

# 3

## Egocentric Rationality

### *1. The Subject Matter of Egocentric Epistemology*

Egocentric epistemology is concerned with the perspectives of individual believers and the goal of having an accurate and comprehensive belief system. This characterizes at least in a rough way its subject matter, but more needs to be said about the exact nature of both the goal and the perspective.

Begin with the goal. It is an intellectual goal but a synchronic one. The concern is with what it is rational for individuals to believe at a given moment insofar as their goal is to have an accurate and comprehensive belief system at that moment. If the moment is the present one and the believer is you, the concern is with what it is rational for you to believe, given your current perspective and given your goal of now having an accurate and comprehensive belief system.

By contrast, nonintellectual and nonsynchronic goals are beside the point. A dramatic way to illustrate this is to imagine situations in which you yourself realize that goals of this sort are best promoted by your believing an obviously false proposition. You might realize, for example, that if you were to believe that the intellectual prospects of the entire human race were dependent solely on you, you would conduct your intellectual life with significantly more care and precision, and this over time would result in a significant improvement of your beliefs.<sup>1</sup> If so, then you may have a reason to believe this obviously false proposition, but it is not the kind of reason in which epistemologists have traditionally been interested.

This is not to say that nonintellectual and nonsynchronic goals are not important for the way we conduct our intellectual lives. They obviously are important. Whenever the concern is with intellectual progress and epistemic improvement, it will be our long-term intellectual goals that are at issue. We will want to know what strategies are likely to promote these goals. We need temporally extended strategies in the theoretical realm just as much as we do in the practical realm. It is important, for example, that we have stable, dependable strategies governing the gathering and processing of information. We need to know when to do so and how to go about it. And since we need these strategies to be feasible ones—we cannot spend all of our time and energy on epistemic

pursuits at the expense of our other goals—our nonintellectual goals will also have to be taken into account. If for no other reason, they will be relevant as practical constraints on inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

So, nonsynchronic and nonintellectual goals are important, but they don't eliminate the need for a notion of rational belief that is concerned with a purely synchronic intellectual goal. Even when we are in the midst of gathering more information about a topic or processing the information that we already have in a different way, we can and sometimes do wonder what it is rational for us to believe in the interim. Our having reasons to continue our inquiries on a topic does not mean that it is rational to withhold judgment until we complete the inquiries. We often have good reasons to believe a proposition even though for safety's sake we also have good reasons to gather additional information about it.<sup>3</sup>

Besides, whether we have good reasons to gather more information about a topic is itself a function of what it is rational for us to believe, as are all questions about what intellectual strategies and procedures it is rational for us to follow. There may be procedures that would dramatically improve the quality of our beliefs, but we won't have a good egocentric reason to adopt these procedures unless we have a good egocentric reason to believe that this is so.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, as important as questions of epistemic improvement are, questions of the synchronic rationality of our beliefs have at least a theoretical priority.

There are two other issues about the nature of the goal that also need clarification. The first is whether the goal is to be understood in terms of beliefs *simpliciter* or in terms of degrees of belief. If the former, then having an accurate and comprehensive belief system is essentially a matter of believing those propositions that are true and not believing those propositions that are false. If the latter, things are not quite so simple. Since degrees of belief are not straightforwardly true or false, we will need to find some other way to characterize their accuracy. One natural way to do so is in terms of objective probabilities, the rough idea being that these probabilities can play a role analogous to the one that truth plays for beliefs *simpliciter*. On this view, accuracy is essentially a matter of having a strong degree of belief in propositions that are highly probable and a low degree of belief in those that are highly improbable. For convenience, however, I am going to put this issue aside, at least for the time being,<sup>5</sup> and simply assume that the epistemic goal is to be understood in terms of beliefs rather than degrees of belief.

The second issue arises because the goal has two aspects, accuracy and comprehensiveness, that pull against each other. Something must be said about the relative weight that is to be given to each. What Descartes said was that accuracy is always to take precedence over comprehensiveness. The Cartesian goal is to make one's belief system as comprehensive as possible subject to the constraint that it be risk-free. So for Descartes, risk-taking is never justified by the prospect of having a more comprehensive belief system. Roderick Chisholm,

by contrast, has often emphasized the value of comprehensiveness, insisting that “playing it safe” is not always the most reasonable intellectual course. Most of us will be sympathetic with this suggestion,<sup>6</sup> but even so there are likely to be differences among us as to just how much relative weight is to be given to accuracy and comprehensiveness. Should the two be given equal weight, or should accuracy be weighted somewhat more heavily, or perhaps should comprehensiveness be weighted more?

The answer is that none of these should be a strict prerequisite of egocentric rationality. Whatever one’s favored attitude toward epistemic risk, one should refrain from imposing it upon others in the name of rationality.<sup>7</sup> Insofar as the issue is egocentric rationality, the attitudes that matter are your own, not Chisholm’s and not Descartes’s and not anyone else’s. What matters is what from your own perspective would seem to be an acceptable risk, insofar as your goal is to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs.

There is more to be said about the issue of one’s attitude toward epistemic risk, but for now I am going to postpone the discussion<sup>8</sup> and concentrate instead on the more general question of what a perspective is. It is essentially a set of beliefs, a body of opinion. However, there are a number of such bodies of opinion that can plausibly be regarded as your own, ranging from one that consists simply of your uncorrected opinions to one that consists of deeper and presumably more stable opinions. It is this last body of opinion that is the measure of egocentric rationality. Indeed, were egocentric rationality simply a matter of having beliefs that, given your uncorrected state of opinion, you were satisfied with, it would border on the trivial that your beliefs about any given topic are egocentrically rational. There would be little or no sorting of your beliefs, and hence little or no point to our declaring them to be rational by your own lights. What matters is your reflective opinion. It is egocentrically rational for you to believe a proposition only if you would think on deep reflection that believing it is part of what is involved in your having an accurate and comprehensive belief system. Your belief must be able to stand up to your own critical reflection. It must meet your own deep standards and in this sense be invulnerable to criticism.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, it need not be invulnerable to criticism come what may. There may be data that would provide you with grounds for criticism, were you to have it. This doesn’t matter. Egocentric rationality requires only that you have no grounds for dissatisfaction, given your current personal resources. Your current resources consist of the data and information represented in your current beliefs, plus any additional data or information that you would acquire were you to be more introspective. For example, there can be sense experiences of various sorts that aren’t currently represented in your beliefs but that would be represented were you to be appropriately introspective.

These resources can be thought of as your starting point. The idea is to imagine you reflecting and to imagine the reflection’s being grounded in your current resources, without new data being gathered. To be sure, the reflection

itself might prompt new ideas or new ways of looking at things. Indeed, this is the point of it: to determine whether something would occur to you on reflection that would cause you to be dissatisfied with what you now believe about a topic. If it would, then your belief is not egocentrically rational.

So, the standards you must meet if you are to be egocentrically rational are not timeless, objective rules of thought that are out there somewhere, waiting to be discovered if only you are clever enough. They are internal standards. But it is not as if the internal standards are always there waiting to be discovered either. You cannot simply peer inward and read off what your standards are. You cannot do so even if you are skilled at introspection, since these standards are not always present in fully developed form. They are based on your own deep dispositions, but often enough the relevant dispositions will be activated only with hard thought—and not so much by hard thought on the question of what your standards are but rather by hard thought on the issues at hand, whatever these may be. In the process of grappling with the issues, the standards emerge. Indeed, in many cases it may be less misleading to think of them as being created rather than emerging. Despite the impression one might get from much of epistemology, dealing with hard intellectual issues is almost never a matter of first discovering what your standards are and then applying them to the issue at hand. More often it is a matter of making a number of tiny, specific decisions about the best way to think about the issue, and these decisions, without too much exaggeration, can be thought of as creating your standards. Even so, for convenience I will continue to say that your beliefs are egocentrically rational if they meet your epistemic standards, and I will say this even if you haven't been reflective and hence even if those standards are merely implicit in your dispositions, waiting to be activated by the proper sort of reflection.

But suppose you happen to distrust reflection. Is egocentric rationality still a matter of what you would think on reflection? In particular, suppose you think that reflection usually just confuses you, causing you to be less reliable in your judgments than you would be otherwise. As a result, you avoid reflection. You think it is better to believe the first thing that pops into your head about an issue. Moreover, you aren't incoherent. This belief, the belief that reflection is not to be trusted, is itself the first thing that popped into your head about the issue of belief acquisition. Nevertheless, on reflection you would be critical of this belief. You would think that this is a silly way to conduct your intellectual life. Then according to what I have said, it isn't egocentrically rational for you to believe what first pops into your head. This might seem counterintuitive. After all, you now think that your reflective views are less reliable than your unreflective ones. Doesn't this suggest that by your own lights it is unreasonable for you to be reflective? And more generally, doesn't it also suggest that egocentric rationality is not always a matter of what you would think on reflection?

This much is right: from your present unreflective perspective, you have no reason to be reflective, since you think that this would make you less reliable. But this is just to say that there is one sense of reason, a radically subjective

sense, that is to be understood in terms of your current beliefs, whatever they happen to be. Whenever you believe that a policy or decision is a sensible one, it is reasonable in this radically subjective sense for you to follow it. Consider an analogy. Two horses are racing each other, and the betting odds on the two are equal. You have overwhelming evidence that horse A will win the race, evidence that you yourself would acknowledge were you to reflect for even a moment. Nevertheless, you haven't been reflective and you instead believe that B will win. If so, it is unreasonable in one sense, a radically subjective sense, for you to bet on A. After all, to do so would be to bet on a horse that you now believe is less likely to win. And what, we might rhetorically ask, could be more unreasonable than that?

But of course, it is also the case that we often criticize decisions as irrational, even when the decision-maker believes that the decision is a good one. Such criticisms must be presupposing a less radically subjective notion of rationality, one that allows us to say that betting on A may be the most reasonable alternative for you even if you believe otherwise. Indeed, an especially forceful way to make such criticisms is to point out that were you to be reflective, you yourself would admit that it would be foolish to bet on anything other than A.

And so it is with the above case involving reflection. Although your current unreflective opinion is that it is best to believe the first thing that pops into your head, on reflection you would regard such a policy as a foolish one. You yourself would be critical of it. Thus, in one important sense, a reflective sense, this is not a reasonable policy for you. It is a policy that violates your own deep standards.

If it is reflective opinion that is the measure of egocentric rationality, we need to have some idea about the amount of reflection and the kind of reflection that is required. For a belief to be egocentrically rational, is it enough that a few moments of reflection would give you no motivation for retraction? Or must it be the case that you wouldn't be dissatisfied with your belief even if you were to engage in lengthy and careful reflection? And if so, how lengthy and how careful must the reflection be?

Descartes thought that he had a straightforward answer to these questions. He thought that there was a natural stopping point to reflection. You reflect until you perceive the truth of the proposition in question with such clarity and distinctness that you are no longer able to doubt its truth. At this point you can terminate your reflection and be assured of not making a mistake. So, additional reflection would be gratuitous.<sup>10</sup> However, Descartes was wrong about there being such a stopping point. There is no point at which we can terminate reflection and be altogether assured of not making a mistake. We need another way to specify the point at which opinion is rational if reflection up to that point leaves you satisfied with it.

Suppose we say that the stopping point is reached when you have reflected in a reasonably careful fashion for a reasonably lengthy amount of time. This is sensible advice. Indeed, in one sense, a sense that I will later try to explicate, it is obviously the right advice.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, for the epistemologist it has a deva-

stating drawback. Like much advice that smacks of common sense, it is itself reason-saturated. It thus leaves us within the circle of terms that are at issue. We now need to say what is involved in your reflections' being reasonably lengthy and careful, but, and here is the rub, this will inevitably involve reference to what it is rational for you to believe. The time and care that it is reasonable for you to devote to such reflections will itself be a function of what it is reasonable for you to believe about the potential benefits and costs of reflection. So, we find ourselves back where we started, confronted once again with questions of rational belief.

Thus, contrary to the familiar saying, this is advice that may work well enough in practice but not in theory. For our theoretical concerns, we need to look elsewhere for a solution. We need to ask, as Descartes in effect did, when it is gratuitous for you to reflect further on a topic. When we think of the matter in this way, there is a natural fallibilistic counterpart to Descartes's proposed stopping point. Further reflection is gratuitous when it would not alter your opinion of the topic at issue. This is the point of stability, the point at which you become invulnerable to self-criticism. Further reflection wouldn't cause you to change your mind. Of course, stable opinion is not the same as true opinion. There is no guarantee of truth here. Even so, there is nothing to be gained from further reflection.<sup>12</sup>

Descartes thought that his stopping point could sometimes be reached easily and sometimes not so easily. He thought that you could clearly and distinctly perceive the truth of some propositions with relatively little reflection, but for other propositions you could do so only with a considerable amount of reflection. Similarly for this notion. Certain topics will be such that even the most casual reflection would produce the relevant kind of stability. Your opinions need not be unreviseable in the face of new information in order to be stable in this sense. They need to be only reflectively stable, and presumably many of your opinions, even those to which you have given little thought, are stable in this sense.

On the other hand, with certain complicated topics, a considerable amount of reflection might be required to reach the point of reflective stability. With respect to these topics, it won't be easy for you or for anyone else to tell whether further reflection would motivate you to retract your current opinion. This is exactly as it should be. After all, the topics are complicated. If it were easy to determine at what point your opinions of them are stable, it would be easy to determine what it is egocentrically rational for you to believe about them, but this shouldn't be easy.

With yet other topics, it may be the case that no amount of reflection would produce stability. On reflection your opinion of them would simply continue to vacillate. If so, it is rational for you to withhold judgment. Thus, there are two ways in which it can be rational for you to withhold judgment on a proposition, theory, or whatever. If reflection would lead to the stable opinion that withholding is your best option, it is rational for you to withhold. Think, for example, of the proposition that the fair coin you are about to toss will land heads. But in

addition, it is rational for you to withhold if reflection would lead you to no stable opinion whatsoever. Perhaps this is the case for the proposition that there is intelligent life elsewhere in the universe. Sometimes it may seem to you that the available data point to this being true, other times to its being false, and still other times it may not seem to point strongly in either direction. And it may be that no matter how much you reflected on the data, you would continue to vacillate.

Of course, you need not have actually engaged in lengthy reflection in order to rationally believe (or rationally withhold on) a proposition. It is enough for your current opinion to conform with what your stable opinion would be (or as the case may be, conform to the absence of any stable opinion). So, even if the point of stability is one that could be reached only with unfeasibly lengthy reflection, you can still be egocentrically rational.

But if it would take deep reflection to arrive at a stable opinion and if as a result of this, your stable opinion is not in any interesting sense represented in your current beliefs, can it really be relevant for questions of egocentric rationality? Consider an example. Imagine a man and woman who believe a proposition on exactly the same evidence. There is no difference in their current beliefs toward the proposition, but there is a difference between the two. He but not she would come to the conclusion, given appropriate reflection, that what they now take to be good evidence for the proposition is not in the final analysis adequate. Since this counterfactual difference, by hypothesis, is not reflected in any of their current beliefs, it might be tempting to think that if her current belief in the proposition is rational, then so too must be his, the counterfactual difference between them notwithstanding.<sup>13</sup>

This much should be admitted: for there to be a relevant difference between the two, it is not enough that on reflection he would alter his opinion of the proposition but she would not. After all, it might be that he but not she has had a restless night's sleep. So, if he were to reflect, he would become drowsy and lose his train of thought, whereas she would not. Counterfactual differences of this sort are not relevant. Not just any kind of reflection under any kind of conditions is indicative of an individual's deepest epistemic standards. In imagining these two people reflecting upon their evidence, we need to ignore potentially distorting features of their current psychological states. We are to imagine that neither their drowsiness nor their crankiness nor any other such feature affects their deliberations.

There are problems here, to be sure, the most pressing of which is that there may be no precise way to determine whether or not something is a distortion of an individual's outlook. Still, there is a distinction to be made. Some of an individual's psychological features are in the normal course of things relatively fixed and deep, while others are either temporary or abnormal. If the former, we are to imagine the individual reflecting with the feature intact, and accordingly it will play a role in shaping the individual's deepest epistemic standards. If the latter, the feature is to be regarded as a distorting one. Accordingly, it is to be

treated more like, say, the state of drunkenness. Even while drunk, individuals have deep epistemic standards, but to determine what they are, we are not to imagine the individuals reflecting in their present drunken condition. Rather, we are to imagine them reflecting in a sober state.<sup>14</sup>

Suppose we put all of these distorting factors to one side and grant that were the above two people to be ideally reflective, they would come to different conclusions. He but not she would come to think that their evidence for the proposition in question is not adequate. Then this counterfactual difference between them is epistemically relevant. It does not matter that this difference is not reflected in their current beliefs. Not everything that is epistemically relevant needs to be captured in the contents of their current beliefs.<sup>15</sup> Their dispositions and their inclinations also count for something, and by hypothesis their dispositions are different. Something in his current state would result in his being critical of his belief were he to be appropriately reflective, but nothing in her current state would result in her being critical of her belief. This is enough to warrant an epistemic difference between the two. It is enough to make the proposition that they both believe egocentrically rational for her but not for him.

This, then, is the way to understand the primary subject matter of egocentric epistemology. Like the subject matter of any proposed epistemology, it is identified by reference to the point of view it adopts, where the point of view consists of a goal, a perspective, and a set of resources. For egocentric epistemology, the goal is a synchronic, intellectual one, that of having an accurate and comprehensive belief system. The perspective is an egocentric one, that of individual believers who reflect, free from distorting influences, on the topic at issue to the point of stability, if there is one. And the set of resources is a personal one, the data and information represented in the individual's beliefs. So, to say that it is egocentrically rational for you to believe something is just to say that it is appropriate for you to believe it, given this point of view. It is to say that your beliefs and your intellectual character are such that if you were sufficiently reflective, you would think that this is an appropriate belief for you to have insofar as your end is now to have an accurate and comprehensive belief system. Moreover, further reflection wouldn't prompt you to change your mind. You are in this sense invulnerable to self-criticism.

Since according to this view the crucial conditions of rational belief are ones having to do with your own perspective, the view can be regarded as a version of epistemic internalism. But it is not a version of internalism that implies you always have ready access to the conditions that make your beliefs rational or irrational. On the contrary, I have emphasized that you cannot always simply peer inward and read off what your deepest epistemic standards are. Thus, it can be easy to make mistakes about what it is egocentrically rational for you to believe. You can make such mistakes even if you are reasonably careful and sophisticated about epistemic matters.

It is useful to distinguish epistemic varieties of internalism from metaphysical varieties. The former insist that the conditions of rational belief be ones to which

we have ready access, while the latter insist only that the conditions of rational belief be internal—roughly expressed, they must be conditions that take place from the skin in. I am recommending an account of egocentrically rational belief that is internalist in this latter sense but not in the strong epistemic sense.

## 2. *Responsible Belief*

Egocentrically rational belief is explicated without recourse to the notion of rationality or any of its cognates. This makes it suitable as a theoretical anchor. It can be used to explicate related but less basic notions.

Indeed, there is a schema for introducing such notions. It is egocentrically rational for you to \_\_\_\_\_ just if it is egocentrically rational for you to believe that \_\_\_\_\_ would be an acceptably effective means to your goals, where the blanks here can be filled with an action, a decision, a strategy, a plan, or whatever. This is merely a schema. It glides over many complications, ones concerning the relative values of your ends, ones about what would constitute an acceptably good overall job of satisfying these ends,<sup>16</sup> and ones concerning the relative amount of confidence with which it is rational for us to believe that \_\_\_\_\_ will satisfy them. Moreover, there is at least one derivative notion that is anchored to epistemically rational belief in a negative manner. More on it in a moment. For now the simplicity of the schema has the advantage of highlighting the idea that, in one importance sense, the rationality of an action, decision, or strategy is not a matter of whether in fact it will do an acceptably good overall job of satisfying your ends—after all, it might do so even though from your perspective there is no indication of this. Nor is it a matter of your simply believing that it will do an acceptable job of satisfying your ends—after all, you might believe this despite your having strong evidence to the contrary, evidence that you yourself would find convincing were you to think about it for a moment. Rather, the rationality of an action, decision, or strategy is a matter of its being egocentrically rational for you to believe that it will acceptably satisfy your ends.

This same schema can be applied to belief itself, and this creates an opportunity for confusion. You have adequate egocentric reasons to believe a proposition, all things considered, if it is egocentrically rational for you to believe that believing this proposition would be an effective means to your goals. There are two notions of rational belief at work here. One is the anchoring notion. It presupposes a purely epistemic goal, the goal of having accurate and comprehensive beliefs. The other is a derivative notion, defined in terms of the anchoring notion. It is rational in this derivative sense for you to believe a proposition just in case it is rational in the anchoring sense for you to believe that believing the proposition is acceptable, given all your goals.

Since having accurate and comprehensive beliefs is ordinarily a good way to promote your nonepistemic goals, these two notions tend not to come apart.<sup>17</sup> But they can come apart. It can be egocentrically rational for you to believe that the overall benefits of believing a falsehood outweigh the overall costs of doing so. If so, then what it is egocentrically rational for you to believe, all things