

Often enough, the context will make it obvious what the relevant perspective is. If, for example, someone says, "I don't care what you or anyone else might think, the rational thing for you to do is \_\_\_\_\_," then we can be pretty well assured that the perspective being adopted is an objective one. Sometimes the perspective will not be at all obvious, however, but if it is not, we can ask for it. We are always entitled to ask of someone making a claim of rationality or a corresponding claim about reasons, "From what perspective, from what viewpoint, is this supposed to be a rational (or irrational) thing to do?"

### 3. *Reasons, Beliefs, and Goals*

For convenience, I will restrict my attention, at least for the moment, to claims of rationality that purport to be objective. We need not worry about identifying the relevant perspective. Nevertheless, there is a second way in which claims about what it is rational for you to do or believe can be elliptical. Depending upon the context and our purposes, we can take into consideration all or only some of your goals.

Often enough, we do the former. We make claims about what is rational for you, all things considered. But for certain purposes and in certain situations, we make claims about a specific kind of rationality. For example, we might be interested in evaluating your decisions with respect to goals that concern your material well-being. If we judge that a decision to do X would be an effective means to these goals, we can say that in a prudential sense this is the rational decision for you to make. We can say this even if, with respect to all of your goals, both prudential and nonprudential, it is not rational for you to decide in favor of X.

Hence, to prevent misunderstandings, we need to be clear about what goals are at issue. Just as we are always entitled to ask of someone making a claim of rationality from what perspective this is supposed to be a rational (or irrational) thing to do, so too we are always entitled to ask, "With respect to what goals, what ends, is this supposed to be a rational (or irrational) thing to do?"

This point is especially important when the rationality of your beliefs is in question, since here as a rule we seem not to be interested in your total constellation of goals. Our interest is only in those goals that are distinctly intellectual. Thus, we typically regard as irrelevant the fact (if it is one) that were you to believe the workmanship on Japanese cars is shoddy, you would be more likely to buy a European or American model and accordingly more likely to promote in your own small way the prospering of Western economies, which, let us suppose, is one of your goals. We may grant that this goal gives you at least a weak reason not to buy a Japanese car, but we would not be inclined to say that it gives you even a weak reason to believe that Japanese automobiles really are shoddily made. More notoriously, in assessing whether it might be rational for you to believe in God, we are unlikely to join Pascal in regarding as relevant the fact (again, if it is one) that you increase your chances of salvation by being a theist.

Nevertheless, despite the claims of so-called evidentialists who insist that

there cannot be good nonevidential reasons for belief,<sup>16</sup> there is nothing in principle wrong with evaluating the rationality of your beliefs in terms of how well they promote your nonintellectual goals. Indeed, if anything is mysterious, it is why we do not do so more frequently. After all, your beliefs affect you in a variety of ways and not just intellectually. They have a bearing on your actions as well as your emotions, and they thus have far-reaching implications for the quality of your life as well as for the quality of the lives of those who surround you. Why is it, then, that in our evaluations of beliefs, we are generally not interested in these kinds of considerations?

There are at least two explanations. First, many of our discussions concerning what it is rational for you to believe take place in a context of trying to persuade you to believe some proposition. We point out the reasons that you have to believe it. But for the purpose of getting you to believe something that you do not now believe, the citing of practical reasons is ordinarily ineffective. Even if we convince you that you have good practical reasons to believe a proposition, this usually isn't enough to generate belief. Offering you a million dollars to believe that the earth is flat may convince you that you have a good economic reason to believe the proposition, but in itself it won't be enough to persuade you that the earth really is flat.

By contrast, becoming convinced that you have good intellectual reasons to believe something—in particular, good evidential reasons<sup>17</sup>—ordinarily is enough to generate belief.<sup>18</sup> A belief is a psychological state that by its very nature, in Bernard Williams's phrase,<sup>19</sup> "aims at truth." John Searle expresses essentially the same point in terms of direction of fit. Beliefs, he says, by their very nature have a mind-to-world direction of fit: "It is the responsibility of the belief, so to speak, to match the world . . ." <sup>20</sup> When we propose nonevidential reasons for belief, we are not even trying to meet this responsibility. Our reasons do not aim at truth. As a result, they normally don't prompt belief. At best they prompt you to get yourself into an evidential situation in which belief will be possible. Think again of Pascalians who resolve to attend church regularly, surround themselves with believers, and read religious tracts in an effort to alter their outlook in such a way that belief in God will become possible for them.

Thus, insofar as our concern is to persuade you to believe some proposition, there is a straightforward explanation as to why we are normally not interested in the practical reasons you have to believe it; namely, it is usually pointless to cite them, since they are not the kind of reasons that normally generate belief. Similarly, in your own deliberations about what to believe, you ordinarily don't consider what practical reasons you might have for believing something, and part of the explanation is similar to the third-person case. Deliberations concerning your practical reasons are customarily inefficacious and hence pointless.<sup>21</sup>

There is another kind of explanation as well. Such deliberations tend to be redundant. Although you do have practical reasons as well as evidential reasons for believing, your overriding practical reason with respect to your beliefs is commonly to have and maintain a comprehensive stock of beliefs that contains few false beliefs.

You need such a stock of beliefs because you are continually faced with a huge variety of decisions, but you don't know in advance in any detailed way what kinds of decisions these will be. Consequently, you don't know the kind of information you will require in order to make these decisions well. This lack of advance knowledge might not be terribly important, were it not for the fact that you will need to make a number of decisions relatively quickly, without the luxury of time either to engage in lengthy research or to seek out expert opinion. You will be forced to draw upon your existing resources, and in particular upon your existing stock of beliefs. And if that stock is either small or inaccurate, you risk increasing the likelihood that your decisions will not be good ones.

So ordinarily, the system of beliefs that is likely to do the best overall job of promoting your practical goals is both comprehensive and accurate. Only by having such beliefs are you likely to be in a position to choose effective strategies for achieving your various goals. But then, since your evidential reasons indicate, or at least purport to indicate, what beliefs are likely to be true, you ordinarily have good practical reasons to have beliefs for which you have adequate evidence. Thus, for all practical purposes, taking this phrase literally, you can usually ignore practical reasons in your deliberations about what to believe. You can do so because usually these practical reasons will simply instruct you to acquire beliefs for which you have good evidence.

There are exceptions, to be sure. It is easy enough to imagine cases in which your evidential reasons and your practical reasons for belief are pulled apart. Consider some extreme cases. Suppose that a madman will kill your children unless you come to believe—and not merely act as if you believed—some proposition *P* for which you now lack good evidence. Then it will be rational for you to find some way of getting yourself to believe *P*. Similarly, if you are offered a million dollars to believe that the earth is flat, then it may be rational for you to try to acquire this belief.

Finding a way to believe these propositions may not be easy, however. You know that believing them would have beneficial consequences, but this is not the sort of consideration that ordinarily leads to belief. If you are to believe these propositions, you may need to plot against yourself in Pascalian fashion. In particular, you may need to manipulate yourself and your situation so that you come to have what you take to be genuinely good evidence for these propositions, even if doing so involves maneuvering yourself into what you would now regard as a worse evidential situation, that is, a situation in which you have misleading but nonetheless persuasive data about these propositions.

Such plots are unlikely to be narrowly contained. Beliefs ordinarily cannot be altered in a piecemeal fashion. Rather, significant clumps of belief have to be altered in order for any one to be affected. Hence, a project of deliberately worsening your epistemic situation in hopes of getting yourself to believe a proposition for which you now lack good evidence is likely to involve changing your attitudes toward an enormous number of other propositions as well. Furthermore, for such a project to be successful, it must hide its own tracks. A measure of self-deception will be necessary, whereby you somehow get yourself to forget

that you have deliberately manipulated your situation in order to garner data favoring the proposition. Otherwise, at the end of your manipulations you won't be convinced by the evidence. You will be aware that it is biased in favor of the proposition.

It will be rational for you to engage in these kinds of desperate manipulations if your children's lives depend on your coming to believe the proposition. But in less extreme cases, the costs of such manipulations are likely to be unacceptably high relative to the benefits of the resulting belief. After all, Pascalian plots require considerable effort, and they are likely to affect adversely the overall accuracy of your beliefs and thus the overall effectiveness of your decision making. So, except in those rare cases in which huge benefits are in the offing, it will be irrational, all things considered, to engage in this kind of plotting against your epistemic self.<sup>22</sup>

Drastic plots against yourself may not always be necessary, however. Suppose that you have reasons to believe that your lover has been faithful despite credible testimony to the contrary, since believing this is the only way, given your attitude toward infidelity, of saving the relationship. Or suppose you have reasons to believe that you will recover from your illness despite clear indications to the contrary, since only this belief will generate the resolve needed to follow a regimen that increases your slim chances for recovery. These kinds of practical reasons for belief are no more capable of directly persuading you to believe the propositions in question than the threat of the madman or the offer of a million dollars. It is not enough for you to be convinced that believing these propositions will be good for you. On the other hand, for you to believe these propositions, it may be not necessary for you to engage in full-fledged self-deception either. More modest deceptions may do. You may be able to find ways to take your mind off the evidence of your lover's infidelity or the symptoms of your illness. Simultaneously, you can fasten onto any sign of fidelity and health. You might even unconsciously adjust your standards of evidence. In the case of your lover, you may find yourself insisting upon higher standards of evidence than usual, and as a result it may take more to convince you of the infidelity. In the case of your illness, just the opposite might occur. You might adjust your standards downward, thus making it easier for you to believe in your recovery.

But even these cases confirm the general rule, since it is precisely in these cases, where an important goal pries apart practical and evidential reasons, that we are most prone to take practical reasons for belief seriously. Most of us will admit, for example, that it is not unreasonable for you to believe in your lover's innocence until you have something close to irrefutable evidence to the contrary. If this stance involves closing your ears to the sort of testimony that in other matters you would find credible, then so be it. The not-so-hidden presumption is that in this situation, where the practical consequences of belief are so significant, it is not irrational, all things considered, for you to resist your evidence. In effect, we are saying that although it would be rational for you to believe that your lover has been unfaithful were you exclusively an epistemic being—that is,

were you exclusively concerned with the goal of having an accurate and comprehensive system of beliefs—it is important for you in this matter not to view yourself in this way. There are other important goals at stake.<sup>23</sup>

There are still other ways in which evidential and nonevidential reasons for belief might seem to come apart, and some of these ways seem to suggest that the two kinds of reasons might come apart with some frequency. It's not the exception that they are at odds with one another; it's closer to the rule. This suggestion is an especially troublesome one for epistemology, and I will try to argue against it in the next section. But in preparation I need first to take a step backward.

I have been presupposing a rough, intuitive distinction between evidential and nonevidential reasons for belief, but for what follows this distinction needs to be made with more care. No doubt it is hopeless to make it in a way that will satisfy everyone, but a good way to begin is to say that A provides you with an evidential reason to believe B only if you stand in an appropriate relation to A, and only if, in addition, from some presupposed perspective A seems to be a mark of B's truth. The appropriate relation that you must bear to A can be left open for purposes here; perhaps you must know A, or perhaps you must rationally believe it, or perhaps it is enough for you to have some sort of access to its truth. Similarly, the notion of a mark can be left somewhat vague. My purpose here is not to defend a particular account of evidence but rather only to sketch a general approach. Let me simply say, without any illusion that this statement is deeply illuminating, that A's truth is a mark of B's truth just in case A's truth makes B's truth objectively probable, where objective probability is given an empirical reading. It is a frequency or propensity of some sort.

One noteworthy feature of this approach is that it allows a factoring of evidence analogous to the one that I have already proposed for rationality. In an objective sense, A provides you with evidence for B only if, from the perspective of an observer who knows the objective probabilities, A's truth seems to be a mark of B's truth. Alternatively, A provides you with egocentric evidence for B only if, from your own perspective (perhaps on reflection), A's truth seems to be a mark of B's truth; similarly for a sociocentric conception of evidence.

Each of these notions ties evidence to what might be called "a purely epistemic goal." Purely epistemic goals are concerned solely with the accuracy and comprehensiveness of our current belief systems. Thus, the goal of now believing those propositions that are true and now not believing those propositions that are false is a purely epistemic goal. There can be other purely epistemic goals as well, but they all can be regarded as variations on this one.<sup>24</sup> For the time being I will restrict my attention to it.

But first, a terminological remark: when I speak of the goal of now having an accurate and comprehensive belief system and speak also of what might be a means to this goal, I am using "means" in a broad sense. In particular, there are constitutive means as well as causally effective means. A constitutive means to a goal is itself a part of the goal. For example, if we think of good health not just as a state in which you currently lack disease but also one in which you are not

disposed to disease, then not having high blood pressure is not so much a causal means to the goal of good health as part of what it means to be in good health. Similarly, getting an A in your philosophy class is not a causal means to getting A's in all your courses but rather part of what is involved in getting all A's. It is a constitutive means to this goal. And so it is with believing a proposition for which you have good evidence. Even if the means cannot be causally effective to the goal of now having an accurate and comprehensive belief system, since the goal is a present-tense one, it can be constitutive to it. Believing the proposition appears, from the presupposed perspective, to be a part of what is involved in now having an accurate and comprehensive belief system.<sup>25</sup>

The important point, however, is that no other goal is tied to your evidence in the way that a purely epistemic goal is. No other goal is such that your evidence invariably purports to indicate what beliefs are likely to satisfy it. This is so even if the goal is an intellectual one, for example, that of believing over the long run those propositions that are true and not believing over the long run those propositions that are false. Although this may be one of your goals, it is not tied to your evidence in the way that a purely epistemic goal is. Your evidence need not even purport to indicate what beliefs are likely to satisfy it. There can be situations in which your long-term prospects for acquiring truths and avoiding falsehoods are apparently diminished by believing those propositions for which you now have evidence. This might be the case, for example, if among these propositions are ones about the intellectual shortcomings of humans. Believing these propositions might discourage you intellectually, thus worsening your long-term intellectual projects. Correspondingly, there can be situations in which your long-term prospects for acquiring truths and avoiding falsehoods are enhanced by believing propositions for which you now lack evidence. For example, let  $p$  be the proposition that you alone are a reliable inquirer and hence the future intellectual development of humans depends on you alone. Believing  $p$  is likely to increase your intellectual dedication. It's likely to make you a more serious inquirer. As a result, it's also likely to promote your goal of having accurate and comprehensive beliefs in the future. But presumably it is not a proposition for which you now have good evidence. It is the same with other goals. Your evidence indicates, or at least purports to indicate, what beliefs are likely to satisfy your purely epistemic goals, but it need not even purport to indicate what beliefs are likely to satisfy your other goals.

The tie between evidence and purely epistemic goals imposes a restriction upon accounts of evidence, and this is so whether the account is concerned with an objective, egocentric, or sociocentric conception of evidence. Whatever one's criteria of evidence, they must make sense, from the presupposed perspective, of this tie. The criteria must "aim" at identifying beliefs that are likely to satisfy a purely epistemic goal.

This restriction has more bite to it than might appear at first glance. Suppose that an account of rational belief recommends inferences of kind  $k$ , and suppose

in addition that making such inferences will increase over the long run your chances for true beliefs. Even so, it may be that the account is not best interpreted as trying to describe when you have good objective evidence for believing something. To be so construed, it must be the case that the recommended inferences are likely not just to get you at the truth eventually but also to do so now.

For example, consider an account that recommends the following as an objectively desirable rule of inference: All else being equal, believe the simplest hypothesis that explains all the data in the domain at issue. There are various ways in which simplicity can be understood, some of which might make the above rule border on the trivial. If by definition an explanation is simple to the degree that its elements are not improbable relative to one another, then the above rule is relatively uncontroversial but also relatively uninteresting. In effect, it merely tells us to believe the most probable explanation, when all else is equal.<sup>26</sup> Let us instead say that the simplicity of a hypothesis is a function of such considerations as the number of the entities it postulates, the number of different kinds of entities it postulates, the number of laws it postulates, and the number of variables that are related in these laws.<sup>27</sup>

Since these various facets might be emphasized in varying degrees, this notion of simplicity is somewhat indeterminate, but it at least has the advantage of being nontrivial, which is what is needed for purposes here. The point at issue is that if an account emphasizing nontrivial considerations of simplicity is to be regarded as an account of objective evidence, it is not enough that it provide a rationale for thinking that a policy of believing simple hypotheses is likely to help us get at the truth eventually. There must be a rationale for thinking that the simpler of two hypotheses, all else being equal, is more likely to be true.

For the moment, assume there is no such rationale, or at least no non-question-begging one.<sup>28</sup> Does this assumption then mean accounts of rational belief that emphasize considerations of simplicity are inadequate? Not necessarily. It means only that it is best not to interpret them as evidential accounts, as ones concerned with evaluations of our beliefs in terms of how effectively they satisfy a purely epistemic goal. Rather, it is best to interpret them as being concerned with a wider range of goals, including long-term intellectual goals and perhaps even nonintellectual goals. Considerations of simplicity would seem to find a more natural home in this kind of account. Indeed, it seems easy to provide a plausible rationale for them, namely, simple hypotheses are easier for us to use than complex ones. They are easier to manipulate and easier to test, for example. This in turn suggests that a policy of believing the simplest adequate explanation over the long run will help promote our long-term intellectual goals as well as our nonintellectual goals. But if so, there would seem to be good objective reasons, all else being equal, to believe the simpler of two hypotheses, only these reasons are not evidential reasons. They are reasons based on considerations of theoretical convenience, not on the assumption that truths are apt to be simple.