

Normalisation for Ordinary Agents: A Solution to the Problem of Logical Omniscience

Choo Ying Hua, David | National University of Singapore

Abstract

The Bayesian model interprets probability as a quantification of degrees of belief. However, the axiom of normalisation asserts that a rational agent must believe all logical truths, even those unknown. This impossible demand on rationality is the problem of logical omniscience. This paper will demonstrate that the problem is set up to challenge us into abandoning the Bayesian model, despite the lack of equally valuable alternatives, by leveraging the conclusion that no ordinary agent is rational. I will then address the problem by relaxing the axiom of normalisation, insofar as a rational agent must assign a maximum degree of belief to logical truths only if they can be known. This is the only solution that keeps the model useful without making it complicated.

I. The Problem of Logical Omniscience

In the Bayesian model, an agent is rational only if their degrees of belief in propositions, hereafter credences, satisfy the mathematical conditions of a probability function.¹ These conditions are the Kolmogorov axioms which state that, for any set of propositions S , the credence function² $Cr : S \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ must satisfy the following:

Axiom 1. (Non-negativity) For any proposition $A \in S$, one has $Cr(A) \geq 0$.

Axiom 2. (Normalisation) For any logical truth $T \in S$, one has $Cr(T) = 1$.

Axiom 3. (Finite Additivity) For any propositions $A_1, A_2, \dots, A_n \in S$ such that for integers $j, k \in [1, n]$ where $j \neq k$ and $Cr(A_j \wedge A_k) = 0$,³ one has $Cr(\bigvee_{i=1}^n A_i) = \sum_{i=1}^n Cr(A_i)$.

1. Wolfgang Schwarz, *Belief, Desire, and Rational Choice*, <https://github.com/wo/bdrc/blob/master/bdrc.pdf>, December 20, 2022, 13.

2. The credence function Cr assigns propositions in a set S to some real number.

3. In terms of the content taught in the module, this is a partition of propositions on a set S .

However, what if we include propositions whose truth we have yet to ascertain in S ? Unfortunately, if we fully abide by the axioms, the axiom of normalisation demands that, to be deemed rational, an ordinary agent must assign maximum credence to the truth of such unknown propositions. This is clearly unreasonable: why are we qualifying rationality on knowledge of truths that ordinary agents cannot prove conclusively? Consider the case of Fermat's Last Theorem, which went unsolved for over three hundred years.⁴ Is it fair to consider someone in the past as irrational if they did not assign maximum credence in the truth of the theorem?⁵ Hence, this impossible demand is the problem of logical omniscience, which may be formalised as:⁶

P1: No ordinary agent can have credences in an infinite number of propositions.

P2: There are an infinite number of logical truths.

P3: If the Bayesian model is applicable to ordinary agents, then any ordinary agent must have maximum credence in any logical truth.

P4: No ordinary agent can have credences in all logical truths.

C: The Bayesian model is inapplicable to ordinary agents.

I will demonstrate that the argument is sound. Suppose there exists an ordinary agent who knows an infinite number of propositions, which means that they have enumerated through an infinite set of propositions and assigned a credence to each proposition within the set. However, it is nigh impossible for an ordinary agent to construct this set, much less to enumerate through it, because they do not possess infinite time to do so. Hence **P1** is true.

Next, suppose for the sake of contradiction that the greatest number of logical truths is a finite number n , so the set of logical truths is $T = \{T_1, T_2, \dots, T_n\}$. For any i with $1 \leq i \leq n$, we know $T_i \in T$ is true, so the tautology $(T_i \vee \neg T_i)$ is also a logical truth. This additional logical truth means that there are at least $n + 1$ logical truths, which contradicts the definition of n as the greatest number

4. The theorem states that for any $n \in \mathbb{Z}_{\geq 2}$, the equation $a^n + b^n = c^n$ has no positive integer solutions. This theorem seems innocuous, but its proof required extensive use of mathematics developed after Fermat's time, which would be inaccessible to an ordinary agent.

5. Sinan Dogramaci, "Solving the Problem of Logical Non-Omniscience," *Philosophical Issues* 28, no. 1 (2018): 108, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phils.12118>.

6. Carneades.org, "The Problem of Logical Omniscience (Bayesian Epistemology)," YouTube video, 6:24, February 22, 2015, youtu.be/pkGFSkGzg4M.

of logical truths. Thus **P2** is true as there is no upper bound on the number of logical truths.

Consequently, **P3** restates the axiom of normalisation. **P4** also follows naturally: if there are an infinite number of logical truths (**P1**) and no ordinary agent can have credences in an infinite number of propositions (**P2**), then **P4** must be true. Hence, the conclusion is obtained by *modus tollens* of **P4** on **P3**.

The issue with the argument is that it challenges us to discard a valuable model of rationality on the basis of a technicality, even though we lack viable alternatives. Its conclusion implies that no ordinary agent is ever truly rational, and so it is pointless to evaluate rationality on the criteria stipulated by the Bayesian model. However, this cannot be the case, because even with this shortcoming, the Bayesian model is generally useful, widely-applicable and valuable for its balance between rigour and simplicity. It literally pays to abide by the model, since we can show by way of a simple Dutch Book argument that if an agent has credences that violate the axioms, then they may be duped into buying bets which lead to a guaranteed loss.⁷ Hence, abandoning the model just because ordinary agents never attain the tall order of logical omniscience forgoes well-grounded criteria for rationality in favour of either a more laissez-faire approach in defining rationality, or the sweeping generalisation that any ordinary agent is irrational. The latter is intuitively repulsive, and the former cannot be the right approach, since a subjective criteria of rationality is not generalisable to all agents and hence holds little purpose as universal standard of rationality. Therefore, it is preferable to preserve the utility of the model by attempting to reconcile it with the problem of logical omniscience, rather than accept the conclusion and surrender without adopting a reasonable alternative.

II. Reformulating Normalisation

To account for the shortcomings of the Bayesian model, we could accept that the model merely prescribes how a logically omniscient agent must assign their credences. In order to apply the model to ordinary agents, the axioms must be duly amended to reflect how ordinary agents actually behave. Since the axiom of normalisation is the critical flaw that leads to the problem, we could reformulate it to:

Axiom 4. (*Weak Normalisation, WN*) For any **known** logical truth $T \in S$, one has $Cr(T) = 1$.

7. Schwarz, *Belief, Desire, and Rational Choice*, 44.

This reformulation implies that an ordinary agent ought to have maximum credence in T , only if they know that it is a logical truth.⁸ Typically, we may say that an agent knows T , if they can justify its truth or non-falsity. Consequently, a rational agent must also assign maximum credence to the truth of T .

This reformulation is desirable because it renders truths that are unknown to an ordinary agent as irrelevant to considerations of rationality, so it eliminates the demand of logical omniscience. Furthermore, it is coherent with the demands on rationality prescribed by the Bayesian model, as it is reasonable to expect that a rational agent can justify their credences. Therefore, applying WN to Fermat's Last Theorem, an ordinary agent in the past remains rational for having a non-maximum credence in its truth, because it would have been impossible for anyone to produce a valid justification for this credence. However, with the theorem now proven, even if a rational agent cannot reproduce the proof, they may justify their credence in the truth of the theorem on the grounds of the rigorous review that its proof underwent, so they must assign maximum credence to this truth. Hence, this constitutes a more pragmatic approach to modelling the credences of ordinary agents.

A possible challenge to this approach is that invoking an arbitrary criteria to "know" a logical truth would taint the otherwise objective Bayesian model with subjectivity. Agents may utilise different criteria to determine what counts as knowledge, so privileging the definition of knowledge as justified true belief may be considered arbitrary. Because the model is grounded in a potentially contentious definition of knowledge, this objection rejects the view that the model is widely applicable and thus implicitly undermines its utility. However, I contend that reformulating the axioms in this manner does not demand universal agreement on a definition of knowledge. It is beyond the scope of the Bayesian model to account for this underlying epistemological challenge, as the model only aims to provide a principled framework for rational credence assignment. The WM formulation of the axiom accommodates for the diversity of perspectives in defining knowledge by limiting its demands to conditions that rational agents ought to fulfil, so it remains agnostic on a specific definition of knowledge. Hence, subjectivity is not introduced by the reformulation and we preserve the value of the model in a sound manner.

8. Hanti Lin, "Bayesian Epistemology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2022, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/epistemology-bayesian/>.

In reformulating the axioms, the natural consideration that follows would be to determine the limits of further reformulations. I propose that if we hope to prevent complications from arising, this limit must be the WN formulation, because going further would completely destabilise the mathematical foundations of the conventional system of probability based on the axioms. By relaxing the axioms to compensate for logical non-omniscience, we lose some applications of probability that make the Bayesian model appealing.⁹ Excessive reformulations are undesirable as they may yield contradictory or nonsensical results, especially for applications of probability that hinge upon the precision of the axioms, thus rendering such applications redundant.

To illustrate this, suppose credences need not be single real values, but are a real interval. This is plausible, because ordinary agents may account for a range of uncertainty or indifference that is more faithful to their epistemic position. Therefore, if a rational agent knows a logical truth, their credence ought to be an interval that includes the number one.¹⁰ We may thus reformulate the axiom of normalisation to:

Axiom 5. (*Very Weak Normalisation, VWN*) For any known logical truth $T \in S$, there exists c with $0 \leq c \leq 1$ such that $c \leq Cr(T) \leq 1$.

However, this causes some useful results of probability to become undone. Consider the case of conditional credences. Intuitively, this represents an agent's credence that a proposition A is true, supposing that B is true.¹¹ This is defined as:

Definition 1. For propositions $A, B \in S$ with $Cr(B) > 0$, one has $Cr(A|B) = \frac{Cr(A \wedge B)}{Cr(B)}$.

If we take B to be a known logical truth, by WN we have that $Cr(B) = 1$, so $Cr(A|B) = Cr(A \wedge B)$. Also, the truth of the proposition $(A \wedge B)$ depends solely on A , as B is logically true, so $Cr(A \wedge B) = Cr(A)$. Thus we obtain a well-defined conditional credence, which is $Cr(A|B) = Cr(A)$. However, in VWN, $Cr(B)$ may be a real interval, so considering conditional credences becomes mathematically absurd, for it is impossible to divide $Cr(A \wedge B)$ over

9. Michael G. Titelbaum, "Old Evidence and Logical Omniscience," in *Fundamentals of Bayesian Epistemology 2: Arguments, Challenges, Alternatives* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 436.

10. Lin, "Bayesian Epistemology."

11. Schwarz, *Belief, Desire, and Rational Choice*, 32.

an interval. This already undermines the case for weakening the axioms in this manner.

Perhaps we still accept that conditional credences as intervals are meaningful,¹² so we compromise on mathematical rigour. We may pursue the logic of WN to let $Cr(A \wedge B) = a$ for some $0 \leq a \leq 1$, and divide $Cr(A)$ over the bounds of $Cr(B)$ to obtain $Cr(A|B) = [a, \frac{a}{c}]$ for some $0 \leq c \leq 1$. However, if we let $a = 1$ and $c \leq 1$, we get a conditional credence that may be greater than the maximum credence in a logical truth. This result violates our logical intuitions, because it suggests that in certain situations, there exist propositions that we may believe in more than logical truths. It is inconceivable, if not outright impossible, to have “more” belief in a proposition than ‘*A triangle has three angles*’. Therefore, VWN is too naïve, thus it cannot be the right approach to account for logical non-omniscience.

One could contend that the above examples are unfair because there could be methods that reconcile VWN with a consistent and improved Bayesian model. However, this makes the model too convoluted to be useful for an ordinary agent, thus making it lose its intuitive appeal. The model is appealing because it balances mathematical rigour with simplicity.¹³ Adding layers of sophistication to the model infringes upon its simplicity and, more importantly, imposes other implicit conditions on rationality. The new model will thus face the same impossible demands on rationality posed by the original problem, since a mathematically-refined model could demand so much calculation from an ordinary agent that it may be impossible to determine if they are truly rational. Hence, introducing mathematical complexity defeats the purpose of the Bayesian model, and those advocating for this approach to strengthen the model will return to square one when challenging the problem. Extreme reformulations are therefore an unacceptable solution to the problem, and the only solution is to adopt a moderate approach espoused by the WN formulation.

12. We may view conditional credences as reflections of our belief in some propositions A , knowing that we are in a specific state of the world where some other proposition B is true.

13. See page 3.

III. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the only solution to the problem of logical omniscience is to adopt the WN formulation of normalisation, which limits the assignment of maximum credence only to logical truths that ordinary agents can know. Adopting weaker formulations like WVN destabilises the conventional system of probability, while also causing new impossible demands on rationality to reappear as a model that is too convoluted to be useful for an ordinary agent.

References

- Carneades.org. “The Problem of Logical Omniscience (Bayesian Epistemology).” YouTube video, 6:24, February 22, 2015. youtu.be/pkGFSkGzg4M.
- Dogramaci, Sinan. “Solving the Problem of Logical Non-Omniscience.” *Philosophical Issues* 28, no. 1 (2018): 107–128. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phis.12118>.
- Lin, Hanti. “Bayesian Epistemology.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2022, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/epistemology-bayesian/>.
- Schwarz, Wolfgang. *Belief, Desire, and Rational Choice*. <https://github.com/wo/bdrc/blob/master/bdrc.pdf>, December 20, 2022.
- Titelbaum, Michael G. “Old Evidence and Logical Omniscience.” In *Fundamentals of Bayesian Epistemology 2: Arguments, Challenges, Alternatives*, 413–444. Oxford University Press, 2022.