



Critique of Maggi Toplak's Dichotomy of Epistemic Agency and Rational Thought

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Abstract

This study is a critique of the dichotomy between epistemic agency and rational thinking as developed in the work of Maggi Toplak. For Toplak, epistemic agency is the individual's capacity for reflective control and responsibility over belief formation, while rational thinking is the ability to produce judgments and decisions that conform to normative standards of logic, evidence, and probability. The problem addressed in this paper is the growing tendency in contemporary epistemology championed by Toplak and cognitive science to treat these two notions as sharply separable domains, thereby raising questions about whether such a dichotomy accurately reflects the structure of human cognition. The study aims to critically evaluate this distinction and to determine whether epistemic agency and rational thinking can be meaningfully separated without conceptual loss. Its objectives include clarifying both concepts, analyzing the basis of their proposed dichotomy, identifying its theoretical weaknesses, and advancing a more coherent alternative framework. Using evaluative and analytic methods of philosophical

research, the study finds that the strict separation between epistemic agency and rational thinking is conceptually problematic. It is shown that rational thinking inherently involves reflective control, while epistemic agency presupposes responsiveness to normative standards of reasoning. As such, the two are not independent but deeply interrelated aspects of a unified cognitive process. The analysis further demonstrates that maintaining a rigid dichotomy undermines epistemic responsibility, neglects the role of intellectual virtues, and misrepresents cognition as fragmented rather than integrated. The study concludes that epistemic agency and rational thinking are best understood as mutually reinforcing dimensions of human reasoning. It therefore proposes an integrated model that emphasizes their interdependence, offering a more philosophically robust account of belief formation and cognitive evaluation.

Keywords: Magi Toplak, Epistemic Agency, Rational Thought, Dichotomy

Introduction

Contemporary debates in epistemology and cognitive science have increasingly drawn attention to how human beings form beliefs and make judgments. One central issue in these discussions is whether rational thinking alone is sufficient for good reasoning, or whether a distinct form of control, often called epistemic agency, is also required. This paper is motivated by the need to critically examine the growing tendency, especially in the work of Maggi Toplak, to sharply separate epistemic agency from rational thinking. While this distinction aims to clarify different aspects of cognition, it raises an important concern: does such a division misrepresent how reasoning actually works? The motivation of this study, therefore, is to assess whether this dichotomy is philosophically sound or whether it unnecessarily fragments what should be understood as a unified cognitive process.

To properly address this issue, it is important to clarify what is meant by epistemic agency and rational thinking. Epistemic agency generally refers to a person's capacity to take responsibility for their beliefs through reflection, evaluation, and deliberate control. Rational thinking, on the other hand, is often described in terms of logical reasoning, evidence evaluation, and adherence to normative standards. However, many scholars argue that these two are closely connected rather than separate. For instance, Keith E. Stanovich notes that "rationality is not merely about computational ability but also about the disposition to reflect and override automatic responses" (p.

45). This suggests that rational thinking already involves elements of agency, such as reflection and control.

This paper argues that the distinction between epistemic agency and rational thinking is overstated. Rather than being separate, the two are deeply interconnected aspects of human cognition. By critically examining Toplak's position, this study aims to show that a more unified account provides a better explanation of how individuals think, reason, and take responsibility for their beliefs.

Toplak Conception of Epistemic Agency

In the work of Maggi Toplak, epistemic agency refers to the capacity of individuals to take an active, reflective role in the formation, evaluation, and regulation of their beliefs. It emphasizes that human cognition is not merely a passive reception of information or an automatic processing of stimuli, but involves deliberate control, self-awareness, and responsibility. Toplak develops this concept within the broader context of cognitive psychology, particularly in response to dual-process theories that distinguish between fast, automatic thinking and slower, reflective thinking.

At its core, epistemic agency highlights the idea that individuals can intervene in their own thinking processes. Rather than simply accepting the outputs of intuitive or automatic cognition, agents are capable of pausing, reflecting, and revising their beliefs when necessary. As Toplak explains, "epistemic agency involves the capacity to decouple from immediate intuitions and engage in reflective processing" (p. 78). This notion of "decoupling" is central to her account, as it captures the ability to step back from initial responses and subject them to critical scrutiny.

A key feature of epistemic agency in Toplak's framework is cognitive control. This includes the ability to inhibit misleading intuitions, sustain attention, and apply relevant rules or standards when evaluating evidence. Epistemic agents are not simply thinkers; they are regulators of their own cognition. In this regard, Toplak notes that "the exercise of epistemic agency requires the deployment of cognitive resources that enable monitoring and override of default responses" (p.83). This means that agency is closely tied to executive functions such as working memory and attentional control, which allow individuals to manage complex reasoning tasks.

Another important dimension of epistemic agency is responsibility. For Toplak, agents are accountable for their beliefs to the extent that they can control and evaluate them. This introduces a normative element into her account, suggesting that good thinking is not just about arriving at correct conclusions, but about how those conclusions are formed. She emphasizes that "epistemic agency entails responsibility for

belief because agents have the capacity to reflect on and revise their cognitive outputs” (p.91). Thus, epistemic agency connects psychological processes with epistemological concerns about justification and accountability.

Toplak also links epistemic agency to dispositions or thinking styles. Individuals differ in their willingness to engage reflective processes, and these differences affect how effectively they exercise epistemic agency. Some people are more inclined to question their initial judgments, seek additional evidence, and consider alternative perspectives. This dispositional aspect is captured in her claim that “individual differences in reflective disposition are central to the expression of epistemic agency” (95). In this sense, epistemic agency is not only a capacity but also a tendency that varies across individuals.

Consequently, one can say that epistemic agency in Toplak’s account is a multifaceted concept that includes reflective control, cognitive regulation, responsibility, and dispositional openness. It portrays human thinkers as active participants in their own cognitive lives, capable of monitoring and improving their reasoning processes. By emphasizing these features, Toplak provides a framework for understanding how individuals can take ownership of their beliefs and strive toward better epistemic practices.

Toplak on Rational Thinking

Rational thinking for Toplak is understood as a form of cognition that adheres to normative standards of logic, probability, and evidence-based reasoning. It is not merely about intelligence in the traditional sense, but about the quality of thought processes that guide judgment and decision-making. Toplak situates rational thinking within cognitive psychology, particularly in relation to how individuals process information, evaluate evidence, and arrive at conclusions under conditions of uncertainty.

At the foundation of Toplak’s account is the idea that rational thinking involves conformity to formal and informal norms of reasoning. These norms include principles of deductive logic, probabilistic reasoning, and sound judgment. According to Toplak, “rational thinking is defined by the extent to which beliefs and decisions align with normative models of inference” (p. 42). This definition emphasizes that rationality is not simply descriptive of how people think, but evaluative of how well their thinking measures up to established standards.

A central feature of rational thinking in Toplak’s framework is its reliance on analytic processing. This type of thinking is typically slow, deliberate, and effortful, in contrast to fast and automatic intuitive responses. Analytic processing allows

individuals to engage in complex reasoning, detect errors, and apply abstract rules. As Toplak explains, “analytic thinking enables the individual to go beyond surface features and apply rule-based processing to arrive at more accurate judgments” (p.47). This highlights the role of cognitive effort and structured reasoning in achieving rational outcomes.

Toplak also stresses the importance of probabilistic reasoning as a key component of rational thinking. Many real-world decisions involve uncertainty, and rational thinkers must be able to assess likelihoods, weigh evidence, and update beliefs accordingly. She notes that “a hallmark of rational thought is the proper calibration of belief in accordance with probabilistic evidence” (p. 53). This means that rational thinking requires sensitivity to degrees of belief rather than simple true-or-false judgments.

Another important aspect of Toplak’s view is the distinction between intelligence and rationality. She argues that high intelligence does not necessarily guarantee rational thinking, as individuals may still fall prey to cognitive biases and reasoning errors. In her words, “intelligence tests do not fully capture rational thinking, particularly in situations involving bias and judgment under uncertainty” (p.60). This distinction has led to the development of measures such as the “rationality quotient,” which aim to assess how well individuals think in real-world contexts.

Furthermore, Toplak highlights the role of cognitive biases in undermining rational thinking. Biases such as confirmation bias, framing effects, and overconfidence can distort judgment and lead to systematic errors. Rational thinking, therefore, involves not only the application of correct rules but also the ability to avoid or correct these biases. As she observes, “failures of rationality often arise from predictable cognitive biases that interfere with normative reasoning” (p.66). This underscores the need for vigilance and corrective strategies in reasoning processes.

Toplak’s account presents rational thinking as norm-governed, analytic, probabilistic, and sensitive to bias. It is a form of cognition that aspires to meet objective standards of good reasoning, even in the face of complexity and uncertainty. By emphasizing these features, Toplak provides a robust framework for evaluating the quality of human thought and understanding the conditions under which reasoning succeeds or fails.

The Dichotomy Between Epistemic Agency and Rational Thinking

The distinction between epistemic agency and rational thinking has become a central theme in contemporary debates within epistemology and cognitive science. In

the work of Maggi Toplak, this distinction is often presented as a conceptual separation between two dimensions of human cognition: the capacity for reflective control over belief (epistemic agency) and the ability to conform to normative standards of reasoning (rational thinking). The dichotomy suggests that an individual may exhibit one without necessarily possessing the other, thereby introducing a layered understanding of cognitive evaluation.

At the heart of this dichotomy is the claim that rational thinking can be assessed independently of the agent's active involvement in the reasoning process. That is, a person may arrive at a normatively correct answer through automatic or intuitive processes without engaging in reflective control. Conversely, an individual may actively reflect on their beliefs yet still fail to meet normative standards of reasoning. As Toplak explains, "performance on rational thinking tasks does not always reflect the degree of reflective engagement or agency involved in arriving at a response" (p. 102). This highlights a perceived gap between outcome-based measures of rationality and process-based accounts of agency.

This separation is further reinforced by dual-process theories of cognition, which distinguish between fast, automatic processes (often labeled System 1) and slow, deliberative processes (System 2). Within this framework, rational thinking is frequently associated with correct outputs, while epistemic agency is linked to the deliberate engagement of analytic processes. Daniel Kahneman captures this distinction by noting that "System 1 operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control" (20). By contrast, reflective thinking involves effortful control, which aligns more closely with the notion of epistemic agency.

Moreover, the dichotomy gains support from empirical research showing that individuals can produce normatively correct answers without conscious deliberation, and, conversely, can engage in extended reflection yet arrive at incorrect conclusions. Keith E. Stanovich argues that "there is a dissociation between the ability to give the normative response and the tendency to engage in reflective processing" (p.85). This dissociation forms a key empirical basis for distinguishing rational thinking from epistemic agency, suggesting that the two operate along different cognitive dimensions.

Another dimension of this dichotomy lies in its normative implications. Rational thinking is often evaluated in terms of adherence to formal standards such as logic and probability theory, whereas epistemic agency is assessed in terms of responsibility, control, and intellectual virtue. This creates a division between outcome-oriented and process-oriented evaluations of cognition. As John Greco observes, "epistemic evaluations can focus either on the reliability of cognitive processes or on the

responsibility of the agent in managing those processes” (p. 145). The dichotomy thus reflects a broader tension between externalist and internalist approaches in epistemology.

However, the separation is not merely theoretical; it also has practical implications for how reasoning is assessed and cultivated. In educational and psychological contexts, measures of rational thinking often prioritize correct answers, while assessments of epistemic agency emphasize reflective dispositions and metacognitive awareness. This divergence raises questions about what it means to be a good thinker and whether cognitive success should be defined primarily by outcomes or by the quality of the reasoning process. The dichotomy between epistemic agency and rational thinking, as articulated by Toplak and supported by cognitive and philosophical literature, rests on a distinction between reflective control and normative correctness. It is grounded in dual-process theories, empirical dissociations, and differing evaluative standards. While this framework provides a nuanced way of analyzing cognition, it also introduces a conceptual divide that invites further philosophical scrutiny.

Critique of Toplak’s Dichotomy

A central weakness in Maggi Toplak’s dichotomy between epistemic agency and rational thinking lies in its tendency to artificially separate what are, in practice, deeply interwoven dimensions of cognition. By construing rational thinking primarily in terms of conformity to normative standards and epistemic agency as reflective control over belief, the distinction risks reifying a division that is better understood as functional integration. Contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science increasingly reject sharp modular separations in favor of interactionist models. For instance, Andy Clark argues that cognition is “not a sequence of discrete inner operations but a temporally extended process involving continuous feedback between control and content” (p. 112). This suggests that the evaluative standards of rationality and the agent’s reflective interventions are co-constitutive rather than separable. If cognitive processes are dynamically integrated, then isolating epistemic agency from rational thinking misrepresents the architecture of human reasoning.

A further problem concerns the implicit reduction of rational thinking to outcome-based correctness, which neglects the normative significance of the agent’s epistemic conduct. By allowing for the possibility that one can be rational without exercising agency, Toplak’s dichotomy undermines the evaluative framework central to much of contemporary epistemology. Ernest Sosa insists that “apt belief is creditable to

the agent's competence, not merely the product of accidental correctness" (p.23). This view challenges any account that detaches rational success from the agent's active contribution. Similarly, Linda Zagzebski maintains that "epistemic evaluation is inseparable from the qualities of the agent who forms the belief" (p. 167). These perspectives expose a fundamental limitation in Toplak's framework: by separating rationality from agency, it becomes difficult to explain why certain beliefs are not only correct but also epistemically praiseworthy.

The dichotomy also faces difficulties from the standpoint of phenomenology and the lived experience of reasoning. Human deliberation does not typically present itself as a split between mechanical correctness and reflective control; rather, it is experienced as a unified activity in which evaluation and self-regulation occur simultaneously. Shaun Gallagher captures this point by noting that "reflective awareness is not an external add-on to cognition but is integrated into the very structure of conscious thought" (p.89). This insight undermines the idea that epistemic agency operates as a separate layer imposed upon otherwise independent rational processes. In a similar vein, Evan Thompson argues that "cognitive processes are inherently self-organizing and involve ongoing regulation by the organism" (p.54). Such accounts reinforce the view that agency is not detachable from rationality but is constitutive of it.

Another line of critique emerges from social epistemology, which emphasizes the communal and dialogical dimensions of reasoning. Toplak's dichotomy is largely individualistic, focusing on internal cognitive processes while neglecting the social contexts in which beliefs are formed and evaluated. Alvin Goldman observes that "justification often depends on socially distributed processes that extend beyond the individual thinker" (p. 271). This broader perspective complicates the separation between agency and rationality, as both are shaped by interactions with others, institutional norms, and shared practices. Likewise, Miranda Fricker emphasizes that "our epistemic practices are deeply embedded in social relations that affect both our credibility and our interpretive capacities" (p.1). These considerations suggest that any rigid dichotomy fails to account for the socially embedded nature of human cognition.

Finally, the dichotomy risks generating a fragmented account of epistemic responsibility. If rational thinking can occur without agency, then individuals may be deemed cognitively successful without being epistemically responsible, and vice versa. This creates a tension within normative epistemology, which typically seeks to align correctness with responsibility. Hilary Kornblith argues that "epistemic norms are grounded in the functioning of our cognitive capacities as integrated systems" (p.134). This integrated view resists any attempt to divide cognition into independent domains

of agency and rationality. Instead, it supports the conclusion that responsible belief formation requires both accurate reasoning and active engagement, not as separate faculties but as mutually reinforcing aspects of a single process.

Conceptual Overlap Between Epistemic Agency and Rational Thinking

A careful analysis of the relationship between epistemic agency and rational thinking reveals a significant degree of conceptual overlap, contrary to the sharp distinction proposed by Maggi Toplak. At a foundational level, both concepts are concerned with the regulation and evaluation of belief, and both presuppose the capacity of the subject to respond appropriately to reasons. The idea that rational thinking can be cleanly separated from epistemic agency becomes difficult to sustain once one considers that rational evaluation itself often requires reflective endorsement. As Robert Audi observes, “rational belief is not merely a matter of causal production but of appropriate responsiveness to reasons” (p. 41). This responsiveness already implies a form of agency, since it involves the subject’s capacity to assess and act upon justificatory considerations rather than passively registering them.

This overlap becomes even more evident when one examines the role of deliberation in both epistemic agency and rational thinking. Deliberation is not simply a mechanical process of applying rules; it involves active judgment, self-monitoring, and the capacity to revise one’s beliefs in light of new evidence. Thomas Kelly captures this point by arguing that “to reason well is, in part, to exercise one’s capacity to critically assess one’s own beliefs and the grounds on which they rest” (p. 67). Such critical assessment is precisely what is meant by epistemic agency. Thus, rational thinking, properly understood, cannot be divorced from the agent’s active participation in evaluating reasons, since the very act of reasoning well presupposes reflective control.

Furthermore, the overlap between these concepts is reinforced by contemporary accounts of metacognition, which emphasize the importance of thinking about one’s own thinking. Metacognitive processes, such as monitoring, error detection, and confidence calibration, are central to both rational thinking and epistemic agency. Peter Carruthers notes that “human reasoning is deeply dependent on metacognitive capacities that allow individuals to evaluate and regulate their own cognitive processes” (p.102). These capacities are not external to rational thinking; they are integral to its proper functioning. At the same time, they are clear expressions of epistemic agency, since they involve the subject’s ability to take a reflective stance toward their own cognition.

The conceptual overlap is also evident in normative epistemology, where the evaluation of belief is inseparable from considerations of intellectual responsibility. Rational thinking is typically assessed in terms of whether beliefs are justified, coherent, and responsive to evidence. However, these criteria implicitly presuppose that the agent has exercised a certain level of control and care in forming those beliefs. Lorraine Code argues that “knowing well requires the responsible management of one’s cognitive resources and epistemic commitments” (p.152). This notion of responsible management aligns directly with the idea of epistemic agency, indicating that rationality is not merely about correct outcomes but about the quality of the agent’s engagement with evidence and reasons.

In addition, the overlap can be seen in discussions of intellectual virtue, where traits such as open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and conscientiousness are treated as both conditions for rational thinking and expressions of epistemic agency. Jason Baehr emphasizes that “intellectual virtues are stable dispositions that guide individuals in the responsible pursuit of truth” (p.58). These virtues operate at the intersection of agency and rationality: they shape how individuals reason while also reflecting their active commitment to good epistemic practices. It becomes difficult, therefore, to assign such virtues exclusively to either domain without distorting their role in cognition.

Finally, the interdependence of epistemic agency and rational thinking is highlighted by the fact that failures in one domain often entail failures in the other. Poor reasoning is frequently linked to a lack of reflective oversight, while deficiencies in agency, such as intellectual laziness or dogmatism, manifest as irrational belief formation. Harvey Siegel underscores this connection by stating that “rationality requires not only the ability to reason well but also the disposition to do so in a self-critical and reflective manner” (p.23). This dual requirement shows that rational thinking and epistemic agency are mutually reinforcing rather than independent capacities.

Hence, the conceptual overlap between epistemic agency and rational thinking is substantial and philosophically significant. Both involve responsiveness to reasons, reflective evaluation, metacognitive regulation, and intellectual responsibility. Attempts to sharply distinguish them risk overlooking their deep interdependence and the unified nature of human cognition. A more adequate account, therefore, recognizes that rational thinking is, in many respects, an expression of epistemic agency in action.

Toward an Integrated Model

A more adequate response to the limitations in Maggi Toplak's dichotomy is the development of an integrated model in which epistemic agency and rational thinking are understood as mutually constitutive aspects of a single cognitive framework. Rather than treating them as separable domains, this approach views rational evaluation and reflective control as dynamically intertwined processes that jointly contribute to responsible belief formation. Such a model aligns with broader trends in contemporary epistemology and cognitive science, which emphasize the unity of cognition and the active role of the subject in reasoning.

At the core of this integrated model is the idea that rational thinking inherently involves the exercise of agency. To evaluate evidence, apply logical rules, or update beliefs in light of new information requires more than mechanical processing; it presupposes the agent's capacity to attend, reflect, and regulate cognitive activity. As John McDowell argues, "our responsiveness to reasons is itself an expression of our rational capacities as active thinkers" (p.88). This insight dissolves the sharp boundary between rationality and agency by showing that the very act of reasoning well is already a manifestation of epistemic agency.

An integrated model also highlights the role of self-regulation and metacognition as central to both domains. Cognitive processes such as monitoring one's reasoning, detecting errors, and revising beliefs are not external additions to rational thinking but essential components of it. Alison Gopnik underscores this point by noting that "human cognition is characterized by a capacity for self-directed learning and revision in light of evidence" (p.134). This capacity reflects the fusion of rational evaluation and agentic control, as individuals actively shape their cognitive trajectories through reflective engagement.

Furthermore, the integrated model restores the normative dimension of epistemology by reconnecting correctness with responsibility. Rational beliefs are not merely those that conform to abstract standards but those that are formed through the agent's proper exercise of cognitive capacities. Tyler Burge emphasizes that "rationality involves a commitment to norms that govern both belief and the processes by which beliefs are formed" (p.201). This commitment is inherently agentic, as it requires individuals to take ownership of their reasoning practices and to align them with epistemic standards.

In addition, the integrated approach accommodates the role of intellectual virtues in shaping good reasoning. Traits such as open-mindedness, intellectual courage, and carefulness are not merely accessories to rational thinking but integral to its proper

functioning. Quassim Cassam observes that “the quality of our thinking is deeply influenced by our intellectual character, including both virtues and vices” (p.76). These character traits operate at the intersection of agency and rationality, guiding how individuals engage with evidence, evaluate arguments, and revise beliefs.

Finally, an integrated model provides a more coherent framework for practical application, particularly in education and cognitive development. Instead of treating rational accuracy and reflective control as separate goals, it encourages a holistic approach that cultivates both simultaneously. This perspective recognizes that effective reasoning depends on the interplay between correct judgment and active engagement, and that improvements in one domain often reinforce the other. Moving toward an integrated model resolves the tensions inherent in Toplak’s dichotomy by presenting epistemic agency and rational thinking as inseparable aspects of human cognition. By emphasizing their interdependence, this approach offers a more comprehensive and philosophically robust account of how individuals think, reason, and take responsibility for their beliefs.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the distinction between epistemic agency and rational thinking as articulated by Maggi Toplak, with the aim of determining whether the proposed dichotomy can be sustained. Through careful conceptual analysis and engagement with contemporary epistemological and cognitive theories, it has been shown that the separation between these two domains is, at best, overstated and, at worst, philosophically misleading. While Toplak’s framework succeeds in drawing attention to important dimensions of human cognition, namely, reflective control and normative evaluation, it ultimately fails to justify a strict division between them.

The analysis has demonstrated that epistemic agency and rational thinking are deeply interconnected. The capacity to reason well is not merely a matter of producing correct outcomes according to formal standards; it also involves the active participation of the subject in evaluating, regulating, and revising beliefs. Likewise, the exercise of epistemic agency is not an independent layer imposed upon cognition but is embedded within the very processes that constitute rational thought. Attempts to isolate one from the other risk fragmenting the unity of cognitive life and obscuring the mechanisms through which responsible belief formation occurs.

Furthermore, the critique has highlighted several problems associated with maintaining a strict dichotomy, including the weakening of epistemic responsibility, the neglect of intellectual virtues, and the misrepresentation of cognition as modular rather

than integrated. In response, the paper has advanced an alternative framework that emphasizes the interdependence of agency and rationality. This integrated model provides a more coherent account of human reasoning, one that accommodates both the normative standards of rational evaluation and the agent's role in shaping cognitive outcomes. Therefore, a proper understanding of human cognition requires moving beyond rigid dichotomies toward a unified perspective in which epistemic agency and rational thinking are seen as mutually reinforcing aspects of a single process. Such an approach not only offers greater philosophical clarity but also has important implications for how rationality is evaluated and cultivated in both theoretical and practical contexts.

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