

Response to Kaplan's 'Coming to Terms with our Human Fallibility: A Response to Christensen'

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It's natural to think that one's rational belief set should be *deductively cogent* (DC): it should contain everything logically implied by its members, and no contradictions among them. But Christensen (2004) argues that (DC) is no such constraint on rational beliefs.

The problem for (DC) is that in preface cases we naturally ascribe to X beliefs in each of the propositions in the book, hence the belief that all such propositions are true, while we also naturally ascribe to X the belief that her book contains errors. All of them seem rational yet the ascribed set is inconsistent. Friends of (DC) typically deny that X is rational in believing:

Excessively Modest Preface Proposition: This book contains errors

They're compelled by closure of rational belief to accept that X is rational in believing:

Immodest Preface Proposition: There're no errors in this book

But Christensen (2004, 45-9) argues that it's irrational of X to form belief in the book's inerrancy. He makes four assumptions: (i) X's book is of significant ambition; (ii) X happily recognises that all her own previous books contained errors; (iii) X readily acknowledges that Y and Z aren't less careful or thorough; (iv) X is aware that Y's and Z's books were found to contain errors. (A) *Unequal treatment*. Given that X has no evidence to suggest that her new book is less subject to error than any other similar book by Y, Z or herself, she ought not treat epistemically similar cases differently. (B) *Internal incongruity* of:

(Odd I) There're no errors in this book, but it's overwhelmingly likely that it contains errors

Although such a statement falls short of strict inconsistency, ordinary rational speakers would certainly refrain from flatly making it in a context of inquiry.

Kaplan responds only to (B). He's a *bifurcation theorist*: being confident and being willing to say are distinct states. One can infer from being aware that p is improbable to not being willing to say that p only when one has a *special reason* to believe that p is false. The apparent impropriety of (Odd I) arises from failing to distinguish those states: since X has no reason beyond (i), X can flat out say that her book is error-free without being willing to say that it contains errors. X can also flatly say that it's overwhelmingly probable, hence that she's confident, that her book contains errors. But unlike *Excessively Modest Preface Proposition*, this assertion doesn't invite the charge of intellectual sloth.

But, by Kaplan's own lights, (i) – (iv) could jointly constitute a special reason. They are not circumstances that always obtain with respect to any ambitious book. But then X shouldn't be willing to say that the book is error-free yet X is committed by closure to asserting just that. Moreover, Kaplan thinks the inference from the probability of the book containing errors to being willing to assert the errancy of the book fails when the former derives exclusively from

(i). Again if (i) – (iv) amount to a special reason, then X should be willing to say that the book contains errors, and that contradicts her other commitment. So, we need to know more about special reasons for the purposes of such inferences.

Maybe in the context of *Excessively Modest Preface Proposition* a special reason must pertain to *particular* propositions in the book. After all, to say flat out that the book contains errors implies the possession of reason to believe exactly where those errors are. One can hardly be blamed for not correcting an error one doesn't know where is. Consider the retreat:

Modest Preface Proposition: Errors will be found somewhere in the body of this book

X correctly acknowledges that this proposition is highly probable. And seriously saying it doesn't warrant the charge of intellectual laziness. So, there's no reason why a special reason needs to concern particular assertions in the book. (i) – (iv) will do.

Kaplan seems to think that since *Excessively Modest Preface Proposition* is a known logical consequence of *Modest Preface Proposition*, asserting the latter implies possession of the *same* special reason that an assertion of the former implies. But suppose I say that the liquid in the bottle isn't merely coloured water. That implies I have some gustatory reason. But I may have just visual reason to believe there's wine in the bottle even though I know the entailment. This backtracking of reasons isn't sanctioned by closure of reasons.

So, the inference from high probability to willingness to assert should go through: X ought to be willing to say not just that X is confident that errors will be found somewhere in her book, but straight out that errors will be found somewhere in the book. But X is also rationally committed by closure to saying that there are no errors in the book. Now conjoin *Modest Preface Proposition* with *Immodest Preface Proposition*:

(Odd II) There're no errors in this book, but errors will be found somewhere in the body of this book

Whereas the second clause in (Odd I) is qualified by a probability that prevents straightforward contradiction with its first clause, the second clause in (Odd II) entails the negation of its first clause. So, even if the intuition that (Odd I) is irrational can be explained away by distinguishing confidence from willingness to say, it isn't clear that the same strategy applies to (Odd II).