

Is Reflective Equilibrium too Conservative?

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What is Reflective Equilibrium?

- ▶ Prominent method of justification in many subfields of philosophy ranging from ethics to logic
- ▶ Proposed by Goodman (1955) and coined “reflective equilibrium” (RE) by Rawls (1971)
- ▶ Key components:
 - ▷ commitments (“judgments”) and elements of a theory (“principles”)
 - ▷ starting from initial commitments, a *process* of mutual adjustments going back and forth between commitments and theory
 - ▷ a *state* of equilibrium among commitments and theory, commonly characterized by coherence

The Objection of Conservativity

- ▶ longstanding line of criticism against RE (e.g., Singer (1974), Kelly and McGrath (2010)) and acknowledged by proponents of RE (e.g., Scanlon (2003))
- ▶ Coherence considerations in RE do not provide enough incentive to revise the initially held views substantially.
 - ▷ Consistency and “hanging together” can be established easily by streamlining the starting point.
- ▶ Conservativity is a pressing issue in view of epistemically deficient inputs (biases, prejudices): “garbage in – garbage out”.

A Formal Model of RE

- ▶ Based on elaborate accounts of RE, Beisbart et al. (2021) provide a formal model in a propositional framework.

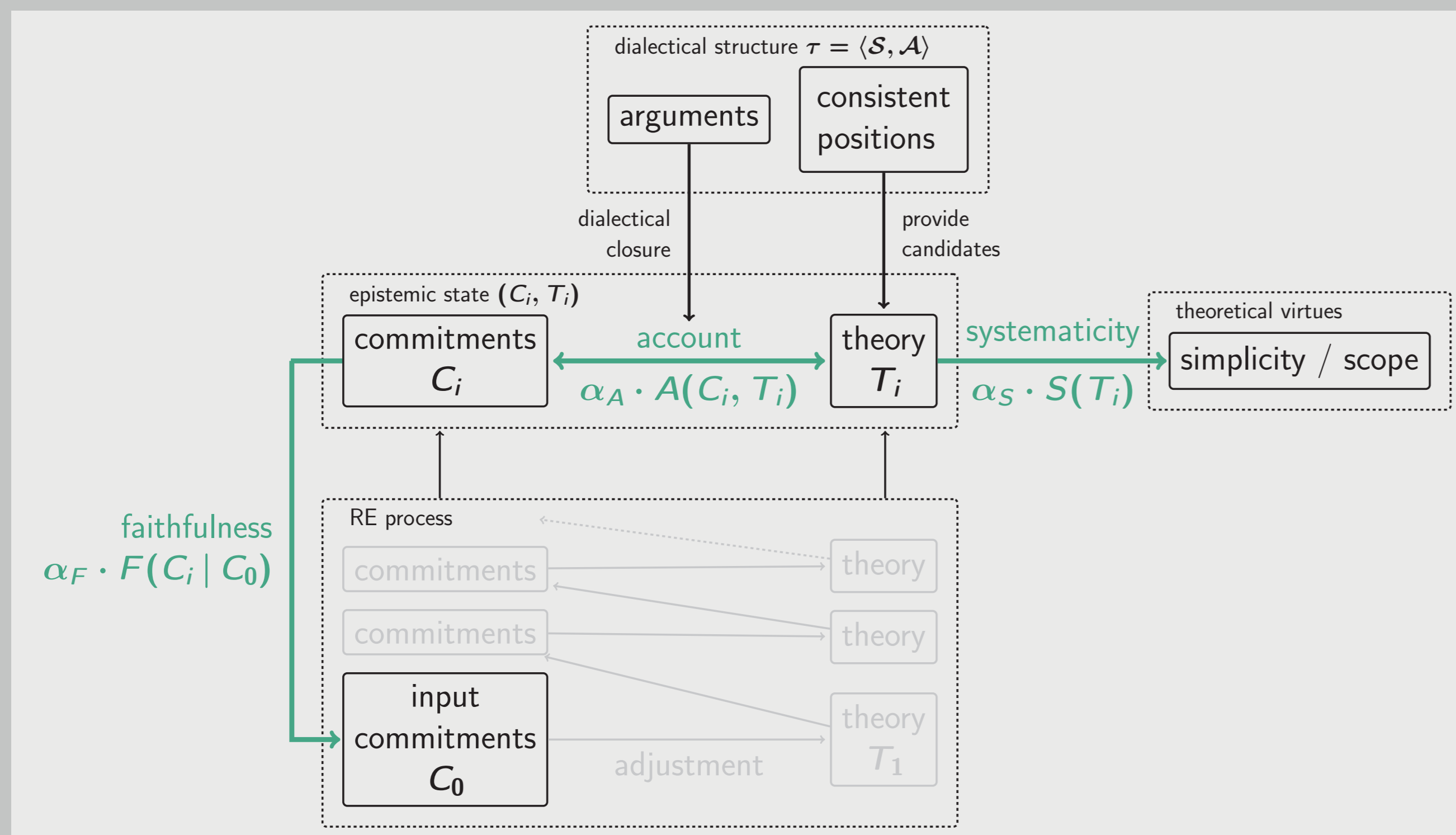


Figure: Components of the formal model of RE.

- ▶ Overall achievement of an epistemic state is defined as

$$Z(C, T | C_0) = \alpha_A \cdot A(C, T) + \alpha_S \cdot S(T) + \alpha_F \cdot F(C | C_0)$$
- ▶ RE states are global optima ■ according to Z that satisfy additional requirements.
- ▶ Z is also utilized to give explicit rules for equilibration processes that yield fixed points ■.
- ▶ Trade-offs between the desiderata of account, systematicity and faithfulness in Z are determined by a configuration of weights $(\alpha_A, \alpha_S, \alpha_F)$.

Conservative Baselines

- ▶ Streamlining ■: Find a minimal axiomatic base of the initial commitments. Fit the commitments perfectly to the consequences of the axiomatic base.
- ▶ Simplistic adaptation ■: Keep the initial commitments if they are consistent. Otherwise, give up a random commitment.
- ▶ Compare model performance (■, ■) baselines with respect to operationalizable features that would reveal conservative behaviour: distance, inconsistency preservation, and axiomatic simplicity

Generating Data

- ▶ Simulations with a Python implementation of the formal RE model
- ▶ Ensemble: **11250** model setups with dialectical structures (**3 · 75**), initial commitments (**25**) and configurations of weights (**2**).

Distance



Figure: The model performs worse/better in (a)/(b) than the streamlining baseline.

Inconsistency Preservation

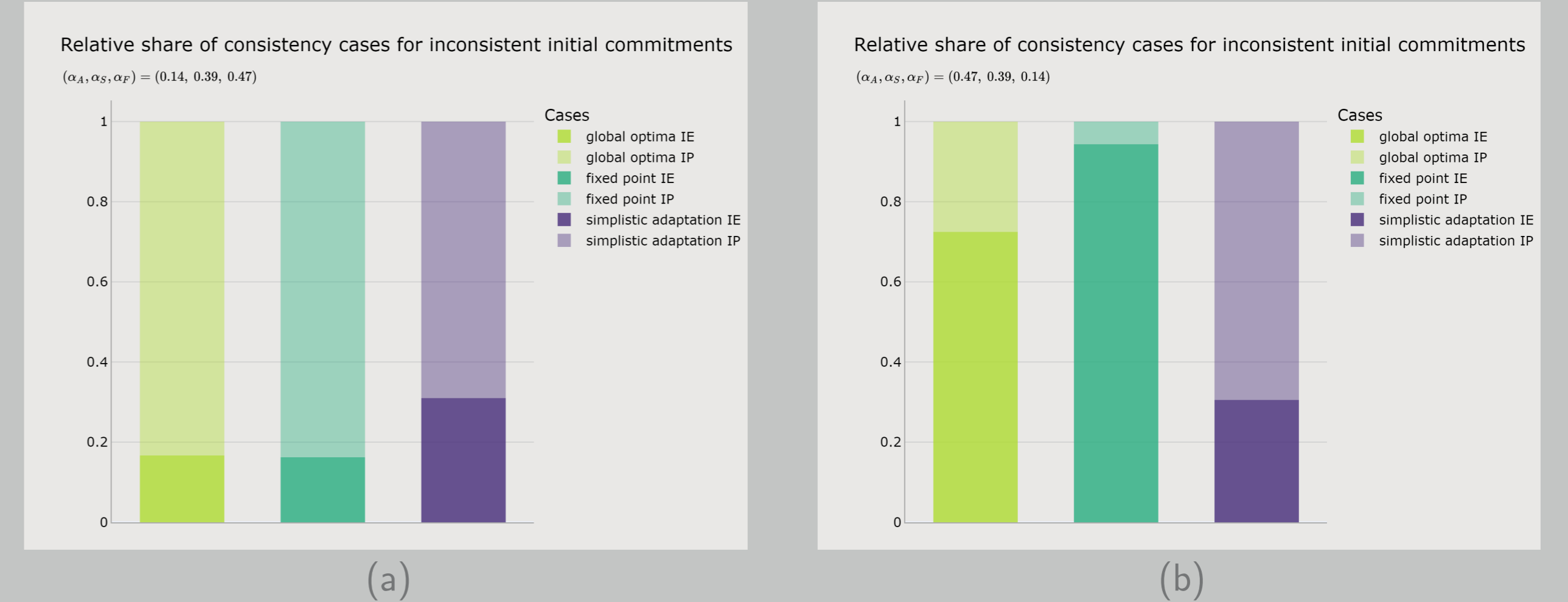


Figure: The model performs worse/better in (a)/(b) than the simplistic adaptation baseline.

Axiomatic Simplicity

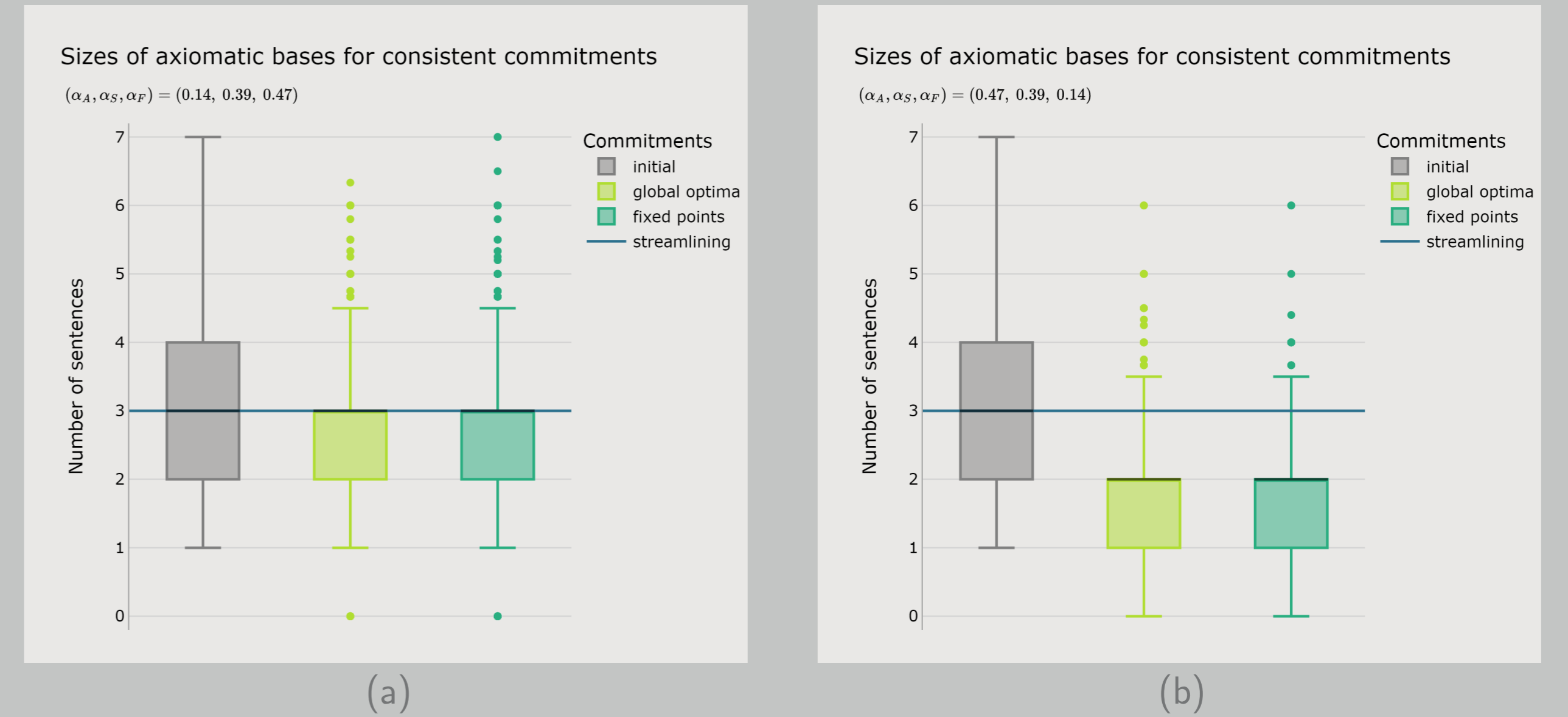


Figure: The RE model performs similar/better in (a)/(b) than the streamlining baseline.

Conclusion: RE is not too Conservative

- ▶ The formal model performs significantly better than conservative baselines For specific configurations of weights.
- ▶ In general, well-performing configurations put a lot of weight to the desiderata of account (α_A) and systematicity (α_S) that operationalize theoretical virtues in the model.
- ▶ Including and stressing the importance of theoretical virtues in RE may help to overcome the objection of conservativity.

References

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