Both ordinary and theoretical explanations of human and animal behaviour tend to turn on the assumption that the agent in question has coherent, rational beliefs. But what does that assumption amount to, exactly? **Ideal** rationality, the standard typically assumed in doxastic logic and game theory, seems too strong for many purposes. It requires an agent to have perfectly consistent beliefs, and to be logically omniscient in the sense that their beliefs are closed under entailment. But while this can be a useful idealisation, it is often more than we need to assume, and in some cases it is clearly too much. For example, the purchase of a calculator only makes sense if the buyer is *not* ideally rational. And if we are trying to understand the behaviour of someone who is attempting to solve a Rubik’s cube, the assumption of ideal rationality is a non-starter: an ideally rational agent would instantly know how to solve the cube, simply by observing its scrambled state. To really achieve ideal rationality would require instantaneous computational powers and an infinite memory. Ordinary, finite creatures like ourselves do not just fall short of that ideal: we do not even come anywhere close.

So there is a theoretical need for a less demanding, more realistic standard of doxastic rationality. This need arises in philosophy and a range of other disciplines where belief-based explanations of behaviour play a role, like psychology, economics, legal theory, political theory and computer science. This lower standard should be attainable, and for the most part attained, by real-world believers like ourselves, with finite cognitive and computational resources. But it should still be high enough to sustain ordinary and theoretical belief-based explanations of behaviour.

An early advocate for such an attainable standard of rationality was Christopher Cherniak (1986). Cherniak’s outline for a theory of what he dubbed *minimal* rationality will be our starting point here. It goes roughly like this. A minimally rational subject may not see every consequence of their beliefs, but they do generally see the *direct* consequences. And while their beliefs may contain inconsistencies, a minimally rational believer at least avoids *blatant* inconsistencies. Cherniak’s account also has an important dynamic aspect: when the need arises, minimally rational agents will reliably make straightforward deductive inferences from their beliefs. But the harder an inference gets, and the more cognitive resources it requires, the less likely a subject is to perform it.

In developing this view, the challenge is to flesh out the operative notions of a direct consequence, a

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1 To appear in Kindermann, Van Elswyk and Egan (eds.) *Unstructured Content*. Oxford University Press.
blatant inconsistency and the difficulty of an inference in ways that steer clear of both triviality and over-idealisation. If we render the notion of minimal rationality too weak, and allow in chaotic belief states that resemble “a collection of mynah bird utterances or snippets from the New York Times” (p. 6), then the notion ceases to have predictive or explanatory value. But if we make the notion too strong, it might collapse into ideal rationality or something uncomfortably close. There are strong pressures from both sides, making this a notoriously difficult balance to strike.

In this chapter, I show that a simple and intuitive solution to this challenge naturally suggests itself once we take on board a conception of belief advocated by Seth Yalcin (2011, 2018) and others: namely the view that the contents of our beliefs are answers to specific questions, and not undirected pieces of information. On the account of minimal rationality I propose, minimally rational beliefs are linked together by their thematic connections rather than their entailment relations. This yields a new, cognitively plausible conception of rational doxastic states. On this view, a minimally rational subject’s beliefs are not perfectly integrated like those of an ideally rational subject. But neither are they partitioned into isolated compartments, as in fragmentation theories of belief. Rather, all their views hang together directly or indirectly in what is best described as a web of questions.

A distinctive feature of this approach is that it is rooted in an unstructured or non-syntactic view of belief content. This is a departure from the norm. At least in the philosophy literature, nearly all extant accounts of minimal or bounded rationality are built on the assumption that belief contents are imbued with syntactic structure. Given that state of affairs, one could be forgiven for thinking that it is impossible to articulate a plausible notion of minimal rationality unless one embraces the view that belief contents are syntactically structured. This contributes to the impression that unstructured views of belief content only apply to heavily idealised subjects, and are inadequate for more realistic contexts, where notions like minimal rationality become important.

One core aim of this chapter is to help dispel that impression. As I will seek to show, the theory of minimal rationality proposed here holds its own against the syntax-based competition, and even has some clear advantages. It is more elegant and principled, and makes a sharp division between minimal rationality and irrationality, rather than leaving that boundary arbitrary or vague. I agree with the criticism that the traditional view of belief contents as sets of possible worlds makes an

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2 Computer science has the awareness-based strategy of Fagin and Halpern 1988. See also Sim 1997, Schipper 2015, Franke and de Jager 2011, Egré and Bonnay 2012, Fritz and Lederman 2015. This approach is not essentially syntactic, and has affinities with my proposal below. But it cannot capture the notion of minimal rationality I am aiming for here, because it precludes the possibility of rational inconsistencies (see §2 below).
inauspicious starting point for a theory of minimal rationality. But in this chapter I hope to show that this critique, while valid, does not carry over to the new crop of theories of unstructured propositions, such as the hyperintensional views articulated in Ciardelli, Roelofsen and Groenendijk 2013, Yablo 2014, Fine 2016, 2017 and the present volume.

Sections I-IV below concern the static aspects of minimal rationality. Sections I and II describe the more or less familiar difficulties one encounters when trying to combine a traditional, intensional account of belief content with the notions of a direct consequence or a blatant inconsistency. This takes the form of two puzzles about minimal rationality: one about closure and the other about consistency. In the light of those difficulties, Section III describes a hyperintensional notion of belief contents, and outlines a natural account of minimal, static rationality on this basis. Section IV then revisits the two puzzles we started with, explaining how the new account resolves each one.

Sections V-VII move on to the dynamic aspect of minimal rationality. Section V introduces a third puzzle about minimal rationality. It argues that the intensional, sets-of-worlds view of belief content faces serious difficulties in making sense of Cherniak’s observation that some deductive inferences are much harder to perform than others. Section VI sketches a model of deductive inquiry as a question-guided endeavour. This model naturally arises from the account of minimally rational belief states developed in the first half of the paper. Section VII shows how this model makes sense of the distinction between easy and difficult deductive inferences, identifying three cognitive obstacles suggested by this model: conceptual barriers that prevent us from asking certain “novel” questions, computational limitations that prevent us from asking certain “big” questions, and strategic limitations that prevent us from identifying the right question to ask.

1. A Puzzle About Closure

Suppose I am of the opinion that it is 8.30pm. It would be natural to infer from this that apparently, I believe that it is not 4.30pm, and that it’s evening, and that it is not yet 9 o’clock. Or suppose Amy thinks October 31st will be a warm, cloudy Tuesday. Then presumably she also thinks that October 31st is a Tuesday, that October 31st will be a warm day and that It will be cloudy on October 31st. Thus our ordinary belief attributions bear out the assumption that when you believe something, you also believe some of its entailments (at least if you are rational). Ideal theories of rationality capture this with the assumption that beliefs are closed under single-premise entailment:

   **Ideal Closure.** Whenever a rational agent believes something, they believe all of its
consequences. That is, if $\phi \vdash \psi$, then also $B\phi \vdash B\psi$.

(Here the operator “$B$” is to be interpreted as standing for “$X$ believes that”, where $X$ is an arbitrary rational believer.)

But given that our present aim is to capture our ordinary, minimal rationality assumptions, Ideal Closure should be rejected. For example, suppose Joe believes that there are exactly thirteen cartons of a dozen eggs in the box. It does not intuitively follow that Joe believes there are exactly 156 eggs in the box: Joe can be (minimally) rational without having bothered to make the calculation. A different sort of counterexample to Ideal Closure is emphasised in the literature on attention (e.g. Franke and de Jager 2011). Suppose Emma thinks that the car keys are nowhere in the house. Does it follow that she believes that the car keys are not in the second drawer of the little wooden cabinet by the front door? The answer seems to be no: Emma may not have considered that particular possibility. Then there are cases involving conceptual limitations, like the following case from Stalnaker 1984 (p. 88). King William believed he could avoid war with France. But he did not, intuitively, believe that he could avoid nuclear war with France. As an eighteenth century monarch, William lacked the concept of nuclear war.

So what we need is some weakening of Ideal Closure:

**Minimal Closure.** Whenever a rational agent believes something, they believe all of its direct consequences. That is, if $\psi$ is a direct consequence of $\phi$, then $B\phi \vdash B\psi$.

In articulating the crucial notion of a “direct” consequence here, we need to tread carefully: by closing beliefs under direct consequence, we allow in the direct consequences of those direct consequences as well. And their direct consequences, and so on. The worry is that this will lead us to rather indirect consequences. Before you know it, Minimal Closure collapses back into Ideal Closure: it is a familiar fact that even very remote consequences can often be reached through a long sequence of simple steps.

But the collapse from Minimal Closure into closure under remote consequence is not inevitable. The key is to identify a notion of direct consequence that is transitive. As long as any direct consequence of a direct consequence of $\phi$ is itself an already a direct consequence of $\phi$, we stay out of trouble. That way, there is no risk of finding any indirect consequences amongst the direct consequences of the direct consequences. Anticipating a little, Cherniak envisioned a hierarchy of deductive inferences partially ordered by difficulty. The higher up an inference is in the hierarchy, the greater the cognitive resources it requires. All the way at the bottom of the hierarchy are deductions that carry no cost at all. An uncontroversial example should the reiteration rule $\phi \therefore \phi$. Clearly reiteration requires no
cognitive effort: if you believe $\phi$ then ipso facto you believe $\phi$ (as such, reiteration barely deserves the name inference at all). Now as long as we are careful to restrict the moniker “direct consequence” to these sorts of zero-cost inferences all the way at the bottom of the hierarchy, the feared collapse will not occur. For while a long sequence of low-cost steps adds up to a costly procedure, a long sequence of zero-cost steps still costs nothing (cf. the treatment of System I inferences of Solaki et al. 2019).

To have a non-trivial Minimal Closure condition, some inferences besides reiteration must be counted as direct. Cherniak identifies a plausible class of such inferences, namely instances of conjunction elimination: $(\phi \land \psi) \therefore \phi$ (Cherniak 1986, p. 28). Cherniak places conjunction eliminations at the very bottom of his hierarchy. So according to him, they count as direct, zero-effort inferences if any inferences do.$^3$ Looking at a few examples, this suggestion accords very well with intuition: if Jill believes that tigers and zebras are striped, it seems to follow that she believes tigers are striped. And if she thinks John is nasty, brutish and short, clearly she believes that John is short.

Cherniak’s suggestion here is based on a widely attested intuition. In fact, conjunction elimination is so straightforward that it seems questionable whether it is properly speaking an inference at all, or if it is really a repetition of what was said (see e.g. Dretske 1970, Vardi 1986, Jago 2013, Yablo 2014, Fine 2016). As Yablo likes to put it: anybody who believes that $(\phi \land \psi)$ already believes that $\phi$ (Yablo 2014, p. 116). Note also that conjunction elimination is transitive in the desired way. By positing that a minimally rational agents believes the conjuncts of their beliefs, we do not risk letting in anything besides conjuncts: for the conjuncts of the conjuncts of a sentence are themselves also conjuncts of the original sentence.

So plausibly, if there are non-trivial direct inferences at all, conjunction eliminations should be amongst them: intuitively, inferences just do not get any easier. If we take that idea on board, then any non-trivial Minimal Closure condition must entail the following:

**Closure under Conjunction Elimination.** When a rational agent believes a conjunction, they also believe its conjuncts. That is, $B(\phi \land \psi) \models B\phi$ and $B(\phi \land \psi) \models B\psi$.

Summing up, we want a Minimal Closure constraint that is intermediate in strength between Closure under Conjunction Elimination and Ideal Closure. In other words, we are aiming for an account of

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$^3$ I am assuming that some inferences are zero-effort and automatic. But I should say that there is some unclarity about whether Cherniak thinks any inferences are truly direct in this sense. Cherniak vacillates a little on this point: some remarks clearly imply that these bottom-rung, maximally easy inferences are indeed completely automatic, while others suggest they are just very low-effort (see esp. §1.4 and §2.6-7).
rationality that endorses *Closure under Conjunction Elimination* but rejects *Ideal Closure*.

The Puzzle about Closure arises when we try to combine that desideratum with the traditional unstructured view of belief as a relation between agents and sets of possible worlds, or indeed any view of belief that endorses the following venerable principle of doxastic logic:

**Intensionality.** If two propositions are (truth-conditionally) equivalent, agents believe one just in case they believe the other: if $\phi \equiv \psi$, then $B\phi \equiv B\psi$.

The problem is that, given *Intensionality*, *Closure under Conjunction Elimination* is equivalent to *Ideal Closure*. For suppose $\phi$ entails $\psi$. Then $\phi$ is equivalent to $(\phi \land \psi)$, so that believing $\phi$ comes to the same thing as believing $(\phi \land \psi)$, on the intensional view of belief. So you can infer $\psi$ from $\phi$ by conjunction elimination. Given *Intensionality*, all single-premise inferences are instances of conjunction elimination. Thus we cannot reject *Ideal Closure* if we accept both *Intensionality* and *Closure under Conjunction Elimination*. The Puzzle about Closure is the resulting trilemma between rejecting *Intensionality*, rejecting *Closure under Conjunction Elimination* and accepting *Ideal Closure* (this problem is discussed in one form or other in Hawthorne 2009, Kripke 2011, Fine 2013 and Yablo 2014, Ch. 7).

To maintain *Intensionality* in the face of this puzzle, one has to give up the hope of finding a *Minimal Closure* constraint of the kind we just envisioned. For if you embrace the view that conjuncts are direct consequences, you are forced to say that *every* entailment is a direct consequence. That view endorses *Ideal Closure* for minimally rational subjects, which is problematic in view of the abundance of apparent counterexamples. On the other hand, if you think conjuncts are not direct consequences, then it is hard to see what direct inferences could plausibly remain: intuitively speaking, it does not get easier than conjunction elimination. Either way, there is no space for a *Minimal Closure* principle that occupies a comfortable middle ground between *Ideal Closure* and triviality, because *Intensionality* obliterates the distinction between direct and remote consequences. If you take the demand for a notion of minimal rationality seriously, that is a strong reason to reject *Intensionality*.

However, rejecting *Intensionality* is not enough to solve the puzzle. For in fairness to the intensional view of belief, it must be said that its “structured” competitors do not directly shed any great light on the distinction between direct and remote consequences either. Syntax-based views of doxastic rationality typically understand rationality as the result of a series of syntactic operations on a belief state. Belief states here are either modelled as a set of sentences or syntactically structured propositions (a *belief box*), or as a set of impossible worlds, where those worlds are in turn sets of
sentences. Bounded or minimal rationality is the product of applying deductive inference rules of limited difficulty to such a set, involving sentences of limited length, using a limited number of reasoning steps, etcetera. On this picture, ideal rationality is the theoretical limit of the process, where no more steps can be taken. Proposals in this tradition include Cherniak’s theory, Eberle 1974, Moore and Hendrix 1979, Konolige 1986, Gaifman 2004, Bjerring 2013, Smets and Solaki 2018 and Solaki, Berto and Smets 2019; for syntactic approaches based on non-classical logic, see Cresswell 1975, 1985, Levesque 1984 and Fagin, Halpern and Vardi 1995.

Views like these can easily capture Closure under Conjunction Elimination without collapsing into Closure under Entailment. The problem is where to take it from there. What other inferences are direct? Is the inference from \((\phi \lor \psi)\) to \((\psi \lor \phi)\) direct? Or the inference from \((\phi \supset \psi) \land \phi\) to \(\psi\)? Even if it is clear from the outset that all sorts of lines can be drawn here, the view gives us no guidance about which one to pick. For this reason, syntactic accounts of minimal closure tend to involve a good amount of arbitrariness or vagueness. Moreover, views in this tradition are maladapted to capture the intuition that, say, *It’s evening* is a direct consequence of *It’s 8.30pm*. Sentences do not in general seem to bear any simple, uniform syntactic relationship to their direct consequences.

Ideally, we would like a solution to the Puzzle about Closure that yields some insight about minimal rationality, and gives us some principled guidance on how the Minimal Closure principle should be formulated. If that is our aim, then simply rejecting Intensionality does not cut it: what we need in its place is a view of belief contents that, unlike the intensional and syntactic views, does something to illuminate the relation that propositions bear to their direct consequences.

## II. A Puzzle About Consistency

Consider a pedestrian example of deductive closure failure. I know I have to go to Sarah’s birthday party. And I also know that Sarah’s birthday is this Wednesday. But I have not put two and two together yet to form the belief that my Wednesday night is taken. Consequently, when that question arises, I consult my diary. Finding it tells me I have Wednesday evening free, I believe it. Assuming I still have my beliefs about Sarah’s birthday, my beliefs have now become inconsistent. In this way,

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4 Shouldn’t sets of impossible worlds be classified as unstructured contents? The superficial similarity with sets of possible worlds suggests as much, but that appearance is misleading. See for instance Jago 2015 on the similarity between impossible worlds-based and Russellian accounts of propositions. Unlike possible worlds, impossible worlds are typically characterised as collections of sentences, and views like Jago 2013 and Smets and Solaki 2018 rely heavily on this syntactic character of impossible worlds.
deductive limitations are inevitably accompanied by some vulnerability to inconsistency.\footnote{In fact, this example involves two failures of deductive closure: first, a failure to form the belief that Wednesday night is taken, and later a failure to appreciate that if Wednesday night were really free, it would follow that I do not have to go to Sarah’s birthday party on Wednesday.} That is not to say I believe a straight-up contradiction. Intuitively, it would not be correct to say that I believe, for instance, that I have Wednesday evening free even though I have to go to Sarah’s birthday party then.

So any plausible theory of minimal rationality must countenance the possibility of inconsistent beliefs, but that does not mean anything goes. Minimal Closure allows us to make inferences, from the fact that a rational agent has certain beliefs, about what other beliefs they must have. But as Cherniak argues, minimal rationality also ought to sustain some inferences from the beliefs a subject has to the beliefs that they must therefore lack (Cherniak 1986, §1.5). So while minimally rational agents cannot be immune to inconsistency, we will want to rule out blatant inconsistencies. That is to say, we should reject Ideal Consistency but accept Minimal Consistency:

**Ideal Consistency.** A rational agent’s beliefs are consistent. That is, if $\phi_1, \phi_2, \ldots, \phi_n \vdash \bot$, then $B\phi_1, B\phi_2, \ldots, B\phi_{n-1} \vdash \neg B\phi_n$.

**Minimal Consistency.** Rational agents do not believe blatant inconsistencies: if $\phi_1, \phi_2 \ldots \phi_n$ are blatantly inconsistent, then $B\phi_1, B\phi_2, \ldots, B\phi_{n-1} \vdash \neg B\phi_n$.

To articulate Minimal Consistency further, the notion of a “blatant” inconsistency must be filled in.

To begin with, the discussion above suggested that outright contradictions cannot be rationally believed, and should be counted as blatant inconsistencies. Then Minimal Consistency entails:

**Avoidance of Contradictions.** Rational agents do not believe contradictions. That is, if $\phi \vdash \bot$, then $\vdash \neg B\phi$.

But with this principle alone, we cannot yet ground inferences about the beliefs an agent lacks from the beliefs they have. For that, we have to ask which inconsistencies between multiple beliefs count as blatant. Cherniak suggests contradictories are examples of this kind (i.e. a proposition and its negation). That is, if a minimally rational person believes $\phi$, they do not believe $\neg \phi$ as well (p. 16). As with conjunction elimination, Cherniak’s intuition about contradictories is widely shared (in particular, the notions of minimally rational belief of Vardi 1986, Bjerring 2013, Jago 2013 and Solaki et al. 2019 underwrite this principle.) So plausibly, Minimal Consistency should also entail the following principle, in addition to Avoidance of Contradictions:

**Avoidance of Contradictories.** Rational agents do not believe contradictories: $B\phi \vdash \neg B\neg \phi$. 
The Puzzle about Consistency arises from the tension between this conception of minimal consistency and another venerable principle of doxastic logic:

**Ideal Adjunction.** If a rational agent believes some things, they also believe their conjunction. That is, $B\phi, B\psi \vdash B(\phi \land \psi)$.

If we assume *Ideal Adjunction*, then *Ideal Consistency* is equivalent to *Avoidance of Contradictions*. (For suppose an agent believes the inconsistent propositions $\phi_1, \phi_2, \ldots, \phi_n$. Then given *Ideal Adjunction* they would also believe $(\phi_1 \land \phi_2 \land \ldots \land \phi_n)$, which is a contradiction.) Thus accepting *Ideal Adjunction* makes it impossible to formulate a Minimal Consistency condition that is intermediate in strength between *Ideal Consistency* and *Avoidance of Contradictions*. In Section I we saw that *Intentionality* collapses the distinction between *Ideal* and *Minimal Closure*, and the distinction between proximate and remote consequences. In a similar way, *Ideal Adjunction* collapses the distinction between *Ideal* and *Minimal Consistency*, and the distinction between blatant and hidden inconsistencies.

Consequently, just as the theoretical demand for *Minimal Closure* casts doubt on *Intensionality*, so the need for *Minimal Consistency* casts doubt on *Ideal Adjunction*. This doubt is reinforced by the fact that cases of conflicting beliefs typically make for intuitive counterexamples to *Ideal Adjunction*. For instance, suppose I believe that Ann will come to the party even though I have some information that rules this out. Perhaps I know that Tom was also invited and also that Ann avoids Tom like the plague. If someone were to point this out, I would revise my belief that Ann will come. But as things stand, I have the belief that Ann will come, and the belief that Tom will come, but I intuitively lack the belief that Ann and Tom will both come.


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6 To take account of the possibility of infinitary inconsistencies, *Ideal Adjunction* would need to be modified to cover infinitary adjunctions as well.

7 The case against *Ideal Adjunction* is admittedly less clear-cut than the case against *Intensionality*, because the status of contradictions as blatant inconsistencies is intuitively less secure than the status of conjuncts as direct consequences. In particular, you could have a view of blatant inconsistency that rules in some contradictions but not others. Such an account could combine a commitment to *Ideal Adjunction* with a non-trivial Minimal Consistency constraint that entails *Avoidance of Contradictories*, say, but not *Avoidance of Contradictions*. However, that way out of the puzzle is not available for those who endorse *Ideal Closure*, as many of the fragmentation theorists cited below do. For given *Ideal Adjunction* and *Ideal Closure*, any agent with inconsistent beliefs believes every proposition. That makes *Ideal Consistency* equivalent to *Avoidance of Contradictories* and to any other non-trivial consistency constraint you could come up with.
false because our beliefs are divided into distinct, compartmentalised belief systems. Each fragment is individually consistent, and the conjunctions of beliefs within a single fragment are believed. But if the belief that $\phi$ is part of one fragment and the belief that $\psi$ is part of another fragment, then the belief $(\phi \land \psi)$ need not be part of any fragment.

The fragmentation view denies Ideal Consistency while accepting Avoidance of Contradictories. So it has a Minimal Consistency condition of sorts. But I think this condition is far too weak to make for a satisfactory solution to the puzzle. It does not do justice to the idea that what we know about the beliefs someone has should tell us something about the beliefs they lack. By design, the fragmentation view does not sustain any such inferences. The beliefs in different fragments are compartmentalised and do not constrain one another. So switch fragments, and all bets are off. In particular, a fragmentation account of rational belief would not sustain Avoidance of Contradictories: a fragmented agent may believe $\phi$ and simultaneously believe $\neg\phi$ as part of some other fragment. So a truly fragmented agent is not minimally rational in Cherniak’s sense.8

One could add a stipulation that belief fragments are to be pairwise consistent. That formal fix does give you Avoidance of Contradictories, but it seems rather ad hoc. The move also goes against the spirit of the fragmentation view: how are the fragments supposed to stay pairwise consistent if they are compartmentalised? Furthermore, once you allow such add-on stipulations, we get perhaps more freedom than we want. Why stop at pairwise consistency, for instance? What about a constraint that any four fragments need to be mutually consistent? Or any five? A more satisfactory solution to the Puzzle about Consistency would yield insight into minimal rationality, and provide some guidance for how to explicate the intuitive notion of blatant inconsistency.

III. Question-Specific Beliefs

In this section I outline a new account of static minimal rationality to address these two puzzles. The starting point for my account is a view of cognitive content that has defend by Seth Yalcin (2011, 2018) and many others8 on a range of philosophical, linguistic and psychological grounds: namely the view that the objects of belief are answers to specific questions, instead of undirected pieces of information about the world. According to that view, believing that Paul is going to Paris next week in

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8 This relates to a deeper worry about the idea of using fragmentation to capture minimal rationality. The choices of a fragmented agent are guided by different fragments on different occasions (Elga and Rayo 2019). Even if their beliefs are assumed to stay fixed, the beliefs that guide an agent now are not guaranteed to be in effect in five minutes: they might switch fragments in the interval. For this reason, fragmentation threatens to undermine the very coherence that minimal rationality is specifically intended to capture (Norby 2014, §3.5 of Hoek 2019).
answer to the question *When is Paul going to Paris* is not the same thing as believing that *Paul is going to Paris next week* in answer to the question *Where is Paul going next week*. These beliefs have the same truth conditions, but they answer different questions. Likewise, the belief that *Either emus can fly or they can’t* is distinct from the intensionally equivalent belief that *Either it is snowing or it isn’t* because those beliefs answer different questions: *Can emus fly* versus *Is it snowing*. In belief reports, these distinctions can sometimes be marked using word choice or focus.

To distinguish those hyperintensional belief contents from other kinds of propositions, I will call them *quizpositions*, short for question-specific propositions. We will model questions as partitions of logical space (in the tradition of Hamblin 1958, Lewis 1988, Groenendijk and Stokhof 1997):

A (partition) question $Q$ is a partition of logical space $\Omega$. The cells $q \in Q$ of this partition are called $Q$-cells. When two worlds $w$ and $v$ share a $Q$-cell, we write $w \sim_Q v$. Any set of $Q$-cells $A \subseteq Q$ is an answer to $Q$.

A question-specific proposition or quizposition is an ordered pair $\langle Q, A \rangle$, also denoted $A^Q$, consisting of the partition question $Q$ that $A^Q$ is said to be about, and some answer $A \subseteq Q$. The quizposition $A^Q$ is true at a $Q$-cell $q$ if and only if $q \in A$, and it is true at a world $w$ if and only if $w \in \bigcup A$.

The singleton sets $\{ q \} \subseteq Q$ are complete answers to the question $Q$; all other non-empty subsets of $Q$ represent partial answers. For instance, *There are fewer than ten people in the room* is a partial answer to the question *How many people are there in the room*. Any question $Q$ has a tautologous answer $Q$ and an absurd answer $\emptyset$; the corresponding quizpositions are written $Q^Q$ and $\bot^Q$.

How does the move to quizpositions help us formulate a principled notion of minimal rationality? The detailed answer will take up the remainder of the paper, but let me give a brief sketch now. The intensional, sets-of-worlds account of belief explicates belief in terms of our ability to rule out ways the world could be. This picture ignores the role of another, prior cognitive ability: namely our ability

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9 “Others” include Dretske 1970, Schaffer 2004, Egré and Bonnay 2012, Blaauw 2013, Koralus and Mascarenhas 2013, 2018, Yablo 2014 (chapter 7), Fritz and Lederman 2015, Pérez Carballo 2016, Friedman 2017, Simons, Beaver, Tonhauser and Roberts 2017, Bledin and Rawlins 2018 and Holguín 2019. The main development from Yalcin’s question-sensitive theory of belief to the account below is the specification of coherence constraints between agents’ answers to different questions: as a fragmentation theorist, Yalcin posits no such constraints. Another difference is that for Yalcin, the contents of beliefs are still sets of worlds, and not question-specific propositions. In Yalcin 2018, he draws explicit attention to the fact that his account still validates *Intensionality*, which he labels “Closure under Necessarily Equivalence”. Yalcin does in effect propose a solution to the Puzzle about Closure, but that solution accepts *Intensionality* and rejects *Closure under Conjunction Elimination* instead.
to distinguish between various possibilities in the first place. In taking beliefs to be sets of possible worlds, the traditional account in some sense presupposes that believers individuate possibilities maximally finely, and have already made every distinction there is to make.

The question-directed view of belief eliminates that idealisation. It holds that, prior to forming any contingent beliefs, the agent first has to map out the relevant space of possibilities: the relevant question, in other words. If the question Q has four cells, say, then believing a quizposition \( A^Q \) only requires one to distinguish those four possibilities. Coming to understand a particular question is itself a substantive cognitive achievement, requiring cognitive resources. In view of this, it is natural to assume that doxastic rationality constrains how the answers we have to different questions cohere, but does not require us to ask particular questions, any more than it requires us to give particular answers. Following that line of thought, a picture will emerge of a minimally rational believer whose deductive achievements and limitations can be systematically understood in terms of the possibilities they have and have not distinguished, and the questions they have and have not asked.

**Question Mereology**

In natural language, interrogatives are conjoined in the same way as declarative sentences. This naturally gives rise to a notion of question conjunction and the related notion of question parthood, both of which will be important in what is to come. Consider for example the conjunctive question *How many stars are there and how many planets are there*. One complete answer to that question is exactly twenty-five stars and three planets, and in general any complete answer to the conjunctive question is a conjunction of a complete answer to *How many stars are there* and a complete answer to *How many planets are there*. Generalising that pattern, we get the following definition:

The **conjunction** of two questions Q and R, written QR, is the question

\[
QR := \{ (q \cap r) : q \in Q \text{ and } r \in R \} \setminus \{\emptyset\}
\]

QR is the partition such that \( w \sim_{QR} v \) if and only if \( w \sim_{Q} v \) and \( w \sim_{R} v \). \( (c) \)

Not every partial answer to QR is a conjunction of an answer to Q and an answer to R: for instance, one partial answer to *How many stars and planets are there* is *There are more planets than stars*.

Note that Q and R are both coarser partitions than QR, in the sense that each Q-cell and each R-cell is a union of smaller QR-cells (in fact, QR is just the coarsest common refinement of Q and R). The notion of a question part is a generalisation of this relation that question conjuncts bear to the conjunction:
One question $Q$ contains (or is \textit{at least as big as}) another question $R$ if and only if every $R$-cell is a union of $Q$-cells. We say $R$ is part of $Q$ if and only if $Q$ contains $R$. Equivalently, $R$ is part of $Q$ just in case $w \sim_R v$ whenever $w \sim_Q v$. \hfill (d)

Note that $Q$ contains $R$ if and only if $QR = Q$. Big questions draw more distinctions between possibilities than the questions they contain. Less abstractly, one question is part of another if it has to be resolved to get a complete answer to the bigger question. For instance, \textit{What month is it} is part of \textit{What is the date} and \textit{What street does she live on} is part of \textit{What is her address}. The trivial question $\{\Omega\}$, drawing no distinctions at all, is part of every question.

Figure 1 provides a visual illustration. Each square represents a question: a partition of logical space. The question at the top makes more distinctions than those displayed below it, and so it contains those questions as parts. In fact, since it is the smallest (most coarse-grained) question to contain both of them as parts, it is the conjunction of the smaller questions.

A conjunction of question parts is itself always a part. Hence the common parts of any two given questions are closed under conjunction, so that there is always a greatest common part:

The overlap of two questions $Q$ and $R$ is the biggest question that is part of $Q$ and also part of $R$. Two questions overlap if and only if their overlap is not $\{\Omega\}$. Otherwise they are disjoint. \hfill (e)

For instance, the question \textit{What are the capitals of Europe} overlaps \textit{What are the capitals of Asia}, and their overlap is the question \textit{What are the capitals of Turkey and Russia} (assuming for the sake of the example that it is not contingent what the countries of Asia and Europe are). Any answer to the latter question is a partial answer to both of the bigger questions. The more (partial) answers two questions have in common, the more they overlap, and two questions do not overlap at all if they do not have contingent partial answers in common.
Minimally Rational Answers

An answer to a big question also answers all of its parts. A view on What date it is says something about What month it is and something about What day of the month it is. So given the view that beliefs are answers to questions, it is natural to expect that agents’ beliefs about any questions should harmonise with their beliefs about the parts:

**Harmonic Parts.** If a rational agent has beliefs about Q, they have matching beliefs about every part R of Q: that is to say, they believe all and only those quizpositions about R that are entailed by their beliefs about Q.

This is an intuitive constraint. If I believe It is the 13th of March or April (in answer to What date is it), plausibly I believe that it is March or April (in answer to What month is it). An agent’s view about the parts includes what is entailed by their beliefs about the whole. It is also plausible that they believe no more than this: if I am unsure whether It is the 13th of March or April, it intuitively follows that I must also be unsure whether It is March or April.

Recall that the trivial question $\{\Omega\}$ is part of every other question. So it follows from Harmonic Parts that if an agent believed the trivial absurdity $\bot^{[\Omega]}$, they would have inconsistent beliefs about every question to which they had an answer. To exclude that possibility, we will assume that minimally rational agents cannot be in such a state:

**Non-Absurdity.** Rational agents do not believe $\bot^{[\Omega]}$.

That completes the account of static minimal rationality I want to propose: at a given time, an agent has minimally rational beliefs if they satisfy Harmonic Parts and Non-Absurdity. In Section IV below, I show how this account yields a Minimal Closure condition and a Minimal Consistency condition.

Harmonic Parts and Non-Absurdity are limited constraints that are in principle attainable by a finite reasoner whose beliefs concern questions with finitely many cells. They only require integrating a belief with related beliefs, rather than with all other beliefs. I will seek to make it plausible that, besides being attainable in principle, ordinary agents for the most part also meet these constraints in practice (by “ordinary agents” I have in mind normal adult human beings, say).

At the same time, Harmonic Parts and Non-Absurdity impose a greater amount of coherence on an agent’s beliefs than meets the eye. Let me explain why. An ordinary agent presumably has views on a wide variety of questions. Wherever those questions overlap, Harmonic Parts directly constrains the relationship between an agent’s views on those questions: if a minimally rational agent has beliefs on
questions Q and R which share a part S, then their beliefs on Q and R must entail all and only the same answers to S. For instance, minimally rational views about *How old Alice and Bob are* and about *How old Bob and Carmen are* must always coincide on the issue of Bob’s age.

The theory also forges indirect links between the agent’s views on disjoint questions. The reason is that those views may be connected through one or more daisy-chains of background beliefs about overlapping questions. Figure 2 illustrates this. The questions on the top left and top right are disjoint: they do not make any of the same distinctions. Nonetheless, they each overlap with the question in the middle: the shared parts are shown underneath. The questions addressed by an agent’s beliefs will usually form a complex mereological structure, naturally described as a web: hence the *web of questions*. Broadly speaking, an agent’s views on some questions become better integrated and more coherent the more connected those questions are within the agent’s web. And while some questions may be more interconnected than others, few if any will be entirely isolated from the overall web.

![Figure 2: A Daisy-Chain of Overlapping Questions](image)

So *Harmonic Parts* and *Non-Absurdity* impose strong, holistic constraints on minimally rational beliefs. Thus the present account aims to do justice to Cherniak’s observation that “the assumption that the agent can make quite complex inferences from his beliefs is crucial to our pretheoretical attributions of psychological states in everyday situations.” (p. 28).

**IV. Direct Consequences and Blatant Contradictions**

In this section, I explain how this simple theory of static minimal rationality addresses the Puzzles about Closure and Consistency. In particular, I isolate the *Minimal Closure*, *Minimal Adjunction* and

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10 Still, are these constraints strong enough to sustain our ordinary belief-based explanations and predictions of behaviour and decision-making, the way Cherniak envisioned? I think so, but admittedly this matter requires much more attention than I can give it here. I say quite a bit more in Hoek 2019, which develops a decision theory for agents who are minimally rational in the sense just explained.
Minimal Consistency conditions that the theory entails. This yields sharply defined notions of a direct consequence (the sort of consequence any minimally rational agent can see), and of a blatant inconsistency (the sort of contradiction any minimally rational agent will avoid).

Minimal Closure

Section I hypothesised that minimally rational agents believe the direct consequences of their beliefs, including the conjuncts of every conjunction they believe. To appreciate what that implies in the present context, we first need to define quizposition conjunction. Given our definition of question conjunction, there is only one sensible way to do this:

The conjunction of a Q-answer A and an R-answer B, written AB, is the QR-answer \{(a ∩ b) : a ∈ A and b ∈ B\} \{Ø\}. The conjunction of the quizpositions A_Q and B_R, written AB_QR or A_Q ⋀ B_R, is the quizposition \langle QR, AB \rangle.

A quizposition conjunction makes just enough distinctions between possible worlds to make every distinctions that its conjuncts make, and rules out just enough possibilities to rule out every possibility that its conjuncts rule out.

Stephen Yablo (2014) and Kit Fine (2017) developed the notion of quizpositional parthood. Just as question parthood generalises the relation that question conjunctions bear to a question conjunction, quizposition parthood is the relation quizposition conjuncts bear to their conjunction. That is, one quizposition is part of another if it makes fewer distinctions and rules out fewer possibilities:

A quizposition A_Q contains a quizposition B_R, or B_R is part of A_Q, if and only if Q contains R and A entails B (that is, \bigcup A \subseteq \bigcup B).

As in the case of questions, one quizposition contains another just in case the conjunction is equal to the whole. That is to say, A_Q contains B_R if and only if AB_QR = A_Q. Not every part is an explicit conjunct. For instance, the quizposition Gold is a soft yellow metal (in answer to What are the properties of gold) contains the quizposition Gold is yellow (in answer to What is the colour gold). And Fred’s phone number starts on a four, in answer to What is the first digit of Fred’s phone number, is part of Fred’s phone number is 49753, in answer to What is Fred’s phone number.

If the objects of belief are intensional, B_φ =⇒ B(φ ∧ ψ) just in case φ entails ψ: that is why Closure under Conjunction Elimination collapses into Ideal Closure in an intensional context. But on the quizpositional

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11 Definition (g) below coincides with Fine’s notion of a conjunctive part. Yablo’s notion of parthood corresponds to the definition of a maximal part below — see definition (h).
account of belief, Bϕ =⇒ B(ϕ ∧ ψ) just in case ϕ and (ϕ ∧ ψ) express the same quizposition, that is just in case ϕ is part of ψ. So in the present setting, Closure under Conjunction Elimination instead strengthens to the following principle: 12

Closure under Parthood. Whenever a rational agent believes something, they believe all of its parts. That is, if ϕ ≤ ψ, then Bϕ =⇒ Bψ.

(Here “ϕ ≤ ψ” stands for “the quizposition that ϕ expresses contains the quizposition that ψ expresses”. ) Closure under Parthood is in fact precisely the Minimal Closure principle we get from the present theory: it is a straightforward consequence of Harmonic Parts. Yablo (2014, Ch. 7) has defended an analogous closure principle for knowledge.

Intuitively, Closure under Parthood covers precisely the sort of automatic inferences we want a Minimal Closure condition to capture. For instance, it is immediately plausible that believing that gold is a soft yellow metal implies believing gold is yellow. If not, something has gone wrong. Likewise, believing that Mary lives on 15 Baker Street seems to involve believing that Mary lives on Baker Street. Or suppose I ask myself What time is it, and take a look at my watch: as I find out It’s three forty-five, I also acquire the belief that it is not yet four o’clock.

More tellingly still, as Yablo points out, Closure under Parthood yields intuitively compelling explanations for the failures of Ideal Closure. For instance, believing that The wall is blue does not entail believing Either the wall is blue or there is something wrong with the lights, because the latter belief involves consideration of a bigger question, What colour is the wall and what is the condition of the lights. Believing Zed is a zebra does not entail believing Zed is not a cleverly disguised mule, because only the latter belief is about disguise. King William believed that England could avoid war with France but not that England could avoid nuclear war with France, because the latter belief answers a question no-one in the eighteenth century was even able pose (cf. Yalcin 2011, §8). And we can begin to see, faintly, why believing the second-order Peano axioms does not entail believing that there are infinitely many primes. Issues about mathematical necessity aside, none of those axioms say anything about primes, or about how many there are (for more on this see Hoek 2019, Ch. 5).

12 I presuppose a quizpositional semantics [··] assigning every formula ϕ a quizposition [ϕ], where [¬ϕ] = ¬[ϕ], [ϕ ∧ ψ] = [ϕ] ∧ [ψ] and [ϕ ∨ ψ] = ¬([ϕ] ∧ ¬[ψ]) (using df. (f) and (i)). “ϕ ≤ ψ” means that [ϕ] contains [ψ] in the sense of df. (g). The relation ≤ may be called analytic entailment (as in Fine 2016 for instance). Axioms for “≤” are given in Goodman 2018. Regular entailment is recoverable from “≤”: ϕ |= ψ if and only if ϕ ∧ (ψ ∨ ¬ψ) ≤ ψ.
Minimal Adjunction

Before moving on to the Puzzle about Consistency, it will be helpful to discuss where the present theory leaves closure under adjunction. Since any question Q is part of itself, it follows from Harmonic Parts that an agent believes all and only those quizpositions about Q that are entailed by their beliefs about Q. In particular, that implies that minimally rational agents believe the conjunction of all their beliefs about a given question. So, writing “φ ≈ ψ” for “φ is about the same question as ψ”, we get:13

**Internal Adjunction.** A rational agent believes the conjunction of all their beliefs about any particular question. That is, if φ ≈ ψ then Bφ, Bψ ⊨ B(φ ∧ ψ).

Let us say an agent’s view about a given question Q is the conjunction of all their beliefs about Q. Together Internal Adjunction and Closure under Parthood tell us that a rational agent with beliefs about Q believes all and only those quizpositions about Q that their view on Q entails.

Suppose an agent has a view V^Q on Q. Now consider any part R of Q. Closure under Parthood tells us that the agent’s beliefs about R include every quizposition about R that V^Q entails. The other half of Harmonic Parts is the converse: the minimally rational agent believes only those quizpositions about R that V^Q entails. This is encoded in the following Minimal Adjunction principle:

**Partial Adjunction.** Rational agents’ beliefs on any part of a question are incorporated into their view about the whole question. That is, if φ ≈ (φ ∧ ψ), then Bφ, Bψ ⊨ B(φ ∧ ψ).

Internal Adjunction is a consequence of Partial Adjunction.

For an intuitive motivation of Partial Adjunction, consider situations where a rational agent is unsure about the conjunction in question. In such cases, it intuitively follows that they must be unsure about the relevant conjunct too. For example, suppose you believe Beth’s house number is 22, but are unsure whether she lives on 22 Broad Street or 22 High Street. It seems to follow that you must be unsure about What street Beth lives on. Contrapositively, if you firmly believed Beth lives on Broad Street, that belief would settle your view on What Beth’s address is. Likewise, if you are unsure whether John’s phone number is 76453 or 86453, you are unsure about the first digit. If you believe Bismuth is either a hard, reddish metal or a soft, blueish metal but are unsure which it is, then you are uncertain about both the hardness and the colour of bismuth. And so on. Partial Adjunction makes systematic sense of these intuitions. As with Closure under Parthood, this constraint is not just attainable in principle. It is at least prima facie plausible that ordinary, finite agents for the most part attain it.

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13 This relation “≈” is definable in terms of “≤”: φ ≈ ψ if and only if φ ≤ (ψ ∨ ¬ψ) and ψ ≤ (φ ∨ ¬φ).
Taken together, *Closure under Parthood* and *Partial Adjunction* are equivalent to *Harmonic Parts* (which says that when \( R \) is part of \( Q \), a rational agent with a view on \( Q \) believes all and only those quizpositions about \( R \) that their view on \( Q \) entails). So on the present theory, a minimally rational agent’s view on \( Q \) completely determines their view on every \( Q \)-part \( R \). More specifically, if \( V^Q \) is their view on \( Q \), then the agent’s view on \( R \) is the maximal \( R \)-part of \( V^Q \):

If \( A \subseteq Q \) is any \( Q \)-answer, and \( R \) is any part of \( Q \), then the maximal \( R \)-part of \( A^Q \), written \( A^Q / R \), is the strongest quizposition about \( R \) that \( A^Q \) contains.  

Figure 3 below provides a visual illustration. Each square represents a quizposition. The black lines represent a question as before: this is the inquisitive component of the quizposition. The colouring represents the informational component: a light grey marks the cells where the quizposition is true and a darker grey the cells where it false. The three quizpositions at the bottom of Figure 3 are maximal parts of the quizposition displayed on top: if we label the top quizposition \( V^Q \), the other three are of the form \( V/R \) for various parts \( R \) of \( Q \).

![Figure 3: The View About the Whole Determines the Views About the Parts](image)

**Minimal Consistency**

Now we are ready to address the Puzzle about Consistency. Let me start by checking that from *Harmonic Parts* and *Non-Absurdity*, we can recover *Avoidance of Contradictions* and *Avoidance of Contradictories*. To evaluate the latter principle, we need to define quizposition negation:

The *negation* of a quizposition \( A^Q \), written \( \neg A^Q \), is the quizposition \( \langle Q, Q \backslash A \rangle \).  

From *Harmonic Parts*, we get that agents believe both \( A^Q \) and \( \neg A^Q \) just in case they believe \( \bot^Q \). Now since \( \{\Omega\} \) is part of any question \( Q \), \( \bot^{\{\Omega\}} \) is always part of \( \bot^Q \), and thus *Non-Absurdity* rules out belief in contradictions and also belief in contradictories.\(^{13}\)

More generally, the theory has it that an agent cannot have inconsistent beliefs about \( Q \), since those
would always adjoin to $\bot_\Omega$. This accords pretty well with our pre-theoretical intuitions. If I am at all rational, I cannot both be convinced that my coat is red all over and also that it is blue all over. If I believe I left the keys in the car, I do not think the keys are in my pocket. If I look at the clock on the wall to discover it is 3 o’clock, I am forced to discard the belief that it is 2:30. And so on. The pattern extends beyond pairwise consistency. It would be odd if you were certain that Montesquieu was either a novelist, an architect or a banjo player, while also being convinced that he was definitely not a novelist, that he was definitely not an architect and that he was definitely not a banjo player.

So question-internal inconsistencies are blatant inconsistencies. Are blatant inconsistencies question-internal? Given Closure under Parthood, the answer must be “no”. For instance, consider the belief Jill and Jack are over twenty-one and the belief Jane and Jill are under eighteen. These quizpositions concern different questions: How old are Jill and Jack and How old are Jane and Jill respectively. And yet these two beliefs are blatantly inconsistent, both intuitively speaking and according to the theory. For the two questions overlap on the question How old is Jill; and it is part of the first quizposition that Jill is over twenty-one and part of the second quizposition that Jill is under eighteen; and those parts make a question-internal inconsistency. That means you cannot believe both of the wholes either.

Generalising from this, minimally rational beliefs about overlapping questions cannot contradict each other on the overlap. That suggests the following Minimal Consistency constraint:

**Partial Consistency.** A rational agent’s beliefs agree on any question. If $\phi_1 \approx \phi_2 \approx \ldots \approx \phi_n$,

$\phi_1, \phi_2, \ldots, \phi_n \models \bot$, and for any $i$, $\psi_i \leq \phi_i$ then $B\psi_1, B\psi_2, \ldots, B\psi_{n-1} \models \neg B\psi_n$.

Partial Consistency imposes some coherence on our beliefs on overlapping questions. However, it does not amount to the claim that our answers on overlapping questions have to be consistent. For a blatant inconsistency, overlapping quizpositions have to contradict one another on the overlapping part. For instance, the two quizpositions displayed at the top of figure 4 are inconsistent: there is no point in logical space at which both are true. They also overlap: they make many of the same distinctions. But they agree on the answer to the question in the overlap, displayed underneath. So the present theory admits this combination of views. (From here on let’s refer to such non-blatant inconsistencies as opaque inconsistencies).

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14 In fact, a minimally rational agent avoids contradictories in a stronger sense than this: they avoid believing quizpositions truth-conditionally equivalent to one another’s negation. For let $B^A$ be truth-conditionally equivalent to $\neg A^Q$, and let $p = \bigcup A$. Then $A^Q$ contains $\{p\} \cup \{\neg p\}$ and $B^A$ contains its negation $\{\neg p\} \cup \{p\}$. So a minimally rational agent cannot believe both $A^Q$ and $B^A$, because that would involve having directly opposing beliefs about the corresponding polar question $\{p, \neg p\}$. 
Let me illustrate this with an example. Here are three opaquely inconsistent quizpositions:

1) *I have Wednesday free* in answer to *What do I have to do on Wednesday?*
2) *I have to go to Sarah’s birthday party* in answer to *Do I have to go to Sarah’s birthday?*
3) *Sarah’s birthday party is on Wednesday* in answer to *When is Sarah’s birthday party?*

Quizpositions (1-3) are about non-overlapping questions, so they are opaquely inconsistent. Now if you conjoin all three with *Today is Monday*, the three resulting conjunctions (1*-3*) overlap, but they are still opaquely inconsistent. You could say that drawing attention to what day it is does nothing to reveal the inconsistency between (1-3). While (1*-3*) overlap on the question *What day is it today*, they all agree on the overlapping part: the inconsistency lies elsewhere.

By contrast, if you conjoin the quizpositions (1) and (2) with (3), we do get a blatant inconsistency, both intuitively speaking and according to the theory:

4) *I have Wednesday free and Sarah’s birthday party is on Wednesday*
5) *Sarah’s birthday party is on Wednesday and I have to go to Sarah’s birthday party.*

Quizpositions (4) and (5) overlap on the polar question *Do I have to go to Sarah’s birthday party on Wednesday or not?*, and directly contradict each other there, answering No and Yes respectively. So *Partial Consistency* rules out this pair of views. This illustrates how deduction may reveal inconsistencies. By performing two adjunctions, we went from an opaque to a blatant contradiction.

Here is a more interesting example of an opaque inconsistency between overlapping questions. Let H, N and C be the questions *How tall is Hob*, *How tall is Nob* and *How tall is Cob* respectively. Then these three quizpositions are opaquely inconsistent, even though they all overlap one another:

6) *Hob is taller than Nob* in answer to HN
7) *Nob is taller than Cob* in answer to NC
8) *Cob is taller than Hob* in answer to CH
This example is reminiscent of the opaque inconsistency observed in a Penrose triangle or an Escher print (figure 5). Such images initially appear consistent, because any sufficiently small region provides a consistent representation of part of the world, just as (6), (7) and (8) are each consistent answers to their respective questions. Furthermore, in both cases, these consistent representations are not at all compartmentalised. On the contrary, they all overlap with one another, and you cannot draw sharp boundaries between them. Still, they do not add up to a consistent representation of how things are.

This is clearly quite different from the account of inconsistent belief given by fragmentation theorists. On that account, inconsistency arises when discrete, independent doxastic representations offer directly contradictory views of the world. Now it may be that this sort of belief fragmentation occurs in people who have split brains or dissociative personalities. But those cases are pathological, and plausibly fall short even of minimal rationality. I contend that the present account paints a much more realistic picture of inconsistent belief as it arises in non-pathological subjects, as a consequence of ordinary failures of logical omniscience.

V. A Puzzle About Deductive Inference

Taken together, the principles of minimal rationality defended above yield a new definition of rational belief states. The standard definition of a rational belief state, notably exemplified by Jaakko Hintikka’s (1992) models of belief, runs like this:

An ideal belief state is a non-empty set \( I \) of intensional propositions (that is, sets of worlds) subject to these three conditions:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ideal Closure: } & \text{ If } p \text{ entails } q \text{ and } p \in I, \text{ then } q \in I. \\
\text{Ideal Adjunction: } & \text{ If } p, q \in I, \text{ then } (p \land q) \in I. \\
\text{Ideal Consistency: } & \bot \notin I.
\end{align*}
\]

This definition uses a simplified statement of Ideal Consistency: conditional on Ideal Adjunction, the
consistency of $I$ is equivalent to $\bot \notin I$. The analogous definition for a minimally rational belief state replaces each clause in (j) with its minimal analogue: 15

A **minimally rational belief state** is a non-empty set $B$ of quizpositions subject to the following three conditions:

- **Closure under Parthood**: If $A^Q$ contains $B^R$ and $A^Q \in B$, then $B^R \in B$
- **Partial Adjunction**: If $Q$ contains $R$, and $A^Q, B^R \in B$, then $AB^Q \in B$
- **Partial Consistency**: $\bot \notin B$. (k)

Again, I have simplified the consistency clause. Conditional on the first two clauses, **Partial Consistency** is equivalent to $\bot \notin B$ (Non-Absurdity).

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of this new account of belief states is the way it allows us to theorise systematically about deductive inferences. A deductive inference is the formation of new a belief on the basis of extant beliefs that entail it. Since they are already deductively closed, ideal belief states preclude the very possibility of such transitions. **Intensionality** is by itself compatible with failures of deductive closure, as witnessed by the fragmentation views mentioned above, as well as the neighbourhood models of Montague 1970 and Scott 1970. But any intensional view individuates inferences very coarsely, and that makes it difficult to form a realistic picture of deductive reasoning on an intensional basis. To bring that out, this section turns to another question raised by Cherniak’s account: what makes some deductive inferences more difficult than others?

As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Cherniak holds that minimal rationality has a dynamic aspect. For Cherniak, minimal rationality not only requires you to have fairly cogent beliefs, but also to make sensible inferences from those beliefs when the need arises. But of course there is a limit on what can reasonably be demanded. Cherniak plausibly holds that the complexity of the deductive inferences that a subject can reliably be expected to make depends on how much time and how many cognitive resources are available for thinking about the issue at hand.

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15 Using definition (k), we can now give a semantics for the belief operator “$B$”. For some minimally rational agent $X$, let $B_w$ be $X$’s minimally rational belief state at world $w$. Let $\mathcal{D}_{B_w}$ be the set of questions about which $B_w$ contains a quizposition. For any $Q \in \mathcal{D}_{B_w}$ let $B_w(Q)$ denote the strongest answer $V \subseteq Q$ such that $V^Q \in B_w$. Let us also write $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket = \langle \llbracket \phi \rrbracket, \llbracket \phi \rrbracket \rangle$. Here double angle brackets mark the inquisitive component of the quizposition that $\phi$ expresses, and double square brackets its informational component. Then $[B\phi] = \langle \llbracket B\phi \rrbracket, [B\phi] \rangle$ where

$$\langle B\phi \rangle = \{ \{ w : B_w(\llbracket \phi \rrbracket) = V \} : V \subseteq \llbracket \phi \rrbracket \} \cup \{ \{ w : \llbracket \phi \rrbracket \notin \mathcal{D}_{B_w} \} \}$$
$$[B\phi] = \{ \{ w : B_w(\llbracket \phi \rrbracket) = V \} : V \subseteq \llbracket \phi \rrbracket \}$$

For other proposals in this spirit, see §8 of Yalcin 2011. Taken together with footnote 12, this semantics for “$B$” invalidates the three principles we wanted to reject: Ideal Closure, Ideal Adjunction and Ideal Consistency. At the same time, it validates all the principles endorsed: Closure under Conjunction Elimination, Avoidance of Contradictions, Avoidance of Contradictories, Closure under Parthood, Partial Adjunction and Partial Consistency.
Common sense offers some guidance about which deductions require greater cognitive resources: the inference from the truth of the Peano axioms to the truth of Fermat’s last theorem, for instance, was extremely difficult. It was much harder than the inference from the clue entries of your average Sudoku to its solution. Sudokus, in turn, are harder than your average instance of universal instantiation. However, to render this aspect of Cherniak’s view predictive, we need something more systematic than case-by-case judgments. We need some independent handle on what makes particular inferences more or less difficult. Ideally, this would give us a concrete way to partially order deductive inferences by difficulty in the hierarchy that Cherniak envisaged.

However, Intensionality makes it very difficult to make sense of such a hierarchy. In the case of single-premise inferences, we have already seen why: modulo Intensionality, every valid single-premise inference is an instance of conjunction elimination. That would make conjunction elimination the hardest single-premise inference rule there is, as it subsumes all the others. Putting it differently, given Intensionality, every single-premise inference is as easy as a conjunction elimination. That leaves no space for any interesting hierarchy in the domain of single-premise inferences.

An analogous issue arises for multi-premise inferences. Assuming Intensionality, every deductively valid inference is an instance of the following inference rule: 16

\[
\text{Recombination. } (\phi_1 \land \psi_1), (\phi_2 \land \psi_2), \ldots, (\phi_n \land \psi_n) \therefore (\phi_1 \land \phi_2 \land \ldots \land \phi_n)
\]

Intuitively, the Recombination rule looks like an almost trivial inference: it simply re-asserts some conjuncts in the premises. Nonetheless, given Intensionality, Recombination encompasses everything from the humblest modus ponens to the highest flights of human reason. Intensionality puts a ceiling on how difficult inferences can in principle be, and that ceiling looks uncomfortably low. On the face of it, Intensionality forces the bizarre conclusion that every deductive argument ever made is really just a repetition of some judiciously selected premises. If one accepts this, it is hard to make sense of Cherniak’s hierarchy. The Puzzle about Deductive Inference is the question of how we are to resolve the resulting tension between Intensionality and the undeniable fact that deductive accomplishments often require considerable effort.

Arguably, the intensionalist’s prospects for explaining the effort involved in multi-premise inferences are a little better than for single-premise inferences. That is because the Recombination rule involves

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16 We want to show that, if \(a_1, a_2, \ldots, a_n \models \beta\), the inference from \(a_1, a_2, \ldots, a_n\) to \(\beta\) is an instance of Recombination, modulo Intensionality. To see this, simply substitute \(\phi_i = (\beta \lor a_i)\) and \(\psi_i = a_i\). For note \(a_i \models (\phi_i \land \psi_i)\), and because of distributivity, we have \(\beta \models (\beta \lor a_i) \land (\beta \lor a_2) \land \ldots \land (\beta \lor a_n) = (\phi_1 \land \phi_2 \land \ldots \land \phi_n)\).
adjunction (conjunction introduction) as well as conjunction elimination. And amongst advocates of fragmentation theories, there is a tradition holding that conjoining separated beliefs into a single conjoined belief can be a non-trivial problem with computational costs. For instance, Stalnaker (1984) writes: “There may be propositions which I would believe if I put together my separate [fragments] of belief, but which, as things stand, hold in none of them. These are the propositions that may be discovered by a purely deductive inquiry.” (p. 85) If that is right, and adjunction takes cognitive effort, then Recombinations get more difficult as they involve more adjunctions. Could this be the hierarchy Cherniak envisioned? Could adjunction be the intensionalist’s Archimedean point, the one source of friction that will put a distance between obvious and remote consequences?

Probably not. Deriving the commutativity of multiplication from the second-order Peano axioms requires eight adjunctions, since there are nine axioms. Deriving Fermat’s last theorem? Again, eight. The Goldbach Conjecture? Eight again, if it is true. Simply counting the number of adjunctions made is clearly no guide to the impressiveness of a deductive accomplishment. Perhaps we can instead distinguish easy and difficult adjunctions. According to Stalnaker, adjunction “may require only a routine calculation, or it may be a challenging and creative intellectual task.” (1984, p. 84) Still, there is apparently no way of predicting, in any given case, which of these it is. To get at the Goldbach Conjecture, nine beliefs must be conjoined: (Peano Axiom 1 ∨ Goldbach Conjecture), …, (Peano Axiom 9 ∨ Goldbach Conjecture). Which of these adjunctions is the one that has baffled the world’s greatest mathematicians for three centuries?

The fragmentation theorist’s project of reducing all deductive reasoning and information processing to adjunction undeniably has a certain cavalier charm to it. But if we take it seriously, this vision of inference quickly starts to look very implausible. Even if the reader does not agree that the intensional view renders the cognitive distinctions we are after more puzzling, I hope I have said enough to persuade them that the intensional view does not help dissolve the mystery either.

As with the puzzles about static rationality, what we are really looking for in a solution to this Puzzle about Deductive Inference is a view of belief that allows us makes some progress on the question we started off with, in this case: what makes deductions difficult? We want a view that gives us a helpful way to think about deductive inference, and provides us some clarification on what makes some deductive inferences so challenging. In the remaining two sections, I will try to show how the question-centric view of minimal rationality meets that demand.
VI. Tautological Belief Updates

In this section, we will make a foray into the dynamics of minimally rational belief, by defining belief updates for minimally rational belief states. This yields the notion of a tautological belief update, which make for a natural way to model certain deductive inferences. In Section VII, I will then discuss three sources of cognitive difficulty that arise in performing these updates, and I will relate those observations to experimental findings from psychology.

Belief Updates
The basic dynamic notion in regular doxastic logic is that of an informational update, representing the way an ideally rational subject acquires new beliefs. Given a belief state $I$ and a new proposition $p$, the updated state $I + p$ is the smallest set of propositions closed under entailment and adjunction that has $I \cup \{ p \}$ as a subset. $I + p$ is only a belief state when $p$ is consistent with $I$. To acquire a belief that is inconsistent with their prior beliefs, an ideal agent would first have to revise their prior beliefs (Alchourrón et al. 1985, Van Ditmarsch et al. 2007).

Quizpositional updates can be defined in an exactly analogous way. Call a set of quizpositions harmonic just in case it is closed under parthood and partial adjunction (that is, just in case anyone who believed just those quizpositions would satisfy Harmonic Parts).

The update of a harmonic set of quizpositions $B$ by a quizposition $A^Q$, written $B + A^Q$, is the smallest harmonic set containing $B \cup \{ A^Q \}$. (I)

Since the set of all quizpositions is harmonic, $B \cup \{ A^Q \}$ always has a harmonic superset. And because any intersection of harmonic sets is itself harmonic, $B \cup \{ A^Q \}$ always has a minimal harmonic superset. So $B + A^Q$ is always well-defined.

As in the ideal case however, the result of a quizpositional update is not always a belief state. Since minimal rationality allows for inconsistency, updating by a quizposition that is inconsistent with the anterior state need not be a problem. But if the update fails to preserve Partial Consistency, some sort of belief revision is needed before the update can be performed. For present purposes, we will set such difficult cases aside, focussing on updates that do preserve Partial Consistency.

Tautological Updates
Updating an ideal belief state with a necessary truth leaves the state unaffected. But updating a minimally rational belief state with a necessarily true quizposition $Q^Q$ yields new beliefs, including contingent ones. Drawing new distinctions enriches your prior views, bringing them to bear on larger
questions with more parts. For instance, you can get from *England will avoid war with France* to the conclusion that *England will avoid nuclear war with France* by drawing a distinction between nuclear and other kinds of war. New questions can also link previously separated views. For instance, to get from *Hob is five foot five* and *Nob is five foot six* to the conclusion *Nob is taller than Hob*, you need to ask *How tall Hob and Nob are*: that question will bring both pieces of information together into a single view. Since tautological updates only yield new beliefs that are entailed by the subject’s prior beliefs, they make a natural model of deductive inference.

To see how this works, let me go through the two examples just mentioned in more detail. Let \( E \) be the polar question *Will England have a war with France or not*. Now suppose Mary’s belief state \( B_M \) contains the quizposition \( A^E \), that *England will avoid war with France*. Let \( F \) be the tripartite question *Will England have a nuclear war with France or some other kind of war or no war at all*: this question contains \( E \). The tautologous answer to \( F \) is \( F_F \), that *Either England will have a nuclear war with France or some other kind of war or no war at all*. If Mary has the ability to distinguish the possibility of nuclear war with France from other kinds of war, she can reason her way from the prior belief state \( B_M \) to the state \( B_M + F_F \). Besides the quizposition \( A^E \), the posterior state \( B_M + F_F \) includes a view on the new question \( F \). Because \( B_M + F_F \) is harmonic, and the question \( F \) contains \( E \), the view on \( F \) in \( B_M + F_F \) must rule out every \( F \)-possibility incompatible with \( A^E \). In particular, the view rules out the possibility of nuclear war, and so \( B_M + F_F \) is bound to include the quizposition \( B^F \), *England will avoid nuclear war with France*.

For the second example, let \( H \) and \( N \) stand for the questions *How tall is Hob* and *How tall is Nob*. Cob’s belief state \( B_C \) includes the following two quizpositions:

\[
V^H: \text{Hob is five foot five} \\
S^N: \text{Nob is five foot six}
\]

Suppose Cob now forms a view on the conjunctive question \( HN \) for the first time: *How tall are Hob and Nob*. Then he transitions from his anterior state \( B_C \) to the belief state \( B_C + HN^{HN} \). To preserve harmony, Cob’s newly acquired view on \( HN \) must exclude the possibilities excluded by \( V^H \), as \( H \) is part of \( HN \). By the same token, the view will exclude every possibility excluded by \( S^N \), since \( N \) is also part of \( HN \). Thus \( B_C + HN^{HN} \) contains \( V^H \) and \( S^N \). So this tautological update effectively amounts to adjoining of Cob’s views on \( H \) and \( N \). Now the quizposition

\[
T^{HN}: \text{Nob is taller than Hob}
\]

is part of \( V^H \). So because of *Closure under Parthood*, \( T^{HN} \in B_C + HN^{HN} \).

As described at the end of Section III above, the beliefs of a minimally rational agent form a web of
interconnected views. For this reason, the effects of a belief update are not always restricted to views that the new quizposition directly concerns. For instance, given suitable background beliefs in $\mathbf{B}_C$, the realisation that *Nob is taller than Hob* might be accompanied by the realisation that *Gob is taller than Hob* too, which could in turn affect Cob’s opinion about *How tall Gob is*, even though the latter question is entirely disjoint from the question $\text{HN}$ we updated with.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 6: A Tautological Update on Overlapping Views**

Figure 6 illustrates the abstract situation. Here we start out with a belief state containing views on $Q_0$, $R$, and $S$, and then perform a tautological update to refine the question $Q_0$ to $Q_1$. The resulting view $A_{1Q_1}$ has the same truth conditions as $A_{0Q_0}$. However, the new question $Q_1$ that this view addresses overlaps with $R$, and $A_{1Q_1}$ rules out some cells in the overlapping part. Consequently, the update strengthens the agent’s view on $R$ from $B_{0R}$ to $B_{1R}$ to preserve harmony. This change in view about $R$ in turn affects the agent’s view on the question $S$, which also overlaps with $R$. Thus the update by $Q_{1Q_1}$ causes a change in view about $S$, even though $Q_1$ does not overlap with $S$. In the same way, the update can percolate further down the daisy chain, spreading through the agent’s web of questions. Thus the tautological update with $Q_{1Q_1}$ can in principle affect the agent’s view on all kinds of questions that are directly or indirectly connected to $Q_1$.

Thus, on the present model, the acquisition of new tautologous beliefs can lead to all sorts of new contingent beliefs, including beliefs about questions unrelated to the question the added tautology is about. We can think of tautological updates as modelling what happens when an agent poses a new question for the first time, where the “posing” of a question $Q$ means the acquisition of a view about $Q$. The mapping $I \mapsto I + Q^Q$ is the natural formalisation of this idea: its output $I + Q^Q$ is the smallest extension of the information state $I$ that includes a view about $Q$. 
Thus tautological updates give us a formal implementation of the idea of deductive inquiry as a question-guided endeavour — compare Pérez Carballo 2016, and Friedman 2017, 2019. As an illustration, think of the slave boy from Plato’s *Meno*. Guided by the questions that Socrates asks him, the boy reasons his way to the conclusion that the diagonal of a square of size one is equal to the side of a square of size two. From the outset, the boy already has all the basic geometric intuitions he needs to figure this out. But he only arrives at the right conclusion after thinking through Socrates’ strategically posed questions.

There are, however, limitations to this paradigm. Tautological updates provide a neat model of certain simple deductive inferences, but not every piece of deductive reasoning can be modelled using tautological updates alone. For instance, the hypothetical reasoning in a proof by cases or a reductio ad absurdum appears to involve the tentative addition of a piece of information to the subject’s stock of beliefs. And as discussed in Section III, deductive inference can sometimes bring to light an inconsistency in the reasoner’s beliefs, and force them to discard one of their prior beliefs. In those cases, the deductive reasoning results in belief revisions and not just updates.

**VII. Three Kinds of Hard Questions**

As the story of Socrates and the slave boy illustrates, human beings can increase their knowledge by posing new questions, rather than acquiring new information. But that ability is not unlimited. In this section, I discuss three different kinds of limits on our question-posing ability, each of which captures a different cognitive barrier curbing our deductive abilities. Bounds on our ability to pose *novel* questions capture our *conceptual* limitations. Bounds on our ability to pose very *large* questions capture our *computational* limitations. And finally, bounds on our ability to identify *good* questions capture our *strategic* limitations.

**Novel Questions**

In distinguishing between possibilities, we draw on our conceptual resources and world knowledge. Limitations in those resources limit what questions we can pose. One illustration of this point has come up several times already: King William believes he can avoid war with France. And as we saw in the last section, this means he is only a tautological update away from believing that he can avoid nuclear war with France. However, William is in no position to pose the requisite question: *Will England have a nuclear war with France or some other kind of war or no war at all.* The reason is that William lacks the requisite conceptual resources: he does not know what a nuclear war is. (Seth Yalcin has a more detailed discussion of this point in Yalcin 2011, §6-8.)
Concepts might also facilitate the posing of new questions in cases where the subject does already have the ability to distinguish the relevant possibilities. One possible example is suggested in Pérez Carballo 2016. The Königsberg Bridges problem asks whether it is possible to take a roundtrip through the city of Königsberg that crosses each of its seven bridges exactly once. In Pérez Carballo’s telling, Euler solved this problem by first posing a new question: What is the graph-theoretic representation of the bridges and landmasses of Königsberg? Now each cell of this question is just an intensional proposition about the layout in the city, so that each one of these possibilities could also be described by someone who lacked the concept of a graph. Still, having the concept of a graph certainly makes it a great deal easier to partition the possibilities in this particular way, and it may even be essential.

Big Questions
I have a terrible sense of direction. When I am new in a city, I will figure out how to get from the hotel to the central square, say, and how I can get from the central square to the museum or the river bank, and from the museum to the restaurant. But having gathered all that information, I still will not be able to work out an even a half-way efficient route back from the restaurant to the hotel. Without a map, the safe option is just to retrace my steps: return to the museum, then back to the central square, then to the hotel. Else I will probably get lost. My friend is different. Given the exact same information, she will identify the shortest way back in a heartbeat, even if it runs through a neighbourhood she has never seen before.

Maybe my friend has a better memory for these things than I do. But what is more important is the way she puts all the information together. My web of beliefs about the city’s geography is a chaotic patchwork of partially overlapping little maps, patched up with landmarks, mnemonics and other crutches. I only have answers to small, local questions about the city’s geography, none of which have any bearing on unexplored areas of the city. My friend, on the other hand, sees the bigger picture. Her views about the layout the city are more robustly connected because she has global views about the overall layout of the city that integrate her detailed views about the small parts. This puts her in a position to see we have walked in a big circle, and that the hotel is just a few blocks away. Her geographical beliefs answer bigger questions and are better linked together.

Maintaining a high level of integration between geographical beliefs is a non-trivial cognitive skill: my friend is better at it than I am. This skill can be improved with practice. London cab drivers are an extreme example. Over three to four years of intensive training for a harrowing exam called The Knowledge, they acquire the ability to efficiently deploy a vast amount of detailed geographical
information in order to determine the fastest route from one place in London to another. It has been shown that in successful trainees, this learning process results in a significantly enlarged posterior hippocampus (Maguire et al. 2000, 2006, 2011). This is a remarkable illustration of the way that neuroplasticity allows human beings to go beyond their innate cognitive endowments. At the same time, the discovery that this requires additional grey matter implies that there is a limit to how far our abilities can be stretched. There is only so much new grey matter one can acquire, if only because there is a finite amount of space in a human skull.

Minimally rational agents see more consequences of their beliefs as they bring their views to bear on bigger questions, and as their views become better connected to other questions in the web. The more an agent’s views are connected, the more information is distributed across the web, and the easier it is to recall. But there is a limit to the number of questions a finite agent can have views about, and also to the size of the questions. This limitation puts ideal rationality out of reach for us mere mortals: a minimally rational agent who had views on every question would be ideally rational, in that their beliefs would satisfy Ideal Closure, Ideal Adjunction and Ideal Consistency.  

So tautological updates take effort because they enlarge a believer’s web of questions, and require the integration of various beliefs on different questions. Sometimes, a small question can already produce a sweeping cognitive change. But adding bigger questions with more parts is always more demanding: bigger questions contain the smaller ones as parts, making more distinctions and forging more connections. We have been thinking of parts as “free” consequences, which are believed without additional cogitation. But that is just to say that no cogitation beyond the acquisition of a belief in the whole is needed to believe the parts. The flip-side is that acquiring beliefs with many parts is hard, because it is a precondition for doing so that you acquire beliefs about the parts as well.

Good Questions

A good question can be hard to find. Since any tautological update requires cognitive effort to process, and resources are limited, we cannot look into every possible question. Consequently, when we engage in deductive reasoning, we inevitably make choices about which questions to look into. Sometimes,  

\[\text{17 Proof. Suppose Laplace is a minimally rational agent with views on every question. Then Laplace’s beliefs satisfy Ideal Closure. For suppose she believes } A_Q, \text{ and suppose } A_Q \text{ entails } B^R. \text{ Since she has a view on QR, harmony demands she must believe } A_{QR}^R, \text{ which contains } B^R \text{ as a part. So she believes } B^R. \text{ Laplace’s beliefs also satisfy Ideal Adjunction. For suppose she believes } A_Q \text{ and } B^R. \text{ She has a view on QR, so given harmony she must believe } A_{QR}^R \text{ and } B_{QR}^R, \text{ and therefore } A_{QR}^{QR}. \text{ Finally, Laplace’s beliefs satisfy Ideal Consistency. If not, by Ideal Adjunction, she would believe } \bot_Q \text{ for some } Q \text{ and thus, by harmony, believe } \bot^{(Q)}, \text{ in violation of Non-Absurdity.}\]
the hardest part of a deduction is not the update itself, but knowing which update to perform. Hitting on the right question may require insight or luck. In the *Meno*, Socrates’ strategic questioning helps the slave boy precisely because it relieves him of the most creative part of the deductive process.

Here is an example taken from the psychology literature to illustrate the point (Levesque 1986, Toplak and Stanovich 2002). Based on the following three pieces of information, can you say whether or not an unmarried person is looking at a married person?

9) Jack is looking at Kate and Kate is looking at George
10) Jack is unmarried
11) George is married

Take a moment to picture the situation and think it through.

In Toplak and Stanovich’s survey, 86% of subjects answered that the correct answer cannot be determined on the basis of the information provided. However, as a matter of the fact it can. It becomes easy to see this once you are given the following hint:

12) Either Kate is married or she is unmarried

Once those two possibilities are separated, the answer becomes clear. If Kate is married, then Jack is an unmarried person looking at a married person, because Jack is looking at Kate. If Kate is unmarried, then she herself is an unmarried person looking at a married person, because she is looking at George.

It is striking how an instance of the law of the excluded middle transforms an otherwise elusive inference into a no-brainer. This makes (12) an unusually simple and elegant example of an informative tautology.

We can account for this phenomenon as follows. Conjoining the the three given premises (9-11) is insufficient to arrive at the conclusion that an unmarried person is looking at a married person. But it is a direct consequence from the conjunction of (9-12). To see this, associate premises (9), (10) and (11) with the quizpositions $A_L$, $B_J$ and $C_G$ respectively where

$L$: Out of Jack, Kate and George, who is looking at whom?

$J$: Is Jack married?

$G$: Is George married?

The task confronts subjects with something like the following question:

$Q$: Who out of Jack, Kate and George is unmarried? And who is looking at a married person?

And the target conclusion is:

$D_Q$: One of Jack, Kate or George is an unmarried person looking at a married person.
In approaching this problem, the natural first step is to try to picture the situation, putting all the
given information together into a single representation. This can be modelled as an update with the
tautologous quizposition $LJG^{UG}$, which takes a state in which $A^L$, $B^J$ and $C^G$ are believed individually to
a state where their conjunction $ABC^{UG}$ is also believed. However, this is not sufficient. The conjunction
$ABC^{UG}$ entails the conclusion $D^Q$, but because $Q$ is not part of $LJG$, it does not contain $D^Q$ as a part. A
further step is required to get from the belief $ABC^{UG}$ to the target conclusion $D^Q$.

Other attempts to get at the answer also do not work in this case. For instance, it is natural to break up
$Q$ into simpler questions: Is Jack an unmarried person looking at a married person, Is Kate an unmarried
person looking at a married person and Is George an unmarried person looking at a married person. $ABC^{UG}$
fails to settle the first two questions, and entails a negative answer to the latter. From these results one
might reasonably conclude that the given information is insufficient to settle $Q$. Plausibly, that is
where the inquiry halted for most of Toplak and Stanovich’s respondents.

The only way to get at the target conclusion is to make a further distinction. We need to separate two
possibilities that $LJG$ joins together: namely the possibility that $Jack$ and $Kate$ are unmarried and only
$George$ is married, and the possibility that only $Jack$ is unmarried and $Kate$ and $George$ are married.
Separating these two scenarios involves conjoining $ABC^{UG}$ with the content of (11), Either $Kate$ is
married or not. This is the tautologous quizposition $K^K$, where

$K$: Is Kate married?

After that further adjunction, the subject’s overall view of the situation $ABCK^{UGK}$; and since $LJGK$ does
contain $Q$ as a part, it follows that they now believe the target conclusion $D^Q$ as well.

There is some amount of cognitive effort involved in making the extra distinction that takes you from
$ABC^{UG}$ to $ABCK^{UGK}$. But the students Toplak and Stanovich interviewed could all have made this
further reasoning step if prompted. The explanation for why most of them failed to take this step does
not lie in the intrinsic difficulty of this update. Rather, the students must have overlooked the question $K$
for some reason. It may be that it simply did not occur to them: there is experimental evidence that
reasoners are in general better at recognising a good question when it is presented to them than they
are at coming up with good questions on their own (Rothe, Lake and Gureckis 2018). It is also possible
that they did consider the question, but made an a priori, metacognitive judgment that it was not
worth looking into.

In this particular context, two factors may contribute to that decision. Firstly, the fact that they were
not given information about Kate’s marital state could be taken as an indication that this issue is
irrelevant. There is evidence that reasoners are generally reluctant to think through a question when they know in advance that the answer is unknown (Toplak and Stanovich 2002, Shafir 1994, Tversky and Shafir 1992). Secondly, the fact that other lines of inquiry do not resolve the matter may give rise to an overriding impression that the provided information is inadequate, and that further cogitation is pointless.

Because we cannot ask every question, we inevitably need heuristics to decide which questions to ignore and which to consider, and those must be prior to actually thinking through the questions. For instance, conjoining \( ABC^{LJG} \) with the tautology \( \text{Either George owns a sloop or he does not} \) also make some new consequences available. But since you know \textit{a priori} that none of those consequences will be of no help in resolving the task at hand, you would never look into that question. That question is safely ignored. In the case at hand, the question \( K \) apparently does not appear fruitful to most people, although that appearance is misleading.

No doubt, these last two sections have raised as many questions about deductive inference as they answered. How do we model belief revision in this context? Can we give an informative quantitative measure of the difficulty of a given tautological update? What heuristics do reasoners use to assess the interest of a question prior to updating? I could go on. Still, I hope the exploration showed that the present account of minimally rational belief states gives us a systematic framework in which theoretical questions about deduction can be fruitfully discussed, and relative to which experimental results about deductive inference can be sensibly interpreted. And because the old, intensional account of belief contents was ill-adapted to those tasks, this development opens up a whole new domain of inquiry for unstructured conceptions of belief content.

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