

# COMMENTS ON InJoon Seo's The Limit of the Fixed Point Thesis

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## SUMMARY

- Seo's paper novelly incorporates insights from Fara (2008)'s account of dispositions into Titelbaum (2015)'s account of rationality. *handout also on website! link ↑*
- I think there is promise in the intervention.
- However, the best target within the Titelbaum (2015) might be elsewhere, depending on what Seo takes his qualification to be.

## The Plan.

1. Outline what I take Titelbaum (2015)'s arguments to be.
2. Lay out possible interpretations for Seo's responses.<sup>i</sup>
3. Suggest that the right reading of Seo's response might threaten the FPT instead.<sup>ii</sup>

### 1. TITELBAUM'S POSITION

#### 1.1. The larger context.

**FIXED POINT THESIS (FPT):** No situation rationally permits an *a priori*<sup>iii</sup> false belief about which overall states are rationally permitted in which situations.<sup>1</sup>

1 p. 261

He contends that the FPT only restricts rational agents from having false beliefs about *rational requirements*, and can thus accommodate bounded theories of rationality.

- no infinite belief set is required because FPT doesn't behoove us to have beliefs about rationality if they're true (in response to worries about logical omniscience.)
- (more importantly for Seo) the FPT is "consistent with limiting rational requirements on an agent's beliefs to what is sufficiently obvious or accessible to her."

#### 1.2. Arguing for the incompatibility of TOP-DOWN and FPT.

**TOP-DOWN:** No matter what particular combination of attitudes an agent possesses, we can always add more to the story (concerning the agent's training, her beliefs about what's rational, etc.) to make her overall state rationally permissible.<sup>2</sup>

2 Titelbaum (2015), 278.

Titelbaum argues that it is *inconsistent* with the FPT, via the following case:

**Jane and the teacher.** There is a belief set,  $b$ , that Jane believes at  $t_1$ .  $b$  is inconsistent, but the inconsistency is "not so obvious as to impugn connective interpretation while still being obvious enough to count as rationally mistaken."<sup>3</sup> Titelbaum argues as such:

- P1. The TOP-DOWN theorist who grants FPT grants that  $q_1$ : " $b$  is rationally permitted at  $t_1$ " is *a priori* false, and Jane would be irrational to believe  $q$ .

3 Titelbaum's example is  $\{\neg(\neg p \wedge \neg q), \neg q\}$ , which we can use as  $b_1$  for this talk.

But then her teacher, a reliable expert logician, tells her at  $t_2$  that  $q_1$  is true:  $b$  is rationally permissible to believe (and always has been.) Call proposition  $q_{all}$ .

- P2. Grant the TOP-DOWN theorist's claim that Jane now has a rational belief in  $q_{all}$ .  
P3. However, Jane can now rationally believe  $q_1$ : that believing  $b$  at  $t_1$  was rationally permissible.  
P4. But  $b$  is *a priori* false at  $t_1$ , and so per the FPT it is irrational to believe that it was rationally permissible!

See P1.

- C. Premise 4 & 5 contradict; FPT is incompatible with TOP-DOWN.

### 2. SEO'S RESPONSE

Seo wants to argue that "Titelbaum's argument does not show that the TOP-DOWN view violates the FPT"(p.16).<sup>iv</sup>

He does so in a few moves:

<sup>i</sup>For both the FPT proper, as well as his argument via counterexample about the tension between FPT and Top-Down.

<sup>ii</sup>By conflicting with Titelbaum's qualifications on cognitive reachability.

<sup>iii</sup>Note that these are supposed to be false beliefs about *a priori* knowable propositions about what is rationally permitted in which situations – Titelbaum himself does not extend it to the *a posteriori* because that would result in a much stronger claim.

<sup>iv</sup>Not necessarily that TOP-DOWN is true, or the FPT also is – just that Titelbaum's argument doesn't work.

**2.1. Introduce the R-FPT.** As mentioned above, Titelbaum claims that FPT can accommodate bounded theories of rationality<sup>v</sup> Seo argues he is warranted in holding Titelbaum to his qualified version of the FPT.

**REACHABLE FPT (R-FPT):** For any agent  $A$  in a situation  $S$  and for any proposition  $p$ , when there is a rational requirement in  $S$  on  $p$ , if the rational requirement is cognitively reachable for  $A$  in  $S$ , then false beliefs about the rational requirement are always irrational.<sup>1</sup>

1 Seo p4.

*Prima facie*, there are two readings to the underlined phrase.

- a. Is the rational requirement itself as an *ability* the subject of cognitive reach?
- b. Or is the (true) *belief* that it is a requirement the subject of cognitive reach?

**2.2. No Mask.** Which interpretation does Seo take? He further argues for:

**NO MASK:** Rational requirements of a given situation are cognitively reachable to an agent only if:

- (i) the agent has the evidence evaluating ability for given situation;
- (ii) the evidence evaluating ability is not masked.<sup>2</sup>

2 15-116

That is: “When an evidence evaluating ability is masked, though she retains the ability, she fails to evaluate rational requirements correctly.”

I'll grant the argument for NO MASK: I think it's creative and deeply pursuitworthy.

**2.3. Against Titelbaum's argument in §1.2.** Now let's examine how Seo then argues against the inconsistency of (R-)FPT and TOP-DOWN:

- S1. The teacher's testimony has masked Jane's ability to evaluate rational requirements.
  - S2. Therefore, per NO MASK, the rational requirements not to believe  $q$  were no longer cognitively reachable to Jane.
  - S3. R-FPT thus no longer forces irrationality on  $q$ , despite its falsity, since the underlined antecedent is false.
  - S4. And TOP-DOWN is also vindicated, since her overall state went from being rationally impermissible to rationally permissible.
- C. Therefore, the Jane case fails to show the incompatibility of TOP-DOWN and R-FPT.

Importantly, for NO MASK to interact with the R-FPT as it does in S1-S3, Seo thus has to take interpretation a. of the underlined antecedent.

The worry is – I think this interpretation of the R-FPT is incompatible with Titelbaum's allowances.

### 3. CAN TITELBAUM ACCOMODATE SEO'S R-FPT?

Recall Titelbaum's FPT.

**FIXED POINT THESIS (FPT):** No situation rationally permits an *a priori* false belief about which overall states are rationally permitted in which situations.

He takes Cognitive Reach to impact “which overall states are rationally permitted in which situations,” such that, given what your theory of rationality says your rational requirements and permissions are, we cannot have *a priori* false beliefs about those requirements and permissions.

That is, the FPT is *already* accomodating of Cognitive Reach concerns – the FPT for boundedly rational agents will be phrased exactly the same as the current FPT.

Contrast Seo's notion of R-FPT, paraphrased for easier comparison and clarity:

**R-FPT (INTERPRETATION A, PARAPHRASED):** No situation rationally permits an (*a priori?*) false belief about which overall states are rationally permitted in which situations, except if the rationally permitted overall states are not cognitively reachable for the agent in the situation.

<sup>v</sup>Specifically: Cognitive Capacity (being limited by the quantity of beliefs one can hold) and Cognitive Reach (being limited by one's access to knowledge of rational requirements.)

Concretely in Jane's case, Titelbaum (and TOP-DOWN+ FPT) would grant that it is irrational to believe  $q_1$  at  $t_2$ , but that  $q_2$  perhaps (that believing  $b$  at  $t_2$  is rationally permissible) is not irrational to believe.

As stipulated,  $q_1$  is *a priori* false and always has been.

So FPT says  $q_1$  is irrational for anyone to believe at any time.

but the R-FPT, with its exception clause, is silent on the irrationality of believing  $q_1$  at  $t_2$ , even though  $q_1$  is indeed an *a priori* false belief about a requirement of rationality.

In other words, the FPT and R-FPT differ on their assessments of the irrationality of believing  $q_1$  at  $t_2$ .

Thus, Seo is right that the Jane case, with his R-FPT, won't show the incompatibility as Titelbaum requires.

But this is because R-FPT is not qualified by Titelbaum's allowances.

#### 4. UPSHOTS

If our precisified version of R-FPT is true, then Titelbaum's FPT cannot be true, but perhaps TOP-DOWN can be.

Titelbaum might still be right that the FPT and TOP-DOWN are incompatible, but Seo has shown that his R-FPT and TOP-DOWN are compatible.

So, perhaps, the question is: Do we take R-FPT to be true? Do we need that modification of the FPT? And what are the virtues/vices of each approach?

I'm really curious to hear what Seo has to say :)