

How and Why to Avoid the Intellectual Vice of Rigidity

Daniel Drucker

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Introduction

Goals:

1. Illustrate a character trait, which I call *rigidity*, that seems individually and socially important.
2. Present a theoretical analysis of rigidity.
3. Explain why it is an epistemic and communicative vice.
4. Show why this makes apparent trouble for decision-theoretic approaches to epistemology.
5. Present two principles that, if followed, would help us avoid being rigid.

1 A Case Study

1. It seems to me that widespread rigidity can lead to degraded discourses. Though this is most obvious in politics, to be less provocative I will draw an example from philosophy (or a counterfactual version thereof).
2. *Grounding and Its Skeptics* (part 1). Metaphysicians now often think we need a fine-grained, non-modal conceptual tool for analyzing relations between “levels” of reality (e.g., between physics and chemistry, biology and psychology, etc.), to specify certain kinds of philosophical position (e.g., physicalism, the two positions corresponding to the two horns of

the Euthyphro question, etc.), and more. Usually this tool—call it grounding—is taken as a *primitive*, about which little more than that it helps us with those jobs can be said. Skeptics contend the notion is mysterious (a name for a problem to be solved) and thus cannot do the intended work, but the grounding theorists themselves find the tool too helpful to disregard.

3. Can conceptual primitives, especially those not drawn from ordinary language and about which little can be said, figure into an IBE the conclusion of which is that *those very primitives* stand for something real?
4. *Grounding and Its Skeptics* (part 2). Grounding theorists’ and grounding skeptics’ relative positions harden. The former focus their attention on metaphysical work that uses grounding-like tools, their exchanges with the skeptics mostly targeted at rebutting specific arguments of theirs. And the latter read very little of the new work, instead pushing the old tools in new directions, or inventing new tools that seem to them more understandable. There are few if any converts in either direction, and little constructive (rather than destructive) exchange.
5. This might just be a collective action problem: individually non-vicious, collectively bad outcome.

Grounding and Its Skeptics (part 3). Each side, the grounding theorists and the skeptics, care that the field reach truth and understanding, but also that their *students* do, too. By

their own lights, it is, respectively, a waste of time to teach grounding skepticism and grounding itself, except, perhaps, as useful target practice. Those who accept the epistemic principle about IBE deploy it quickly as a way of leading their students from error, both in what they think and *how* they think; and those who reject the epistemic principle about IBE introduce it and reject it quickly with the same exact purposes in mind. As a result, even in their teaching grounding's proponents and its skeptics spend very little time teaching their opponent's views, and even less to teaching them in a serious way.

6. Other examples in philosophy: whether Rawls's project is hopeless, given his reliance on maximin, or whether possible-worlds semantics is hopeless, given the problem of logical omniscience.

2 *An Analysis*

1. I will introduce my analysis of rigidity with the conceptual machinery of a theory that seems to me to recommend it: the decision-theoretic approach to rational belief. But note: it is more general, and I will state it in full generality.
2. According to decision-theoretic approaches to rational belief, we should form our beliefs so they get us most of what we (epistemically) want, in expectation. I will assume that is accuracy.
3. So, decision-theoretic epistemology says to "act" so as to maximize the expected accuracy of one's beliefs.
4. But we need a way of coming up with that expectation. How is it to be formulated?
5. It can seem like the only proper perspective is one's *current*; if some other perspective were better (according to your current perspective), irrational not to switch to that other perspective.
6. What this argument motivates: the guides an agent's use for all their decision-making, epistemic and other, should be—their

own, and they ought to be the best one's to have by their own lights, given how they value accuracy. This requirement is called **IMMODESTY**.

7. By 'an individual's epistemic standards' I will mean 'what the individual takes as good reasons for bearing which doxastic attitudes to which propositions or collections of propositions, including what are good arguments and what counts as evidence for what and to what degree'.
8. Similar argument as the argument for **IMMODESTY** gets us that we ought always to use our own epistemic standards in every (epistemic) decision we make. Call this **IMMODESTY FOR STANDARDS**.
9. **IMMODESTY FOR STANDARDS** plus the decision-theoretic framework of maximizing one's epistemic utilities gets us that we should always use our own epistemic standards in deciding what to do and believe.
10. This will be my analysis of rigidity. S is *rigid* =_{def} S always (or almost always) uses her own epistemic standards in deciding what to do and think.
11. Might be very unclear why this should be at all vicious!

3 *Why Rigidity Is an Epistemic Vice*

1. First I will argue that rigidity is an epistemic vice. Then I will argue that this is a problem for decision-theoretic epistemology.
2. Here's the argument I will defend:
 3. P1. A character trait is *epistemically vicious* if possession of the trait inhibits normal, good epistemic functioning and development.
 - P2. Changing one's epistemic standards not by conditionalizing (or by analogous processes) sometimes is necessary for good epistemic functioning and development.
 - P3. Rigidity prevents one from changing one's epistemic standards not by conditionalizing (or by analogous processes).

- C1. So, rigidity prevents one from obtaining something necessary for good epistemic functioning and development. (P2 and P3)
- C2. So, rigidity is epistemically vicious. (P1 and C1)
4. Defense of P1 is minimal: I hope it is just intuitive that this is a sufficient condition for something to be an epistemic vice.
 5. P2 is more involved, and in a sense the heart of what I'm doing here.
 6. In an interestingly similar dialectical context, McDowell mentioned *conversion experiences*. He meant, roughly, experiences the having of which allowed one to see (usually moral) reasons that were there the whole time but which did not connect up with anything (desires, etc.) that had been in one previously.
 7. There are epistemic analogues, changes in epistemic standard that cannot happen in the usual deliberative ways (e.g., by Bayesian conditionalization). One candidate: a student of analytic philosophy who comes to see the importance of precision and rigor, where before they hadn't.
 8. Contrary picture: we ought to be "superbabies"—born with the conditional credences (standards), which we need never revise. No child is like that, and none of us ever are at any point.
 9. Someone who could not have epistemic "conversion experiences" would *not become epistemically mature*, i.e., would not refine and improve their standards in the normal human way.
 10. That is, P2 is correct.
 11. P3 says that rigidity prevents us from undergoing those crucial changes.
 12. There are two ways it might do this.
 13. First, because they can't be reached *via* conditionalization, they might *block* their own replacement. (Standards must be self-recommending, given overall credences.)
 14. But perhaps they can be updated directly, like some perceptual propositions in standard Bayesian theory.
 15. Second, and more importantly, rigidity rationalizes *avoiding* having one's standards changed. Thus, not putting oneself in epistemically vulnerable positions, i.e., where one *can* be converted. (Not always—there might be independent reason to put oneself in situations like that. But often.) Should I allow my standards to be changed? No—they're expectedly best. So, avoid!
 16. Since decision-theoretic epistemology advocates behavior that would rationalize or even require this, it is to that extent suspect.
 17. Different perspective on the problem: similar to problems that might arise when how we act changes what our utilities are/will be. Do we act on current preferences, or on later ones? The real problem here is that changing standards is sometimes epistemically necessary.

4 Why Rigidity Is a Communicative Vice

1. I will focus on two ways in which rigidity is a communicative vice, i.e., the ways it inhibits normal and good communication between people.
2. In each case, rigidity needs some other quality of a person to be a vice, but in each case they are, themselves, unproblematic: being epistemically self-interested (wanting one's beliefs to be accurate), and epistemic altruism (wanting one's *interlocutor's* beliefs to be accurate).
3. The first is a communicative consequence of the epistemic aspect I investigated in section 3.
4. In conversations with one another, a kind of openness to views and arguments we would not have been antecedently open to—not just understanding them, but *being open to them* as real possibilities for ourselves.
5. This is part of what being a good interlocutor is, but rigidity makes exchanges like these more epistemically risky than they

would otherwise be, or epistemically useless if we already know the basic argument and that we won't find it convincing.

6. 5. depends on epistemic self-interestedness. It also calls to mind *Grounding and Its Skeptics* (part 2).
7. Next suppose a person is motivated by epistemic altruism. They decide whether it is worthwhile to report the views of their opponents, which depend on a basic epistemic standard they reject but their students might accept, if they encounter it.
8. To the rigid person, it is epistemically risky to expose them to the views, and at best epistemically useless (except where it is worthwhile to know that some people say that *p*). This calls to mind *Grounding and Its Skeptics part* (part 3).

5 *How to Avoid Rigidity*

1. I will recommend that agents who are concerned that they might be or become rigid follow two principles.
2. Think of them as Kantian *imperfect duties*: principles we need to follow sufficiently often, but perhaps not *all the time*.
3. Both, I think, would have beneficial effects for our overall community (political, but also more general), but they are directed here at getting us not to be rigid.
4. The first one is aimed at the epistemic problems with rigidity (and thus the first way it is a communicative vice):

THINK LIKE YOUR BEST OPPONENT. Where *p* is *controversial* (in that experts disagree), *S* must attempt to think about whether *p* from the perspective of—standards, etc.—of the person or people *S* takes to be their “best” (i.e., most reasonable) opponent.

5. This is a kind of principle of charity, but more, it is a way to force yourself to be vulnerable to the standards that move others.
6. It does not prevent rigidity, but it does diminish its harmful effects.

7. The other is purely communicative:

STRONGEST OPPOSED REASONS NORM (SORN). Where *p* is *controversial*, *S* must assert *p* only if: *S* ensures that *S*'s audience grasps the strongest reasons for not believing *p*.

8. I suspect this norm will be more controversial. It goes against some of the most famous norms that Grice posits as essential for rational, cooperative conversation.
9. It likely inhibits *the transfer of knowledge*, which is behind some of the most popular norms of assertion, e.g., the knowledge norm. (It likely inhibits the transfer of other kinds of good belief, too. At least in the short term.)
10. It is also a norm almost no one regularly follows, even the broadly intellectually virtuous. It is, to that extent, very revisionary.
11. Nevertheless I think it will make us more epistemically virtuous, and again, mostly prevent the downsides of rigidity (and hopefully train us out of being rigid).
12. There are probably other imperfect (maybe even perfect) duties that my considerations here would motivate. But it at least motivates these.