Against the Fixed-Point Thesis*

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ABSTRACT: I argue that the reasoning that generates the Fixed-Point Thesis also generates a stronger thesis. I then argue that existing attempts to explain how the Fixed-Point Thesis could be true do not explain how the stronger thesis could be true. Absent a good explanation, I argue that we should reject both theses.

§I. Epistemic Enkrasia

If Ezra thinks he should get the train, because it's cheaper, quicker, and more comfortable, but then books a flight instead, he's not exactly a paragon of rationality. In general, there's something irrational about a person who does something whilst judging that they have better reasons not to do it. This is a thesis about practical rationality. Recently, there has been a great deal of interest amongst epistemologists in an epistemic analogue to it. Just as it is irrational to do something whilst judging that you have better reasons not to do it, so to, many epistemologists have thought, is it irrational to believe something whilst believing that you

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* This is a draft. Nevertheless, feel free to cite it. Got comments or questions? Email me!

should not believe it.[1] Let's call this analogue 'Enkrasia'. Generalised, it says that:

ENKRASIA
Rationality requires that:
(a.) If one is in doxastic state D, one does not believe that one should not be in state D, and:
(b.) If one believes that one should be in state D, one is in state D

A doxastic state here can be an attitude towards a single proposition – belief that p, suspension on p, or disbelief that p, for instance. Or it can be a set of attitudes towards a set of propositions – belief that p, disbelief that q, and so on. We will focus on the coarse-grained attitudes {belief, suspension, disbelief} throughout.

In two influential recent articles, Michael Titelbaum (2015) and Clayton Littlejohn (2018) have argued that if we accept Enkrasia we must also accept what they call the 'Fixed-Point Thesis' (which I'll call 'Weak Fixed-Points'). It says that:

WEAK FIXED-POINTS
False beliefs about the a priori requirements of rationality are irrational.[2]

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[1] See Gibbons (2013), Greco (2014), Horowitz (2014), Horowitz & Sliwa (2015), Christensen (2016), Kiesewetter (2017), Worsnip (2018), Lord (2018), Silva (2018), Salow (2019), Dorst (2019), Smithies (2019), Daost (2019), and Rinard (fc.) amongst others. 'Should' here is restricted to the epistemic 'should'. There is nothing inherently epistemically irrational about believing that p whilst believing that one *morally* or *legally* (etc.) should not believe that p.

[2] For ease of exposition, I have changed the wording from Titelbaum's original formulation of WEAK FIXED-POINTS, which is "no situation rationally permits an a priori false belief about which overall states are rationally permitted in which situations". (2015: 261)

As Titelbaum and Littlejohn both acknowledge, Weak Fixed-Points is surprising if true. Epistemological orthodoxy has it that whilst false beliefs can't be knowledgeable, they can be rational. But if Weak Fixed-Points is correct, certain kinds of beliefs are exceptions to the rule – they can't even be rational. This cries out for an explanation: *why not?* In this article I'll argue that we should not expect a plausible answer to be forthcoming. The reasoning that gets us Weak Fixed-Points also generates a stronger thesis – 'Strong Fixed-Points' – and the two theses stand or fall together. But there is no good explanation for how Strong Fixed-Points could be true. Absent an explanation, I'll argue, we should reject both theses and rethink the reasoning that leads to them.

§II. Strong Fixed-Points

We start with Enkrasia. First, note that it is a wide-scope norm, as 'requires' scopes over the whole conditional in each of (a) and (b). That means it only prohibits *combinations* of attitudes. The logical form of (a) and (b) is $\Box(\varphi\rightarrow\psi)$. The corresponding narrow-scope norm, in which the conditionals have the logical form $(\varphi\rightarrow\Box\psi)$, doesn't have much to be said for it. Call it 'Narrow Enkrasia'. It states that:

> **NARROW ENKRASIA**
> (a.) If one believes that one should not be in doxastic state D then rationality requires one not to be in state D, and:
> (b.) If one believes that one should be in state D, then rationality requires one to be in state D.

Narrow Enkrasia is implausible because it licenses bootstrapping; with it, we can infer from the fact that Ezra *thinks* he should believe that p that he

should believe that p. The obvious problem with this is that Ezra might have no good reason to think that he should believe that p.[3] Rationality doesn't require you to do something just because you think it does.

However, given the K axiom of deontic-modal logic $\Box(\varphi\rightarrow\psi) \rightarrow (\Box\varphi\rightarrow\Box\psi)$ Enkrasia entails a narrow-scope requirement. Let 'R^r' stand for 'rationality requires', 'D' stand for 'one is in doxastic state D' and '$^\downarrow$D' stand for 'one believes that one should not be in doxastic state D'. We can reason like this:

> **WIDE-TO-NARROW**
> 1. R^r(D → ~$^\downarrow$D)
> 2. R^r(D → ~$^\downarrow$D) → (R^{r}D → R^r~$^\downarrow$D)
> 3. ∴ R^{r}D → R^r~$^\downarrow$D

(1) is condition (a) of Enkrasia. (2) applies the K axiom. It says that if (1) is true, then, if rationality requires Ezra to be in a certain doxastic state D, it also requires him not to believe that he shouldn't be in state D. The conclusion, (3), follows by modus ponens. It says that if rationality requires Ezra to be in state D, then it requires him not to believe that he shouldn't be in state D. That's a narrow-scope requirement, as it says that rationality requires Ezra not to believe that he shouldn't be in state D irrespective of whether he *is* in state D. I'll call it 'Strong Fixed-Points':

> **STRONG FIXED-POINTS**
> If rationality requires one to be in doxastic state D, then rationality requires one not to believe that one should not be in state D

Strong Fixed-Points is similar to Weak Fixed-Points, and the argument for it makes use of the same premises – Enkrasia and the K axiom – as

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[3] As Kolodny (2005) pointed out.

Titelbaum and Littlejohn. They use the Wide-to-Narrow reasoning to derive Weak Fixed-Points from Enkrasia. But the two theses are not the same. There are several differences that I will not dwell on here.[4] The important one for our purposes is that Strong Fixed-Points is, as the name suggests, in a certain way *stronger* than Weak Fixed-Points. Weak Fixed-Points only rules out the possibility of rational false beliefs about the *a priori* requirements of rationality. But Strong Fixed-Points isn't restricted in this way. It rules that even certain mistakes about the *a posteriori* requirements of rationality are irrational.

To understand the difference, we need to know which requirements of rationality are a priori and which aren't. Let us assume, along with Titelbaum and Littlejohn, that Evidentialism is a plausible candidate for being a principle of epistemic rationality:

> **EVIDENTIALISM**
> Rationality requires that your doxastic states conform to your evidence.[5]

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[4] For instance, unlike Weak Fixed-Points, Strong Fixed-Points only says that if rationality requires you to be in state D, then rationality requires you not to believe that you should not be in state D (i.e. that being in state D is forbidden). It doesn't say that if rationality requires you to be in state D, then rationality requires you not to believe that it's *permitted* not to be in state D.

[5] I will assume that putative 'substantive' requirements of rationality such as Evidentialism involve the same kind of necessity as 'structural' requirements like Enkrasia. Not everyone accepts this assumption – Worsnip (2018), for instance, denies it. Without the assumption, the strongest conclusion we could draw from Wide-to-Narrow is that if structural rationality requires you to be enkratic, then if structural rationality requires you to be in doxastic state D, then structural rationality requires you not to believe that you should not be in state D. This is a much weaker conclusion than the one Titelbaum and Littlejohn defend – it is compatible with rational false beliefs about the a priori *substantive* requirements of rationality.

If Evidentialism is true it is, arguably, knowable a priori. This is not uncontentious, but it does fit with the common conception of normative philosophy as an armchair discipline. If so, Weak Fixed-Points says that if Evidentialism is true, then Ezra cannot rationally believe that it is false. The point generalizes. If the principles of epistemic rationality are in general knowable a priori, as many philosophers would argue, then Weak Fixed-Points entails:

NO FALSE PRINCIPLES
If X is a principle of epistemic rationality, it is irrational to believe that X is not a principle of epistemic rationality.

In other words, Weak Fixed-Points rules out the possibility of rational false beliefs about the principles of epistemic rationality.

When it is put to work, Evidentialism generates requirements like the following:

EXAMPLE
If one's evidence consists of {p, q, r}, rationality requires that one believes that s.[6]

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[6] Notice that this is a narrow-scope requirement. I follow Titelbaum and Littlejohn in interpreting Evidentialism and other would-be substantive rational requirements this way. The narrow-scope interpretation is necessary as without it we do not get the result that rationality ever requires one to be in a doxastic state – only that it requires coherence between one's doxastic state and one's situation, which may be achieved by changing one's situation rather than revising one's doxastic state. Without the result that rationality sometimes requires a doxastic state, Weak Fixed-Points and Strong Fixed-Points follow vacuously from Enkrasia but are uninteresting for this reason. The narrow-scope interpretation is not unproblematic (see Williamson (ms.) for discussion), but I will grant it here as my concerns with Weak and Strong Fixed-Points lie elsewhere.

Arguably, evidential support relations are knowable a priori. If so, Example is knowable a priori (which is not to say that it is *easily* known). Again, the point generalizes. Let 'S' be a variable picking out situations. Conditionals of the following form may be knowable a priori:

SITUATIONS-TO-STATES
If S, then rationality requires that one is in doxastic state D

If so, then Weak Fixed-Points rules out the possibility of rational false beliefs about what doxastic states are rational given a situation.

However, what is *not* plausibly taken to be a priori is what one's situation is. In the case of Evidentialism: what one's *evidence* is.[7] On most theories of evidence it is an a posteriori question what evidence one possesses. For example, if one's evidence consists of all and only those propositions one knows to be true (Williamson 2000), the question is an a posteriori one because knowledge is not negatively introspectable; if Ezra's belief that p is Gettiered he cannot come to know simply by reflection that he does not know that p.[8] Negative introspection failure is a feature of all but the most internalist theories of evidence. Theories that I (and others) have argued are adequate.[9]

The point is not unique to Evidentialism, or even to epistemic norms. Ezra might know that the following rule is in force:

DRINKS
If it is after 10pm, one must not have an alcoholic drink outside.

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[7] A point with which both Titelbaum and Littlejohn agree.

[8] Of course, Gettier cases are not the only examples of negative introspection failure.

[9] See [omitted-a].

But, sitting outside with a glass of wine, he might not know that he is in breach of the rule, because he doesn't know that it is 10.15pm (his watch has broken and is reading 9.15pm). The point is quite general: one can know a rule, know how to apply it in a given situation, and yet not know how to apply it in one's current situation, because one does not know what one's current situation is.

We are now in a position to see the way in which Strong Fixed-Points is stronger than Weak Fixed-Points. Weak Fixed-Points doesn't say that Ezra is irrational if, possessing evidence {p, q, r}, he believes that he should not believe that s. After all, if he is mistaken about what his evidence is – if he thinks it is not {p, q, r} but rather {x, y, z} – then this need not be a mistake about an *a priori* requirement of rationality. But Strong Fixed-Points isn't restricted in this way. According to Strong Fixed-Points Ezra is irrational if he believes that he should not believe that s, even if this belief is the result of him being mistaken about what his evidence is.

This difference between Strong Fixed-Points and Weak Fixed-Points is a significant one. As I will argue in sections four and five, it means that Strong Fixed-Points cannot be explained in either of the ways that Titelbaum and Littlejohn attempt to explain Weak Fixed-Points.

§III. Weak Without Strong?

At this point a question presents itself: can we accept Weak Fixed-Points without committing to Strong Fixed-Points?

There is nothing inconsistent about doing so; neither thesis entails the other. However, since the premises in Wide-to-Narrow – Enkrasia and the

K axiom – are exactly the same as those Titelbaum and Littlejohn use to generate Weak Fixed-Points, the only way to motivate such a stance is to argue either that:

1. K should be applied to akratic combinations of beliefs (hereafter: 'akratic beliefs') which have a priori requirements of rationality as their subject, but not to akratic beliefs which have a posteriori requirements of rationality as their subject.

Or:

2. Enkrasia should be restricted, such that it rules akratic beliefs to be irrational when their subject is a priori rational requirements, but not when their subject is a posteriori rational requirements.

I hope we can all agree that option (1) is a non-starter. It would be completely ad hoc to apply K only to some instances of Enkrasia, but not to others. What about option (2)?

Interestingly, some things Titelbaum says suggest that he might go for it. He acknowledges that it is not always a priori what one's evidence is, and he only commits to Enkrasia applying in situations in which one knows exactly what one's evidence is, leaving it as an open question whether it also applies in other situations. (2015: 262)

But is it an open question? Or, putting it another way, is it plausible to suppose that akratic beliefs are irrational when their subjects are a priori requirements but *not* irrational when their subjects are a posteriori requirements? To me that seems highly implausible. Let me explain why.

There may well be some situations in which akratic beliefs are not irrational. The most obvious candidates are cases of what I will call 'unwitting akrasia'. Consider:

- Ezra believes that p, but he doesn't know that he does – the belief is consciously inaccessible to him. He consciously believes that he should not to believe that p. He has a combination of beliefs of the form 'p, and I should not to believe that p', but he doesn't realise it.

- Ezra believes that p, believes that he should not to believe something the negation of which he has believed in the past, believed ~p in the past, but does not remember that fact now. He has a combination of beliefs of the form 'p, and I should not to believe that p', but he doesn't realise it.[10]

- Ezra believes that Phosphorus is visible in the morning sky and also believes that he ought not to believe that Hesperus is visible in the morning sky, but he does not know that Hesperus = Phosphorus. He believe 'p, and I should not to believe that p'[11] but he doesn't realise it.

If you're like me you'll be reluctant to level the charge of irrationality against Ezra in these cases. So perhaps some kind of restriction on Enkrasia is warranted. However, cases of 'clear-eyed akrasia', in which the agent *knows* that they have akratic beliefs, give rise to no such hesitation, at least for me. Consider an example:

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[10] This case is from Titelbaum (2015).
[11] Assuming we don't accept hyperintentional semantics, at least.

- Ezra believes that the London-Oxford train service will be suspended next Monday, and that he shouldn't believe this. Moreover, he knows that he has this combination of beliefs, under this description. He happily asserts 'The service will be suspended on Monday, but I don't have good evidence that it will, and I shouldn't believe it'; happily replies 'yes' when asked 'Do you believe that the service will be suspended and that you shouldn't believe that?'; and happily accepts a wager on the service being suspended even whilst regarding it as a bad wager for him to make…and so on.

In this case it seems intuitively obvious to me that Ezra is irrational – an intuition many philosophers appear to share.[12] Indeed, if we can't say that Ezra is irrational in this case, I'm not sure on what grounds we could maintain that *any* akratic combination of beliefs is irrational – including those which Titelbaum and Littlejohn wish to indict. Maybe unwitting akrasia is rationally okay, but clear-eyed akrasia definitely isn't.

Now, here's the rub. In order to stop Wide-to-Narrow from generating Strong Fixed-Points, Enkrasia needs to be restricted to a priori rational requirements. But restricting it to cases of clear-eyed akrasia won't get us that outcome, since it's possible for one to have clear-eyed akratic beliefs and *at the same time* for the subject of those beliefs to be *a posteriori* rational requirements. There is *simply no connection* between one being an unwitting or clear-eyed akratic, on the one hand, and the subject of one's

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[12] Again, see Gibbons (2013), Greco (2014), Horowitz (2014), Horowitz & Sliwa (2015), Christensen (2016), Kiesewetter (2017), Worsnip (2018), Lord (2018), Silva (2018), Salow (2019), Dorst (2019), Smithies (2019), Daost (2019), and Rinard (fc.) amongst others. That clear-eyed akrasia is irrational is typically taken as a premise from which conclusions are drawn, rather than as a conclusion argued for from independent premises – presumably precisely because it seems intuitively so obviously irrational. Smithies (2019) is a nice example of this phenomenon.

akratic beliefs being an a priori requirements or a posteriori requirement, on the other.

The upshot this is that if we accept that clear-eyed akratic beliefs are irrational (as we should), then, applying K to Enkrasia, we will get the result that false beliefs about the a posteriori requirements of rationality are irrational.[13] In other words, we get Strong Fixed-Points. To reject this conclusion, one would have to maintain that some clear-eyed akratic beliefs are irrational and others aren't. This strikes me, as I hope it will the reader, as a very implausible position to adopt.

The net result is that if we accept the Wide-to-Narrow argument for Weak Fixed-Points, we must also accept it for Strong Fixed-Points. And so Weak Fixed-Points and Strong Fixed-Points stand or fall together. As we will see in the next two sections, neither of Titelbaum's or Littlejohn's attempts to explain how Weak Fixed-Points could be true carries over to explain how Strong Fixed-Points could be true. Absent a good explanation, I will argue, we should reject Stong Fixed-Points, and Weak Fixed-Points along with it.

§IV. Titelbaum on Weak Fixed-Points

Titelbaum and Littlejohn don't just accept Weak Fixed-Points. They each try to explain *why* it is true by describing ways that "…the epistemological landscape might lie if [it] is true" (Titelbaum 2019: 233). We might hope that one of their offerings will also explain Strong Fixed-Points.

Titelbaum proposes the following evidentialist explanation of Weak Fixed-Points:

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[13] At least, those that don't feature in unwittingly akratic combinations.

"…every agent possesses a priori propositional justification for true beliefs about the requirements of rationality in her current situation. An agent can reflect on her situation and come to recognize facts about what that situation rationally requires. Not only can this reflection justify her in believing those facts; the resulting justification is also empirically indefeasible." (2015: 276)

In (2019) he clarifies. The claim is that everyone has indefeasible, a priori, *evidence* for truths about the requirements of rationality in their current situation, and this evidence always outweighs any countervailing evidence.

This is not entirely implausible when it comes to a priori requirements of rationality such as those described by No False Principles and Situations-to-States.[14] After all, if these requirements are a priori one already has all the evidence needed to figure out what they are. On this way of thinking, rational requirements are analogous to logical and mathematical truths, which are entailed by any evidence whatsoever. Of course, it might be extremely *difficult* to figure out the requirements. But whoever said that being rational is easy?

However, whilst the proposal has something to be said for it when it comes to explaining Weak Fixed-Points, it does not carry over to explain Strong Fixed-Points.

Strong Fixed-Points prohibits false beliefs about the a posteriori requirements of rationality stemming from empirical ignorance – in particular, ignorance of what one's evidence is. In order for Evidentialism to explain Strong Fixed-Points, it would have to be impossible for Ezra's

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[14] Though for criticisms see Field (fc).

evidence to make it rational for him to mistakenly believe that his evidence is E, on which it would be irrational for him to believe that p, rather than E*, on which he is rationally required to believe that p. For if this was possible there would be situations in which it is rational for Ezra to believe that p and rational for him to believe that he should not believe that p. However, as a number of epistemologists have recently pointed out, there are good reasons to think that this kind of situation *is* possible.[15] Indeed, it seems to be a consequence of negative introspection failure for evidence. Suppose that Ezra's evidence is {p, q, r} and that if his evidence is {p, q, r} rationality requires him to believe that s. Now suppose that, due to negative introspection failure, Ezra's evidence indicates that his evidence is *not* {p, q, r}, but rather {x, y, z}, and suppose he knows that if his evidence is {x, y, z}, rationality requires him to not believe that s. In that case, he should believe that s, and he should believe that he should not believe that s.[16] Thus, Evidentialism does not explain Strong Fixed-Points.

§V. Littlejohn on Weak Fixed-Points

Littlejohn doesn't accept Titelbaum's proposed explanation of Weak Fixed-Points. He doesn't buy the idea that we all have indefeasible, a priori, evidence for truths about the requirements of rationality. Instead he denies that good evidence is sufficient for a false belief about what rationality requires to be rational. He argues that such a belief will inevitably fail to be rational because it will manifest a kind of *incompetence*.

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[15] Assuming the orthodox view that there is a tenable version of Evidentialism on which it can be rational to believe a falsehood.

[16] C.f. Salow (2019). For different arguments for the same conclusion, see Worsnip (2018) and Lasonen-Aarnio (2020)

His argument begins with an analogy. Suppose your accountant watches you fill out your forms for the IRS and tells you to do so in a certain way, with the result that you lose money you could have saved and break the law at the same time. Meanwhile, your neighbour is filling out his forms in exactly the same way as you, with the same consequences. Littlejohn says "…your neighbour isn't competent at handling this kind of situation. [His] *actions* manifest this incompetence". What about your accountant? Well, he hasn't filled out anything, but nevertheless, Littlejohn argues, he "…manifests the same kind of incompetence and…[also] shows himself to be incapable of managing the situation even though his incompetence is manifested in his *beliefs* about what you should do, rather than in his actions" (2018: 270)

Littlejohn thinks that the same goes for epistemic rationality. He thinks that "…if your first-order beliefs violate rational requirements…you'll manifest a kind of incompetence at handling reasons that merits the charge of irrationality." But, just as your accountant manifested the same kind of incompetence as your neighbour despite only forming beliefs about how the forms should be filled out, rather than actually filling them out, if you merely *judge* that you should form beliefs that happen to violate the requirements of rationality, "…this judgement reflects the same incompetence, the same failure to discern what a situation requires of you, that the first-order irrational beliefs did". (2018: 270) And that's why mistaken beliefs about what rationality requires are themselves irrational beliefs.

As before, this proposal has something to be said for it when it comes to Weak Fixed-Points. Consider what seems to me to be a more illuminating analogy: with moral principles. One might think that whilst a person who *thinks* it's okay to take money from their friends without asking isn't quite as bad as a person who actually *does it*, they nevertheless display the same

kind of failing.[17] False beliefs about the principles of morality, the thought goes, are immoral beliefs. Similarly, false beliefs about the principles of rationality are irrational.[18]

But does the reasoning here carry over to explain Strong Fixed-Points? It does not. To continue our analogy, a person who has the right moral principles but inadvertently misapplies them due to an empirical error is not naturally taken to be morally incompetent or corrupt in the same way as the person who thinks it's okay to take money from their friends without asking. If Ezra pockets your cash, reasonably but mistakenly believing that it's his, he is not on a par with a person who thinks it's fine to steal. Similarly, if you give your accountant false information about your finances, then he does not necessarily show himself to to be incompetent when he tells you to fill out the forms in a way that happens to lose you money and breaks the law. Likewise, a person who holds a belief not supported by their evidence because they are mistaken about what their evidence *is* does not show themselves to be incompetent in the way that a person who gets the principles of epistemic rationality wrong arguably does. Empirical error does not entail incompetence. If it did, we would have to say that *all* false beliefs manifest incompetence and should be branded irrational. That is implausible. The analogies break down when they are applied to Strong Fixed-Points.

Neither of Titelbaum's or Littlejohn's attempts to explain Weak Fixed-Points carries over to explain Strong Fixed-Points. Since there is no motivation for accepting Weak Fixed-Points *without* also accepting Strong Fixed-Points, we should also conclude that they fail to motivate Weak Fixed-Points.

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[17] C.f. Harman (2011)

[18] I will leave it open whether this line of thought carries over to a priori truths about evidential support relations.

§VI. Where Now?

If anything is consensus in epistemology, it is that false empirical beliefs can be rational. As we have seen, there are good reasons to think that false beliefs about what one's evidential situation is are no exception. So if Evidentialism is true we should not expect any explanation for Strong Fixed-Points to be forthcoming. Instead, we should reject it. Since Strong Fixed-Points and Weak Fixed-Points stand or fall together, we should reject Weak Fixed-Points too.

Of course, this assumes that Evidentialism *is* true. Perhaps a non-evidentialist theory of rationality can vindicate the theses? Elsewhere [omitted-b] I have argued that this is unlikely. Absent a vindication, a question presents itself: which of the premises and assumptions in Wide-to-Narrow should we keep and which should we reject? In [omitted-b] I argue that we should keep Enkrasia and reject the K axiom.[19] Here I will be content if I have shown that proponents of the Fixed-Point Thesis need to rethink their commitment to it.[20]

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[19] C.f. Broome (2007). It is worth mentioning that given Titelbaum's rather 'idiosyncratic' (his words) interpretation of the 'rationality requires' operator, K applies to it by definition, given classical first-order logic. So if we reject K, we must also reject his interpretation of the operator. Given the implausible consequences of the Fixed-Point Thesis I have described, I'd say that this is a reasonable thing to do.

[20] [acknowledgements omitted]

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