

# A Puzzle About Fickleness

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## 1 THE PUZZLE

Fran and Tom are history buffs, who have studied conflicting theories about how Amelia Earhart died.

They agree that the most plausible theories are that she died in a plane crash or in Japanese captivity.

On June 1, both believe that she died in a plane crash.

**Fran** changes her mind each day of the month after that—switching back and forth between the theories.

**Tom**, from June 1–15, believes that Earhart died in a plane crash. However, on June 16, he changes his mind. For the remainder of the month, he believes that she died in Japanese captivity.

**Assume:** same (first-order) evidence, no losses or gains, same skills, both know their own track records; redeliberated in between

### June 2020

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
31	<b>1</b>	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	1	2	3	4

⇒ **Intuition:** Fran is doing *worse* in some respect than Tom.

**The Puzzle of Fickleness:** To explain the asymmetry between *One-Off* and *Frequent Changes of Mind* based on redeliberation<sup>1</sup>

**Why does redeliberation matter?:**

- **Redeliberating:** *S* changes her mind as a result of redeliberation or reassessing the evidence, conscious or unconscious
- **Jumping:** *S* flips between doxastic responses as if by a flip of a coin. 🗳️

**My aims:** Solve the puzzle & illuminate the contextual factors on which our judgments depend

**Starker Asymmetry?:** Tom may be praiseworthy

## 2 MERELY PRACTICAL VS. EPISTEMIC SOLUTIONS

**The Merely Practical Solution:** fickleness is practically problematic

- difficulty achieving goals; faces opportunity & sunk costs

**Objection:** This solution is incomplete.

1. Fails to explain why fickleness is problematic when nothing practical is at stake, or when won't act on any beliefs in question
2. There are cases where fickleness may be practically rational (e.g., Anya, who is given \$100 each time changes her mind)

**Positive Claim:** An epistemic solution is desirable:

1. Epistemic values that fickle agents have difficulty realizing
  - (a) Interpersonally: trust/reliance
  - (b) Intrapersonally: consistency; self-trust/reliance
2. Suppose you believe that *p* while also believing that if you were to reopen deliberation, you would not conclude that *p*. Epistemic mistake, even if never going to act on belief.

**Terminological choice:** will talk in terms of epistemic *rationality/irrationality*

<sup>1</sup>*Deliberative changes* for short.

### 3 MY SOLUTION: THE RATIFIABLE REASONING ACCOUNT

When you redeliberate multiple times, you gain two types of second-order evidence:

- **Inductive Evidence** that you likely won't settle on your new belief but will change your mind again.
- **Higher-Order Evidence (HOE)** that you are—or ought to view yourself as—unreliable at the matter at hand.

This higher-order evidence can explain the epistemic irrationality of fickleness in two ways:

1. **UNRELIABILITY:** It is epistemically problematic to believe that  $p$  while also believing that one is unreliable about whether  $p$
2. **UNRATIFIABILITY:** It is epistemically problematic to believe that  $p$  while thinking that said belief would not survive further redeliberation

- **Ratifiability Norm:** if you expect that you will not believe that  $p$  later (with no change in evidence), you ought not believe that  $p$  now

What should one do once one has gained sufficient HOE?

*Answer:* suspend judgment on whether  $p$

⇒ APPLYING SOLUTION TO FRAN AND TOM:

- **Fran:** straightforward
- **Tom:** has not gained much, if any evidence, that he will not settle on newfound belief; so no/little evidence that unreliable

#### 3.1 When Frequent Changes Are Fine

Some factors that are relevant:

- Evidence that you're improving each time or getting better/more skilled at assessing the evidence
- Special information about track record (or domain)

This type of reasoning has a limit. Analogy: gambler's fallacy.

### 4 COMPETING EXPLANATIONS

#### 4.1 The Self-Binding Account

Attempts to capture the irrationality of fickleness by positing norms against reopening deliberation in the first place.

- The problem with Fran is not that she changed her mind multiple times, but that she reopened deliberation multiple times.

Consider Fran\* who reopens deliberation each day but arrives at the same view each time.

**Motivation:** The point of forming beliefs is to settle inquiry. Once we settle, our beliefs ought to be resistant to reconsideration. So, we make an epistemic mistake by reopening.

**Problems:**

1. Indicts one-off changes of mind as irrational
2. Not clear that Fran\* is epistemically irrational

#### 4.2 Permissivism Versus Uniqueness

**Uniqueness:** There is always at most one rational response to a single body of evidence (contrast *Permissivism*)

**Problem:** can't adequately explain the rational difference between one-off and frequent deliberative changes (e.g., Fran & Tom)

- E.g., suppose that uniquely rational response to Earhart evidence is to suspend. Fran and Tom are equally irrational.

Choice of Permissivism vs. Uniqueness is relevant for how often changes of mind are rational

### 5 CONCLUSION

Too much of a good thing is bad, and my account explains why.

**FUTURE WORK:** More work needs to be done on the roles of reasoning, and how it bears on the epistemic status of changing one's mind.