable differences cannot make a difference to what is rationally incumbent on a subject – for that judgment may manifest a commitment to the conjunction of KNOWABILITY and ACCESSIBILIST MENTALISM, the conjunction of which is fully consistent with ANTI-LUMINOSITY. I conclude that there is no case to be made against this common judgment. And the case in favor of it is simple and obvious.

To review: BETTER BASIS says that an agent’s successful perception of a mind-independent object can provide her with a kind of epistemic ground for belief concerning that object that she cannot possess unless the belief is true. Whatever epistemic grounds Hallie has for believing propositions about a white cup before her, Percy has all those same grounds, *and more*. But this raises the question: why isn’t it then rationally incumbent on a subject who’s transitioning from Percy’s situation to Hallie’s to have a lower degree of confidence in the truth of those propositions at the end of the transition than at the beginning? We’ve examined various ways of undermining the presupposition of this last question, and found them unsuccessful. I conclude that the question is a good one, and the proponent of BETTER BASIS needs an answer. The proponent of BETTER BASIS had better be prepared to explain either why, contrary to appearances, BETTER BASIS STRONGER EVIDENCE is false, or STRONGER EVIDENCE HIGHER RATIONAL CONFIDENCE is false, or BETTER BASIS HIGHER RATIONAL CONFIDENCE is true.

In the next section, I offer the proponent of BETTER BASIS an answer to these questions. It’s an answer that embraces the argument from BETTER BASIS to BETTER BASIS HIGHER RATIONAL CONFIDENCE, but avoids implausible commitments concerning the transitioning subject, by insisting that, in the envisaged cases of transitioning subjects, the “all else equal” clause of BETTER BASIS HIGHER RATIONAL CONFIDENCE is not satisfied.

1. **Percy, Hallie, and rational degrees of confidence**

Suppose that the white cup in front of Percy is my favorite white cup, but Percy doesn’t know this, and doesn’t even know me. When Percy sees the white cup, she is seeing my favorite white cup, but the fact that it is my favorite white cup is not a fact disclosed to her by her perceptual state. In fact, her perceptual state itself may provide her with no evidence whatsoever that she sees my favorite cup: if she has no idea who I am, and no evidence of my own existence, then she would have no evidence of anything that would very obviously entail my existence, including the fact that the white cup in front of her is my favorite white cup. In general, even though successful perception involves a relation between a perceiver and something perceived, not every true description of that relation is a description that the perception justifies the perceiver in accepting as true. What the perception justifies the perceiver in accepting as true depends not only on the obtaining of the perceptual relation, but also on the particular way in which that relation is presented to the perceiver – a way that may be available to some perceivers but not others in virtue of their background knowledge, or their conceptual repertoire, etc.

Suppose that Percy looks at the same white cup for a long time. She starts looking at it before I am born, and she continues looking at it steadily for a decade, during which period I am born, I am shown the same white cup, and that white cup eventually becomes my favorite white cup. Percy has undergone a transition: she began the decade looking at a white cup that was not my favorite white cup, and she ended the decade looking at a white cup that was my favorite white cup. It’s numerically the same white cup, of course, but its properties are different. This is a difference that may be undetectable to Percy, and if it is, then it is not rationally incumbent on Percy to change any of her opinions about the white cup that she’s looking at, nor need there be any change in the opinions about the white cup that it is rationally incumbent on Percy to have at the beginning of the decade and at the end of it. (It may, of course, be rationally incumbent on her change her opinions about all sorts of other things, e.g., how bored she is of still looking at the same white cup.)

Now suppose that, instead of the white cup changing its relational properties during Percy’s decade-long view of it, something different happens: half-way through the decade, one white cup is very quickly replaced by a numerically distinct but visually indistinguishable white cup, and the replacement occurs in just a few nanoseconds – too quickly for Percy to see it happen. Percy spends the first half of the decade seeing cup 1, and spends the last half of the decade seeing cup 2. This is a difference in the object to whch Percy is perceptually related, but once again, this difference makes no difference to what opinions it is rationally incumbent on Percy to have at the beginning and at the end of the decade. Given the stipulations of the case, it is rationally incumbent on Percy to think that she’s been seeing the same cup throughout the decade (unless she has background evidence to the effect that such indiscernible switches happen around here).

But what if Percy begins the decade by seeing what she knows to be her favorite white cup. Since she knows that it is her favorite white cup that she’s seeing, it is rationally incumbent on her to be very confident that she is seeing her favorite white cup. But half-way through the decade, her favorite white cup is indiscernibly switched with a visually indistinguishable white cup. By the reasoning in the preceding paragraph, it will continue to be rationally incumbent on Percy to be very confident that she is seeing her favorite white cup – even though it is now false that she is seeing her favorite white cup. In other words, the reasoning that we’ve just endorsed implies that it can be rationally incumbent on a perceiver to invest a high degree of confidence in falsehoods about what she’s perceiving. Notice, though, that this does not imply that it can be rationally incumbent on a perceiver to *believe* falsehoods about what she’s perceiving: recall the distinction drawn above between belief and high confidence. What it is rationally incumbent on Percy to believe may change across visually indiscernible changes in the identity of the cup that she sees, even if nothing about her rational degrees of confidence changes. Rational degrees of confidence are determined by evidential support, but rational *belief* may be determined by other factors in addition.

In each of the transitions described above, what changes across the transition is the identity or the properties of the cup that Percy sees. But the same verdicts should hold for other indiscernible changes, including a change from Percy’s situation to Hallie’s: in such a case, the transitioning subject’s rational degrees of confidence at the beginning of the transition should be just as they should be at the end. But, since rational confidence is determined by evidential support, how does this fit with the implication of BETTER BASIS that the subject has better evidence at one end of the transition than at the other?

To see how this can work, consider the following two situations:

You see a seemingly fair coin flipped 10 times, and it comes up heads five times and tails five times. The track record confirms that the coin is fair, and so you should have confidence .5 that the coin will come up heads on the next toss.

You see a seemingly fair coin flipped 10,000 times, and it comes up heads 5,000 times and tails 5,000 times. The track record confirms that the coin is fair, and so you should have confidence .5 that the coin will come up heads on the next toss.

In both of these two situations, you should have confidence .5 that the coin will come up heads on the next toss, but this confidence is based on stronger evidence in the second situation than in the first. Additional evidence concerning some hypothesis need not always alter the degree of confidence that the evidence-possessing agent should invest in the hypothesis.

But the contrast between Percy’s perceptual evidence and Hallie’s is not a contrast in quantity, but in kind: Percy’s evidence concerning the white cup is of a different kind than Hallie’s, and not simply more of the same. Percy’s evidence set includes, or entails, the presence of the white cup, whereas Hallie’s doesn’t. So how can Percy’s rational degree of confidence concerning the white cup be the same as Hallie’s?

We’ve assumed here that an agent’s rational degree of confidence in a hypothesis is fixed by the support that that hypothesis receives from the agent’s evidence. And we’ve also granted that Percy has evidence that Hallie lacks, and that Percy’s evidence entails or includes the presence of the white cup, whereas Hallie’s doesn’t. How can both of these claims be true? Here’s how: the degree to which an agent’s evidence supports a proposition is a product *not just* of what evidence the agent has, and the normative relation between that evidence and the hypothesis in question. *It is also a product of how confident the agent should be of that evidence itself.* We can illustrate this point by specifying further features of Percy’s case and Hallie’s case.

Suppose that Hallie hallucinates a white cup, and that, given her total evidence, it is rational for her to be 95% confident that she successfully perceives a white cup, and 99% confident that it appears to her as if she perceives a white cup.

Now, suppose that Percy successful perceives a white cup, and that her evidence therefore includes the fact that she perceives a white cup. Does it follow that she must be more than 95% confident that she successfully perceives a white cup? That follows only if we must be rationally certain of each element of our evidence. But why should anyone assume that? Much of what we ordinarily take to be our evidence consists of facts concerning which we have slightly less than maximal confidence: why should we assume that appearances are here misleading, and that it is rationally incumbent on us to be maximally certain of everything in our evidence? Of course, it may be rationally incumbent on us to be highly confident of the conjunction of our evidence – but satisfying that requirement (if it is, as I believe, a requirement) does not require that we have maximal confidence of each element of our evidence: we could have less than maximal confidence in each element, so long as those elements are probabilistically interrelated in such a way that my rational confidence in their conjunction is not much lower than the lowest level of rational confidence in any individual element.

Percy’s evidence set can include facts about the white cup missing from Hallie’s evidence set, but this does not entail that Percy should be more confident of propositions about the white cup than Hallie is: Percy’s rational degree of confidence is determined by evidential support, but evidential support is determined not just by what it is in Percy’s evidence set, but also by how confident it is rational for Percy to be concerning those contents of her evidence set.

The proponent of BETTER BASIS can give a satisfactory answer to the present question concerning rational confidence so long as she grants that it is not rationally incumbent upon an agent to be maximally confident of every proposition in her evidence set. But granting this will raise a worry[[15]](#footnote-15): if we grant that Percy’s rational degrees of confidence need not differ from Hallie’s, then why so much as bother distinguishing a subject’s evidence, on the one hand, from any other factors that determines that subject’s rational degrees of confidence, on the other? If a diminution of evidence can be traded off against an increase in the subject’s rational confidence in the evidence she maintains, or if an augmentation of evidence can be traded off against a decrease in the subject’s rational confidence in that evidence, then why bother trying to separate out these two components that determine a subject’s rational confidence? And if we have no reason to separate out these two components, then why engage in the kind of theorizing about evidence that involves claims like BETTER BASIS in the first place?

Although I think BETTER BASIS has no immediate implications concerning the degree of confidence that it is rationally incumbent on us to have in various hypotheses, determining such degrees of rational confidence is not the only work that having evidence is supposed to do. What evidence you have has implications not only for your degrees of rational confidence, but also, as I’ve argued elsewhere, for what it is rational for you to *believe*, and what it is possible for you to *know*.[[16]](#footnote-16) But why do belief and knowledge matter? Why should epistemologists talk about anything other than rational degrees of confidence, and the evidence that fixes those? These are questions for another paper – or rather several other papers.

In brief, my answer to them is similar to, but not quite the same as, Williamson’s. As I have argued elsewhere, the evidence that fixes an agent’s rational distribution of confidence across hypotheses consists of all and only those facts that the agent is in a position to know non-inferentially.[[17]](#footnote-17) If we are interested in rational degrees of confidence, then we must be interested in evidential support, and so in what evidence an agent possesses, and so in what it is that puts us in a position to gain non-inferential knowledge. Even if the proponent and the opponent of BETTER BASIS can make all the same predictions concerning our rational degrees of confidence, they are committed to offering differing explanations of these predictions. The reason for accepting BETTER BASIS is not that it makes more accurate predictions than other views, but rather that it can do a better job of explaining those same predictions.[[18]](#footnote-18)

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1. Pritchard 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See McDowell 2011, especially section 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. McDowell 2011, section 11 discusses a case of an experimental subject who possesses a fully normal capacity to know the colors of things by looking at them, but is given misleading information that impedes her successful exercise of this capacity: once she possesses the misleading information, she can continue to see things by looking at them, but can no longer come to know their colors by seeing them. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Williamson 2000, 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Schellenberg 2013, 699. See Schellenberg 2016 for more discussion of the difference between Percy and Hallie. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Neta 2008b. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Neta 2008a. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The answer I provide in the remainder of this paragraph is an abbreviated form of the answer given in Neta 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Nelkin 2000, Weiner 2005, and Smith 2010 all argue that statistical evidence in favor of p can serve as grounds for believing that p. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Neta 2008b for an elaboration of this thought in response to the criticism of disjunctivism in Johnston 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Schellenberg 2016, 945. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Williamson 2009, 333. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. E.g., Williamson 2013, 92: “In a sceptical scenario, beliefs only partially supported by one’s evidence appear to be fully supported by it.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Williamson 2009, 336: “it is *not* reasonable to have the greatest possible degree of confidence in a complex unproved logical truth on present evidence. We should rightly regard someone who bet everything he held most dear for trivial gain on such a logical truth as far more deserving of criticism than someone who refused the bet.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In conversation, it’s raised a technical worry in addition to the one discussed in the text, since Jeffrey Conditionalization is the standard model of credal updating with uncertain evidence. What about the worry raised by Weisberg 2009 that Jeffrey Conditionalization cannot accommodate both holism and commutativity? This worry is based on a pair of confusions. First, as Weisberg notes, this same worry applies to regular conditionalization as well, so letting evidence be less than certain has nothing to do with generating the worry. Second, the way to accommodate both commutativity and holism is to follow Field’s strategy of mapping experiences onto evidence, but letting the right mapping depend on the whole temporal sequence – past, present, and future – of the subject’s experience. Understood thus, conditionalization is not a usable “update rule”. But it was never meant to be: it’s a wide-scope diachronic constraint on credences, not a narrow-scope constraint on activity, let alone a *guide* to intellectual conduct. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Neta 2008 on the implications of evidence for what it is rational for you to believe. See Neta forthcoming on the implications for what it is possible for you to know. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Neta forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Neta 2011 argues on these grounds for an internalist version of BETTER BASIS.

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