**Whither Higher-Order Evidence?[[1]](#footnote-1)\***

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**Abstract**

*First-order evidence* is evidence which bears on whether a proposition is true. *Higher-order evidence* is evidence which bears on whether a person is able to assess her evidence for or against a proposition. A widespread view is that higher-order evidence makes a difference to whether it is rational for a person to believe a proposition. In this paper, I consider in what way higher-order evidence might do this. More specifically, I consider whether and how higher-order evidence plays a role in determining what it is rational to believe distinct from that which first-order evidence plays. To do this, I turn to the theory of reasons, and try to situate higher-order evidence within it. The only place I find for it there, distinct from that which first-order evidence already occupies, is as a practical reason, that is, as a reason for desire or action. One might take this to show either that the theory of reasons is inadequate as it stands or that higher-order evidence makes no distinctive difference to what it is rational to believe. I tentatively endorse the second option.

**1. Introduction**

Consider:

MURDER (Part I) Maria, an experienced detective with an unbroken track record, is investigating a murder. She has gathered and considered carefully the various clues. The evidence they provide – concerning the motives of the suspects, their whereabouts at the time of the killing, their access to the murder weapon, and so on – suggests that the butler is innocent.

In this case, one might think, it is rational for Maria to believe that the butler is innocent. Of course, the case is underdescribed, but it is highly plausible that there are ways of filling in the details which preserve this verdict.

However, the story continues:

MURDER (Part II) Maria is aware that the butler is her child, which suggests that she is not in a position to assess the evidence; more specifically, it suggests that her assessment of the evidence is prejudiced in favour of the butler’s innocence.

In the full version of MURDER, one might think, it is not rational for Maria to believe (outright) that the butler is innocent, notwithstanding the fact that the clues suggest as much.[[2]](#footnote-2) Indeed, one might think this even if the evidence is misleading and Maria does not in fact suffer from bias.

Call evidence which bears on whether a proposition is true, that is, which indicates or makes it likely that a proposition is (or is not) true, *first-order evidence*. Call evidence which bears on whether one is able to assess or respond to one’s evidence concerning a proposition, *higher-order evidence*.[[3]](#footnote-3) In MURDER, the clues provide first-order evidence while Maria’s relationship to the suspect provides higher-order evidence.

Cases like MURDER might encourage us to think that higher-order evidence makes a difference to whether it is rational for a person to believe a proposition. In this paper, I consider in what way it might do this.[[4]](#footnote-4) More specifically, I consider whether and how higher-order evidence plays a role in determining what it is rational to believe *distinct* from that which first-order evidence plays. To do this, I turn to a theory with considerable explanatory and expressive power, the theory of (normative) reasons, and try to situate higher-order evidence within it.[[5]](#footnote-5) Surprisingly perhaps, the only place I find for it there is as a reason for desire – for example, a reason for wanting to avoid certain beliefs – and as a reason for action – for example, as a reason to bring it about that one avoids those beliefs.

There are two conclusions one might draw from this. First, one might think that the theory of reasons needs supplementation or revision so as properly to accommodate higher-order evidence. Second, one might instead take it to cast doubt on the idea that higher-order evidence makes a difference to whether it is rational to believe a proposition. I do not rule out the first but I do suggest that some of the points that emerge along the way support the second.

Before proceeding to the main discussion, I will make some preliminary remarks about rationality and about the importance of the topic (over and above its self-standing interest).

I use ‘rational’ here as a label for the (or a) status that the beliefs of subjects in Gettier (1963) scenarios possess. This is a positive epistemic status distinct from mere blamelessness.[[6]](#footnote-6) Some might prefer the label ‘justified’ or ‘reasonable’. The terminology is not important in what follows. I focus on what it is rational for a person to believe (ex ante rationality), not what she rationally believes (ex post rationality). In addition, I focus on what it is overall or all-things-considered rational for a person to believe, not what it is rational to some degree or in some respect for her to believe. I take no stand here on the dispute between internalists and externalists about rationality, or the corresponding dispute about evidence. As far as I can tell, the outcomes of those debates make little to no difference to the points I make.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Why care about the role of higher-order evidence? For one thing, reflection on higher-order evidence might put pressure on a popular view: *evidentialism*.[[8]](#footnote-8) According to evidentialism, as I understand it here, it is rational for a person to believe a proposition if and only if her evidence suggests that it is true (cf. Conee and Feldman 2004). Consider again MURDER. Maria’s evidence suggests that the butler is innocent. But, given the likelihood of bias, it is not rational for Maria to believe that the butler is innocent. So, evidentialism is false.

No doubt there are other ways to formulate evidentialism. Indeed, reflection on cases like MURDER might prompt one to explore alternatives. But this point only bolsters the claim about the significance of higher-order evidence.

Another reason to care about higher-order evidence is that its effects might be surprising, even troubling. Some suggest, for example, that higher-order evidence generates *rational dilemmas*, situations in which a person is subject to conflicting requirements (see Christensen 2010, 2013, 2016).[[9]](#footnote-9) Consider again MURDER. If Maria fails to believe that the butler is innocent, she is ignoring the evidence the clues provide. But, if Maria believes that the butler is innocent, she is ignoring the threat of bias. More generally, rationality requires one to believe in accordance with one’s first-order evidence, and it requires one to believe in accordance with one’s higher-order evidence, but it is not always possible to satisfy both requirements. As Christensen puts it, situations involving higher-order evidence can be ‘rationally toxic’ (2010: 212).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Others suggest that reflection on higher-order evidence supports scepticism – either of a general sort or in particular domains.[[11]](#footnote-11) If the risk of bias in MURDER makes it irrational for Maria to believe that the butler is innocent, then many, perhaps most, of our beliefs are irrational. After all, there is plenty of evidence that ordinary thinkers are subject to biases and other irrational influences in the beliefs they form and revise, and are prone to make mistakes of various kinds in their reasoning and assessment of evidence. If many, or most, of our beliefs are irrational, then many, or most, of our beliefs fall short of knowledge.

I am not endorsing these lines of thought; indeed, I query each of them below. The point for now is just that reflecting on higher-order evidence might lead to non-trivial conclusions.

**2. The motivational constraint**

In what follows, I often appeal to a *motivational constraint* on reasons:

MC That p is a reason for a person to φ only if that person can φ for the reason that p.[[12]](#footnote-12)

To put the same point differently, a normative reason is a possible motivating reason.[[13]](#footnote-13) As stated, MC is a condition on reasons in general, including, but not limited to, reasons for belief.

MC offers a way to capture the intuitive thought that reasons provide *guidance*. As Korsgaard says, ‘A practical reason must function […] as a guide’ (2008: 31). Raz puts it in more general terms: ‘normative reasons can guide agents’ (2011: 26). There is no point in providing guidance to a person, one might think, if she cannot be guided by it in what she does, thinks, or feels, that is, if she cannot act, think, or feel in light of it.

To see that MC is plausible, suppose that it is good for Holly to grow taller. This improves her prospect of joining the basketball team. Holly can grow taller; indeed, she is growing taller. However, Holly cannot grow taller *for the reason* *that* it improves her prospect of joining the team, or any other reason for that matter. Her growth is not responsive to reasons. According to MC, that it improves her prospect of joining the team is not a reason for Holly to grow taller. In contrast, suppose that it is good for Holly to go to practice. This too improves her prospect of joining the team. Holly can go to practice; indeed, she is going to practice. Moreover, Holly can go to practice *for the reason that* it improves the prospect of joining the team. So, MC allows that the fact that it improves her prospect of joining the team is a reason for Holly to go to practice. These seem the right results.

Accepting MC does not commit one to thinking that, if there is a reason for a person to do, think, or feel something, she can tell that she has that reason, or that it is a reason, or that she is doing, thinking, or feeling something for that reason. This follows only on the assumption that to respond to a reason one needs to be able to tell such things, which is questionable at best.

Of course, there are challenges to MC. Since I tackle the main objections elsewhere (Way and Whiting 2016), I take it for granted here.

**3. Reasons for and against believing**

As mentioned above, I will consider how higher-order evidence fits into the theory of reasons, what place it might have within that framework. The starting-point is the notion of a *reason*. A reason is a consideration which *counts in favour of* or *justifies* an attitude or action. Reasons have weights and (so) one reason can be weightier than another. For example, that an interesting film is showing might be a reason of some weight for Miyuki to go the cinema, while that she promised to stay at home might be a weightier reason for her not to go.

A plausible and widely held view is that a person’s reasons contribute to determining what it is rational for her to think, feel or do.[[14]](#footnote-14) Another plausible and widely held view is that, if a consideration is evidence for or against the truth of a proposition, it is a reason for or against believing that proposition.[[15]](#footnote-15) Does higher-order evidence play this role?

Higher-order evidence might in this way provide a reason for a higher-order belief.[[16]](#footnote-16) In MURDER, the evidence of bias might suggest that it is not rational for Maria to believe that the butler is innocent, or that she cannot rationally believe this; it might thereby give Maria a reason for beliefs about the rational status of believing that the butler is innocent. However, the present concern is with the impact of higher-order evidence on first-order attitudes. Might higher-order evidence provide a reason for or against a first-order belief?

It might. After all, any consideration can be evidence for the truth of any proposition, given a suitable background. Imagine that, in MURDER, Maria knows that, if the butler is her child, then the butler is guilty. Against this background, the evidence that her assessment of the clues will be prejudiced is evidence that the butler is guilty. In this way, it is a reason for Maria not to believe that the butler is innocent. In this way, in turn, it might make a difference to what it is rational for her to believe.

In this role, higher-order evidence satisfies MC. Maria might not believe that the butler is innocent for the reason that the butler is her child, that is, in response to evidence that the butler is guilty.

So, one way for higher-order evidence to affect the rationality of belief is for it to provide a reason for or against belief by providing evidence for or against the truth of a proposition. In this way, however, higher-order evidence does not play a distinctive part – the role it plays is simply that of first-order evidence. It is higher-order in name only or, to borrow Lasonen-Aarnio’s phrase (2014: 318), ‘just more evidence’.[[17]](#footnote-17) I have some sympathy with this idea and return to it below. For now I will continue the search for some contribution higher-order evidence *as such* might make. To that end, suppose that, in MURDER, Maria has no background evidence relative to which the fact that the butler is her child is evidence for or against the proposition that the butler is innocent. Perhaps Maria and her child are estranged, and she knows nothing about the butler beyond the evidence the clues provide. In that version of the case, one might think, it remains irrational for Maria to believe that the butler is innocent, given the likelihood of bias. What role, then, is her higher-order evidence playing?

At this point, one might point out that, even if every reason for believing a proposition is evidence for its truth, it is not the case that every reason against believing a proposition is evidence against its truth. By the same token, some reasons against believing are not reasons to disbelieve a proposition, or to believe its negation.[[18]](#footnote-18) For example, that Isabella’s evidence suggests neither that some proposition is true nor that it is untrue is, plausibly, a reason for her not to believe it. But that reason is not itself evidence Isabella possesses for or against the relevant proposition; it is, rather, a fact about her evidence.[[19]](#footnote-19) By the same token, it is not a reason for Isabella to disbelieve the proposition.

This opens up the prospect that higher-order evidence provides a reason against believing a proposition without providing evidence against it. In this way, it might have a distinctive role to play in determining whether it is rational for a person to believe a proposition.

However, it is not enough simply to suggest that higher-order evidence is a reason against believing, especially given the puzzling or non-trivial consequences to which that suggestion might lead. We need a plausible account of how or in virtue of what higher-order evidence might provide a reason against believing, one which allows us to understand how that reason might interact with the reasons the first-order evidence provides so as to determine what it is rational to believe.

In Isabella’s case, it is not hard to see why, given that her evidence suggests neither that the relevant proposition is true nor that it is false, it is not rational for her to believe it. After all, if her evidence does not support the proposition, she lacks a (sufficient) reason for believing it. Evidently, that is not what is going on in cases like MURDER. Moreover, in Isabella’s case, it is clear that her reason against believing is derivative. Once the (evidential) considerations that provide reasons for believing the proposition and reasons for disbelieving it are in place, the (non-evidential) reason for not believing it is in place. But, again, that is not what is going on in MURDER. In what follows, I will consider what might be going on instead.

**4. Modification**

It is widely recognised in the theory of reasons that, alongside reasons, there are *modifiers*. These come in two species: *intensifiers* and *attenuators* (cf. Dancy 2004: 41-42). An intensifier is a consideration that increases the weight of a reason. An attenuator is a consideration that decreases the weight of a reason.[[20]](#footnote-20) For example, that Cora will be at the party might be a reason for Frank to go (since Cora is a fun person to be around). However, that Nick will be there makes the reason less weighty (since Cora is less fun when Nick is around). That Nick will be at the party is, then, an attenuator. To give another example, suppose that Juan testifies that the chauffer did it. This is evidence that the chauffer did it, and thereby a reason for Maria to believe that the chauffer did it. However, Juan and the chauffer are archenemies. This makes the reason less weighty – given the animosity, Juan’s testimony is less likely to be true. That Juan and the chauffer are archenemies is, then, an attenuator [[21]](#footnote-21)

If a consideration attenuates a reason for believing a proposition, it is thereby a reason against believing it, though it is not thereby a reason for disbelieving it (cf. Pollock 1986: 36).[[22]](#footnote-22) That Juan and the chauffer are archenemies is a reason for Maria not to believe that the chauffer did it. If Maria does not believe that the chauffer did it, she might (partially) justify the omission on the grounds that, though Juan said that the chauffer did it, Juan and the chauffer are archenemies.

In view of this, one might ask whether higher-order evidence attenuates the reasons first-order evidence provides for a proposition and thereby provides a reason against believing it. This would explain why, in MURDER, it is not rational for Maria to believe that the butler is innocent. That the butler is her child reduces the weight of the reasons for believing that the butler is innocent which the clues provide (below whatever the threshold is for rational belief).[[23]](#footnote-23)

As others point out, cases involving higher-order evidence seem unlike typical cases of attenuation.[[24]](#footnote-24) Juan’s relationship to the chauffer makes his testimony less reliable as a guide to whether the chauffer did it; their animosity makes it less probable that what Juan says is true. In contrast, Maria’s relationship to the butler does not make the clues less reliable as a guide to whether the butler is innocent. The risk of bias notwithstanding, the clues continue to suggest that the butler is innocent.[[25]](#footnote-25)

To bolster the view that higher-order evidence cannot play the role of an attenuator, I will appeal to MC. Higher-order evidence, I suggest, does not satisfy MC.

One might think that higher-order evidence obviously satisfies MC. In MURDER, it is surely possible for Maria not to believe that the butler is innocent for the reason that she is not in a position to assess the evidence.

At this point, further comment on MC is in order. The idea it is supposed to capture is that, if that p is a reason for a person to φ, it must be possible for her to φ for the reason that p *in virtue of the fact that* or *because* that p is a reason for her to φ (cf. Shah 2006: 485ff; Way and Whiting 2016: 225ff). This connects to the thought about guidance. A person is not guided by a consideration if she is not sensitive to the guidance it provides.

It is possible for a person to φ for a reason for φing without doing so *because* it is a reason for φing. Suppose that Donald knows that he lives in the White House and, if he lives in the White House, he is President. On that basis, Donald concludes that he is President. However, when Donald forms his belief, he follows this rule of inference: from any consideration concerning Donald, infer that he is President. In that case, though Donald’s reasons for believing are in fact reasons which justify doing so, he is not responding to those reasons as such. He is not manifesting sensitivity to the reason-giving force of the relevant considerations. After all, Donald would have drawn the same conclusion had he believed that he does not live in the White House.[[26]](#footnote-26)

So, MC is to be understood as requiring that it be possible for subjects to respond to the relevant reason as such. My suggestion, then, is that higher-order evidence does not attenuate, since a person cannot respond to it as such.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Consider: Maria might revise her belief that the chauffer did it for the reason that Juan and the chauffer are enemies *because* their animosity makes it less likely that Juan’s testimony is true. In this way, she manifests sensitivity to the reason for not believing. But, in MURDER, Maria cannot revise her belief that the butler is innocent for the reason that her assessment of the evidence is likely prejudiced *because* the risk of bias means that the clues do not suggest as strongly that the butler is innocent.

For one thing, to return to an earlier point, it is false that the risk of bias means that the clues do not suggest as strongly that the butler is innocent.

For another, to respond to an attenuator *as such* or *in its role as an attenuator* a person must respond to its attenuating, that is, to its having an effect on the weight of the original or unmodified reason. To respond to that, to the difference the attenuator makes, a person must be responsive to the weight of the unmodified reason. But in cases involving higher-order evidence a person cannot simultaneously manifest sensitivity to the weight of the unmodified reason and manifest sensitivity to the supposed attenuator’s effect on it.

In MURDER, if Maria treats the clues as having a certain weight apart from her higher-order evidence, she is not treating the risk of bias as genuine. Conversely, if she is sensitive to that risk, she will not treat those clues as having that weight apart from her higher-order evidence. After all, the higher-order evidence suggests that she is not in a position to assess the evidence the clues provide.

To bolster this point, consider how Maria might manifest sensitivity to the weight of the original evidence, and the effect of her higher-order evidence on it, in her thought or talk: ‘Were there no risk of bias, the clues would suggest that the butler is innocent. But my assessment is probably biased. So, the clues do not suggest that.’ This is confused at best.

It is helpful in this context to model sensitivity to an attenuator as a matter of applying a function to an unmodified reason with a certain weight to deliver a modified reason with a different weight (which might then serve as input to deliberation).[[28]](#footnote-28) In the testimony case, Maria enters the weight of the reason Juan’s testimony provides independent of context, applies the Juan-hates-the-chauffer function, and arrives at the modified weight of the reason. But we cannot model Maria’s sensitivity to her higher-order evidence in MURDER in this way. To what does she apply the I-am-probably-biased function? What does she input? Not the weight of the reason she takes the clues to provide. After all, if she is biased, that is the wrong thing to apply the function to.

It seems, then, that is not possible for a person in a case involving higher-order evidence to respond to that evidence in the capacity of an attenuator on first-order evidence. By the same token, it is not possible for her not to believe the relevant proposition on the basis of the corresponding reason as such. Given MC, it follows that higher-order evidence does not attenuate.

**5. Second-order reasons**

So far, I have argued that higher-order evidence does not play the role of an attenuator. What other role might it play? Again, I turn to the theory of reasons.

Raz (1990: 35-48, 178-199) suggests that, in addition to reasons for and against acts and attitudes, there are *second-order* reasons. Second-order reasons are reasons for or against responding to certain reasons, that is, reasons for or against acting or having an attitude for or on the basis of other reasons.[[29]](#footnote-29) To adapt Raz’s example, suppose that Kelly promises her partner to make decisions about their child’s schooling on the basis of education-related reasons alone, and not, say, in view of what might be best for their careers. Suppose further that Kelly is deliberating as to whether to send their child to a certain school. The promise, according to Raz, is not a reason for or against sending their child to that school – it does not reveal or indicate any positive or negative features of the school. Nor, for that matter, does it modify those reasons – the pros and cons remain as weighty. Instead, the promise is a second-order reason for Kelly not to decide to send their child to that school for the reason, say, that it will shorten their commute.

In view of this, one might suggest that higher-order evidence plays the role of a second-order reason – a reason for or against basing one’s belief on certain first-order considerations. In MURDER, the risk of bias is a second-order reason for Maria not to believe that the butler is innocent on the basis of the evidence the clues provide.[[30]](#footnote-30)

If one is going to appeal to this idea to explain why it is not rational for Maria to believe that the butler is innocent, one has to make the further assumption that only the reasons a person has which are not excluded by her second-order reasons contribute to determining what it is rational for a person to think.

I will not spend long on this proposal as I have argued against it at length elsewhere (Whiting 2017). A key objection is that putative second-order reasons do not satisfy MC. It is possible to φ for a reason but it is not possible to φ-for-a-reason for a reason. Kelly can decide to send her child to a school. And she can decide to do so for educational reasons. But she cannot decide to send her child to a school for educational reasons for the reason that she promised to do so. Since second-order reasons do not satisfy MC, they are not really reasons at all, at least, not reasons for or against acting or having an attitude for a reason. If there are no second-order reasons, then higher-order evidence cannot provide such reasons.

That is not to say that the relevant considerations provide no reasons at all. In Whiting 2017, I suggest that Kelly’s promise, for example, is a reason for *wanting* to make schooling decisions on basis of educational reasons alone, or for *bringing it about* that she does so. More generally, putative second-order reasons are really first-order reasons for desires and actions. Might higher-order evidence play a similar role? I return to this later.

**6. State-given reasons**

Is there another place for higher-order evidence in the theory of reasons? A familiar and widely discussed distinction is between *object-given* and *state-given* reasons for attitudes.[[31]](#footnote-31) Object-given reasons indicate or reveal something about the object of the attitude, while state-given reasons indicate or reveal something about the attitude itself. Suppose that Maria believes that the butler is innocent. Evidence that the butler is innocent – for example, that the butler lacked a motive – indicates that what she believes, the object of her belief, is true. It is, then, an object-given reason for believing. In contrast, suppose that believing that he is President makes Donald happy. This concerns, not what he believes, but his believing it. So, if it is a reason for believing, it is a state-given reason.

The issue at hand is what role higher-order evidence plays in determining what it is rational to believe. First-order evidence, like the clues in MURDER, provides object-given reasons for and against believing. Perhaps higher-order evidence, like Maria’s relationship to the butler in MURDER, provides state-given reasons. This is a suggestion DiPaolo (2018) makes.

According to DiPaolo, state-given reasons for or against an attitude are value-based; they concern respects in which having that attitude is good or bad. For example, that it makes Donald happy to believe that he is President is a respect in which so believing is good (for him). DiPaolo’s proposal is that in the same way higher-order evidence can indicate that believing a proposition is bad in a respect (2018: 262). In MURDER, Maria’s relationship to the butler indicates that her believing that the butler is innocent is irrational, which is a bad thing. In this way, higher-order evidence can provide state-given reasons against believing a proposition (though not reasons for believing its negation). If the state-given reason not to believe a proposition the higher-order evidence provides outweighs the object-given reasons to believe it which the first-order evidence provides, it can make it irrational to believe that proposition.

This is an interesting proposal. One advantage of it, to return to an early theme, is that it not only suggests that there might be non-evidential reasons against believing but in addition tells us what grounds those reasons, namely, (expected) values. One challenge facing it is to explain how the object-given reasons weigh against or interact with the state-given reasons so as to determine what it is rational for a person to believe. It is not clear that they are commensurable.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Here is a different worry. State-given reasons are thought by many *not* to make a difference to whether it is rational to have an attitude (see Schroeder 2012b). That so believing makes him happy does not make it rational for Donald to believe that he is President. That might suggest that the idea that higher-order evidence gives state-given reasons cannot explain how such evidence bears on what it is rational to believe.

The point about rationality connects to a further point. Many take a characteristic feature of state-given reasons to be that it is not possible to respond to them, in the sense that it is not possible to hold an attitude for such reasons (see Kelly 2002, Parfit 2011, Raz 2011, Schroeder 2012b, and Shah 2006). Donald cannot believe that he is President for the reason that so believing makes him happy. This might explain why state-given reasons do not contribute to determining whether it is rational to have an attitude. If it is not possible to respond to them, it is not a failure of rationality not to do so.

This point in turn connects to MC. Given MC, if subjects cannot have attitudes for state-given reasons, they are not really reasons (in anything but name) for the relevant attitudes (see Kelly 2002, Shah 2006).[[33]](#footnote-33) Proponents of this line of thought typically add that, what might seem to be state-given reasons for an attitude are in fact object-given reasons for wanting to have that attitude (or for causing that attitude). For example, that it makes him happy to do so is a reason, not for Donald to believe that he is President, but for him to want to believe this.

Building on these points, I will suggest that, if higher-order evidence provides state-given reasons, it is not possible for a person to believe or to refrain from believing for those reasons. Given MC, it follows that they are not really reasons at all.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Again, it might seem that it *is* possible for Maria not to believe that the butler is innocent for the reason that the butler is her child. Recall, however, that the issue is whether it is possible for her to respond to that consideration *as a state-given reason* for believing. To support the suggestion that this is not really possible, I will proceed in an indirect fashion.

According to DiPaolo, higher-order evidence provides a state-given reason against believing by indicating a way in which so believing is bad, namely, that it is irrational. In view of this, suppose that Hilary knows that Donald is President.[[35]](#footnote-35) In this case, it seems rational for her to believe that Donald is President or the moon is made of cheese. After all, her evidence a priori entails this. However, a malicious and all-powerful demon tells Hilary that, if she believes the disjunction, it will ensure that her belief is irrational, say, by making her forget that Donald is President. The demon’s testimony indicates a way in which believing the disjunction would be bad, namely, that it would be irrational. So, parity of reasoning suggests that it is a state-given reason against so believing.

It is, of course, possible for Hilary not to believe the disjunction – she might not have bothered to draw out this consequence. Plausibly, however, it is not possible for her not to believe the disjunction *for the reason that* the demon will make her forget her evidence if she does so. The demon’s threat cannot be Hilary’s reason for not believing what is entailed her evidence. She cannot refrain from believing the proposition which her evidence supports in light of the fact that, were she to do so, the demon would interfere with her mental states. Given MC, the demon’s threat is not a reason against believing.

Setting aside MC, it seems clear that, in this case, it *is* rational for Hilary to believe the disjunction, the demon’s threat notwithstanding.[[36]](#footnote-36) Although the demon will make that belief irrational, if Hilary forms it, it is presently the rational thing for her to believe. So, even if the demon’s threat provides a state-given reason against believing, it is not one which bears on what it is rational for her to believe.

Here, then, is the argument. If the evidence that Maria’s assessment of the clues will be prejudiced in MURDER is a state-given reason against believing, one which bears on what it is rational to believe, then so is the demon’s threat. The demon’s threat is not a state-given reason against believing, at least, not one which bears on what it is rational to believe. So, the threat of bias is not a state-given reason against believing, at least, not one which bears on what it is rational to believe. More generally, higher-order evidence does not provide state-given reasons against believing, at least, not reasons which bear on what it is rational to believe.

A proponent of the view under consideration might insist that cases like MURDER and the case involving the demon are disanalogous. Alternatively, she might insist that, in the demon case, Hilary is able to respond to its threat in the relevant fashion. Rather than explore such responses, I will argue that the view is independently implausible.

The proposal that higher-order evidence provides state-given reasons against believing faces what one might call a problem of *containment*. Consider this transmission principle (cf. Way 2012):

If that p is a state-given reason for φing, and ψign is a means to φing, then that p is a state-given reason for ψing.

For example, that it makes Donald happy to believe that he is President is a state-given reason for him so to believe. If believing that he lives in the White House is a means to believing that he is President, then that it makes Donald happy to believe that he is President is a state-given reason for him to believe that he lives in the White House.

The transmission principle does not hold for object-given reasons (cf. Way 2012). That Donald is President is a reason for Hilary to believe that Donald is President or the moon is made of cheese. Suppose that believing that the moon is made of a dairy would facilitate believing the disjunction. Nevertheless, that Donald is President is not an object-given reason for believing that the moon is made of dairy; it is not evidence that this is true. Nor is it a state-given reason for so believing; that Donald is President does not indicate or reveal some respect in which it is good for Hilary to believe that the moon is made of dairy.

In view of this, consider again MURDER. Suppose that Maria’s relationship to the butler is a state-given reason for her not to believe that the butler is innocent, insofar as it provides evidence that so believing is irrational. Suppose also that disbelieving the (first-order) evidence – say, that the butler was out of the country at the time – or believing without evidence that some defeating consideration obtains – say, that the butler’s prints are on the gun – would allow Maria not to believe that the butler is innocent. Given the transmission principle, it follows that Maria’s relationship to the butler gives her a state-given reason against believing that the butler was out of the country, or for believing (without evidence) that the butler’s prints are on the gun. In turn, Maria’s relationship to the butler might make it irrational for her to believe that the butler was out of the country, or rational for her to believe that the butler’s prints are on the gun. While it might be plausible to think that, given her relationship to the child, it is not rational for Maria to believe that the butler is innocent, it is not plausible to think that, given her relationship to the child, it is rational for her to disbelieve her first-order evidence or to form beliefs without evidence.

The point here is that, while the suggestion that higher-order evidence provides state-given reasons against believing might deliver the desired verdict when it comes to Maria’s belief that the butler is innocent, it does so at the cost of delivering highly problematic verdicts concerning any number of other beliefs. So, quite apart from MC, there is reason to reject the suggestion.

While I do not accept DiPaolo’s proposal, I think that it contains an important insight. Higher-order evidence indicates or suggests that believing a proposition is bad in a respect, say, that it is irrational. This is an object-given reason for wanting not to believe that proposition (perhaps also for causing oneself not to believe it). So, just as state-given reasons are (really) reasons for desire, higher-order evidence provides reasons for desire. I explore this further in the final section.

**7. Reasons for and against wanting and acting**

Reflection on cases like MURDER might encourage the thought that higher-order evidence can make a difference to what it is rational to believe. The question I have asked is: how so? What role might higher-order play such that it bears on whether it is rational to believe a proposition? Higher-order evidence, I allow, might provide (‘just more’) first-order evidence. In that case, it plays the familiar role of a reason for or against belief. I suspect that, for many cases in which higher-order evidence seems to affect what it is rational to believe, it does so, or we imagine that it does so, in this capacity. But does higher-order evidence play any other role? One might think that it makes a difference to what it is rational to believe, even when it is does not provide first-order evidence. How so?

Drawing on the theory of reasons, I have considered various possibilities. Specifically, I have considered whether higher-order evidence plays the role of an attenuator on reasons for belief, or a second-order reason against believing for certain first-order reasons, or a state-given reason against believing. I have argued that it cannot play these roles – in each case, the case rests in part on an independently plausible motivational constraint on reasons.

As noted at the outset, there are two lessons one might take from this. One is that the theory of reasons as it stands is incomplete or inadequate. Another is that higher-order evidence does not really make a distinctive difference to what it is rational to believe. I cannot here rule out the former option. But there is something to be said for the latter.

First, when surveying the candidate roles higher-order evidence might play, it turned out in each case that higher-order evidence is unable to guide our thinking about first-order matters. In this way, a pattern has emerged, one which might be projectable.

At this point one might object. Surely Maria might say or think to herself, ‘I’m probably biased, so I shall withhold belief as to whether the butler is innocent.’ This suggests that it is possible for her Maria not to believe that the butler is innocent in light of the risk of bias (or the evidence which suggests it).

By way of response, note that, in general, ‘I shall’ expresses a practical attitude, such as a decision. Accordingly, I suggest that ‘I shall withhold belief’ expresses, not a doxastic attitude, but a practical attitude, for example, a decision. It is commonplace that one cannot decide (not) to believe. But one can decide to bring it about that one does (not) believe. This brings me to a second point.

The discussion of state-given reasons highlights that higher-order evidence in cases like MURDER indicates a respect in which having a certain belief is bad. A consideration that suggests or indicates that φing is bad in some respect is, in general, a reason to want not to φ. So, higher-order evidence in such cases is a reason to want not to believe certain propositions.[[37]](#footnote-37) By the same token, it might serve as a reason to perform (mental or non-mental) actions that result in one’s not believing those propositions. In a similar fashion, higher-order evidence might provide a reason to want to counter the risk of bias, for example, by securing expert advice, or as a reason to do this (when possible).

Note that the reason for desire that higher-order evidence provides satisfies MC. It is possible for Maria to want not to believe that the butler is innocent, or to want a second opinion, for the reason that the butler is her son (which suggests her assessment is biased).

Here we have found a role for higher-order evidence to play, that of a reason for desire. This might seem a surprising conclusion; it suggests that the reasons higher-order evidence provides are *non-epistemic* or *practical*.

On this view, if Maria believes that the butler is innocent but does not, say, double-check her reasoning, or at least want to do so, she might exhibit irrationality of a sort, but the irrationality in question is practical, not epistemic. She is failing to respond to evidence of disvalue, rather than evidence of truth. So, what is irrational is not Maria’s belief, but her lack of concern.[[38]](#footnote-38)

This proposal, if correct, goes some way toward domesticating higher-order evidence. It shows that higher-order evidence is no threat to evidentialism. In MURDER, assuming that the evidence that Maria’s assessment of the clues is prejudiced is not also evidence of the butler’s guilt, Maria’s evidence suggests that the butler is innocent. So, it is rational for her to believe this. The higher-order evidence might give Maria a reason to want not to believe this but it does not affect what it is rational for her to believe (at the first-order). By the same token, if the proposal is correct, it shows that higher-order evidence does not generate a distinctive sceptical threat. If it remains rational for Maria to believe that the butler is innocent, her belief remains a candidate for knowledge.

One might, however, suspect that on the view I am exploring higher-order evidence continues to give rise to rational dilemmas. Consider again MURDER. It is rational for Maria to believe that the butler is innocent, given the clues, but rational for her to want not to believe this, given her relationship to the child. If Maria forms the relevant attitudes, is she not conflicted or at odds with herself? Perhaps. But the conflict is of an unproblematic and familiar sort. For one thing, Maria can accord with both the reasons for believing and the reasons for desiring – by having a belief she wants not to have. The situation is not one in which she is unable to satisfy competing considerations. For another, there are many cases not involving anything like higher-order evidence in which it is rational to want not to have rational attitudes. It is rational for Hilary to believe that Donald is President but, since that thought upsets her, it is rational for her to want not to believe this. So, if higher-order evidence gives reasons for desire, rather than reasons against belief, it does not generate rational dilemmas of a troubling sort.

Not so fast! Above I suggested that higher-order evidence might provide reasons, not only to want to lack a belief, but also to act so as to bring it about that one lacks a belief (when possible). Doesn’t this allow for problematic dilemmas? In MURDER, Maria is rationally required to believe that the butler is innocent, given the first-order evidence, and rationally required to bring it about that she does not believe this, given the higher-order evidence. If she satisfies the first requirement, she violates the second, and vice versa.[[39]](#footnote-39)

However, this is not a case in which there is a requirement (or corresponding reasons) to respond in a certain way and a requirement (or corresponding reasons) not to respond in that way. In MURDER, according to the view under consideration, the evidence the clues provide gives Maria reasons for believing but it does not give her reasons against acting, and the evidence of bias gives Maria reasons for acting but it does not give her reasons against believing. To use Parfit’s terminology (2011: 427), the epistemic reasons and practical reasons in this case and others like it *compete*, in the sense that it is not possible to accord with both, but they do not *conflict*, in the sense that they support different answers to the same question, namely, ‘What to believe?’ (or, for that matter, ‘What to do?).

In contrast, the suggestion I mentioned in the introduction was that higher-order evidence generates cases of *conflict*, not just *competition*, that in cases like MURDER the first-order evidence and the higher-order evidence support different answers to the same question, namely, ‘What to believe?’ So, if the reasons higher-order evidence provides are practical rather than epistemic, the (so-called) dilemmas higher-order evidence gives rise to are of a more benign sort than feared at the outset.

Moreover, the view under consideration is not the only one to countenance competitions of the above kind. Any view according to which, for example, the fact that it would make him happy to do so is not a reason for Donald to believe that he is President but, instead, a reason for him to cause this belief will have to tolerate such situations.

In closing I will consider a final objection. One might complain that it is simply counterintuitive to think that higher-order evidence (as such) has no bearing on what it is rational to believe at the first order. Note, however, that the competing views which allow for rational conflicts or scepticism are also counterintuitive. So, no position here seems wholly in accord with untutored intuition. Moreover, the positive proposal might help to explain away opposing intuitions – they are tracking, not reasons not to believe, but reasons to want not to believe.

While I have shown that higher-order evidence plays the role of a reason for desire, I have not shown that that is the only role it plays (distinct from that of first-order evidence). Nonetheless, if this turn to be the case, it helps to bring higher-order evidence down to earth.

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2. Christensen (2010), DiPaolo (2018), Schechter (2013), Sliwa and Horowitz (2015), and Saul (2013), among many others, offer similar verdicts about similar examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Some use the label instead, or in addition, for evidence about what evidence one has (or will have, or lacks, etc.), or for evidence about what one’s evidence supports. For reasons of space, I will not consider whether the points to follow generalise. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. So as to keep things manageable, I focus on the rationality of full or outright belief, rather than partial belief or credence. How to extend the discussion to degrees of belief is an interesting question but not one I address. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Some have reservations about the importance of the notion of a reason for epistemology. For discussion, see Sosa and Sylvan 2018. For other examples of framing or approaching questions in epistemology using the framework the theory of reasons provides, see the contributions to Reisner and Steglich-Petersen (eds.) 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. On the difficulties of specifying the conditions under which a belief is blameless, see Srinivasan 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I also take no stand on the nature of the evidential relation. I assume only that it is objective in the sense that what a person’s evidence supports is independent of what she takes her evidence to support or whether she can tell what it supports. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. DiPaolo (2018) and Worsnip (2018) make this point in different ways. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Some draw another surprising moral, namely, that higher-order evidence gives rise to cases in which it is rational to believe against one’s better judgement, that is, in which epistemic akrasia is rational. For discussion, see Coates 2012, Christensen 2013, Feldman 2005, Greco 2014, Horowitz 2014, Lasonen-Aarnio 2014 and Forthcoming, Littlejohn 2018b, Sliwa and Horowitz 2015, Titelbaum 2015, and Worsnip 2018. I do not tackle that issue here. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In fact, I do not think that a person’s evidence ever rationally *requires* her to believe a proposition; it only ever rationally *permits* her to do so (see Nelson 2010, Whiting 2013). I will not press this point, since I doubt for independent reasons that higher-order evidence generates rational dilemmas. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For relevant discussion, see Elga 2007, Feldman 2005, Feldman 2006, Saul 2013, Schechter 2013: §4.3, and Schoenfield 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Proponents of MC include Gibbons (2013), Kelly (2002), Kolodny (2005), Parﬁt (2011: 51), Raz (2011: 28), Shah (2006), and Williams (1981). MC entails but is not entailed by the principle *reason implies can*, according to which, if that p is a reason for a person to φ, she can φ (see Streumer 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For discussion of the distinction between normative reasons and motivating reasons, see Alvarez 2010, Mantel 2017b. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For discussion of what it is to ‘have’ a reason, see Alvarez 2018, Comesaña and McGrath 2014, Schroeder 2008, and Lord 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Kelly goes so far as to say, ‘”reason to believe” and “evidence” are more or less synonymous’ (2014). That, I think, is going too far (cf. Whiting 2017: §7.3). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Cf. Coates 2012, Kelly 2005, Lasonen-Aarnio 2014, and Worsnip 2018. Titelbaum (2015) and Littlejohn (2018b) deny that higher-order evidence makes it rational for a person to believe such higher-order propositions, at least when it is misleading. But the claim here is the weaker one that it at least provides a reason for so believing. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This seems to be how Kelly (2010, though compare 2005) and Worsnip (2018) view higher-order evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Are they, then, reasons to suspend judgement with respect to that proposition? That depends on what it is to suspend. For discussion, see Friedman 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For this point, see Schroeder 2012a, Littlejohn 2018a, and Lord 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. I focus in the remainder on attenuators. There are also *disablers*, considerations which make what would otherwise be a reason not one (cf. Dancy 2004: 38ff). One might suggest that higher-order evidence disables, rather than attenuates, the reasons the first-order evidence would otherwise provide. This suggestion will face similar problems to those I discuss. In addition, it will struggle to account for cases in which the higher-order evidence seems to make it less rational, but not irrational, to believe the proposition the first order-evidence supports. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Considerations that attenuate reasons for believing are, to use Pollock’s (1986) terminology, *(partial) undercutting defeaters*. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. This is a claim about attenuators on reasons for believing. I take no stand here on whether this holds for attenuators on reasons for other attitudes or for actions. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Feldman (2005, 2006) seems to view higher-order evidence in this way. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Lasonen-Aarnio (2014: 317) and Christensen (2010) indicate ways in which defeat by higher-order evidence differs from undercutting defeat. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. I assume here that a consideration attenuates the weight of a reason for believing a proposition (only) by attenuating the weight of the evidence it provides for the truth of that proposition. In the practical domain, a consideration might attenuate the weight of a reason, not by attenuating the evidence it provides that some option will realise or promote some value, but by attenuating the value itself. Nothing analogous to this second dimension of attenuation occurs in the epistemic domain. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For similar examples and discussion of what it is to a respond to a reason as such, see Arpaly and Schroeder 2014: ch. 3 Lord and Sylvan Forthcoming, Mantel 2017a, and Way 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Coates (2012) makes a similar point in different terms. He argues that a person cannot rationally regard higher-order evidence as defeating the rationality of her first-order belief. Coates then appeals to a *Transparency Requirement*, according to which a consideration is a defeater ‘only if it is possible for those who encounter the consideration rationally to regard it’ as such (2012: 120). It follows that higher-order evidence is not a defeater. In what follows, I appeal, not to the Transparency Requirement, but to MC, which demands less cognitive sophistication. MC allows that there might be a reason for a person to respond in some way, or an attenuator on such a reason, even if she is unable to regard (think of, represent) it in those terms. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Cf. ‘The unmodified reason is always prior to the modified reason. The former is the input to the modification function, yielding the latter as its output’ (Bader 2016: 40). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Second-order reasons are not merely reasons for considering certain reasons or directing one’s attention away from others. Such reasons are just first-order reasons – reasons to perform certain mental acts. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. This is how I understand Christensen’s ‘bracketing picture’ (2010, Forthcoming, see also Elga 2007). Note that it is nontrivial to suggest that higher-order evidence provides second-order reasons. To talk of ‘second-order reasons’ in this context is not just to talk of considerations that operate at a higher-order; it is to talk of considerations which play a distinctive role. It is a substantive question whether higher-order evidence plays that role. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For this terminology, see Parfit 2001. For some important discussions of the distinction, though not always in these terms, see D’Arms and Jacobson 2000, Hieronymi 2005, Olson 2004, Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2004, Schroeder 2012b, Sharadin 2015, and Way 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. DiPaolo acknowledges this challenge but does not try to address it (2018: fn54). For a story about how practical considerations might weigh against or alongside evidential considerations, see Reisner 2008. It is a nice question whether Reisner’s proposal combines with DiPaolo’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. In Whiting 2017, I develop and defend a theory of reasons which, together with the plausible assumption that truth is the correctness-condition for belief, entails that state-given reasons for belief are not (really) reasons. But I do not rely on that theory here. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Schroeder (2012a) argues that there are state-given reasons against believing of a certain sort, namely, reasons provided by what is at stake in holding a belief. According to Schroeder, those reasons bear on whether it is rational to believe a proposition and (because) it is possible to respond to them, hence, they satisfy MC. In both respects, Schroeder takes the stakes-based reasons to differ from more familiar examples of state-given reasons, such as Donald’s happiness-based reason. I do not here take a stand on Schroeder’s view. For critical discussion, see Mueller 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. One can add that she knows this for certain, or knows that she knows this, or that she has mastered the rule for disjunction-introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. The issue here is what it is ex ante (not ex post) rational for Maria to believe. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Or, if one prefers, a consideration that rationalises so desiring. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. This way of presenting things avoids Schechter’s (2013: 444) objection to the idea that a failure to respond to higher-order evidence is a ‘moral or pragmatic’ failure rather than an epistemic one. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. As mentioned in fn9, I do not think that subjects are ever rationally required to believe propositions but I grant here that they are for the sake of argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)