

our ends are epistemic, most of us will have no motivation to drug ourselves.

Descartes and Locke notwithstanding, our primary intellectual threat is not that of chaos, and our primary intellectual need is not for advice about the most fundamental matters of intellectual outlook. We cannot help but be largely guided by our intellectual inheritance on these matters. The primary threat is rather that of intellectual conformity, and our primary need is for intellectual autonomy. There is little in life that is more difficult than resisting domination by one's intellectual environment. It is all too easy for us to be intellectual lemmings. We do not have the ability to cast off wholesale the effects of our environment and adopt a radically new intellectual outlook. So, our having this ability cannot be the basis of our intellectual autonomy. Our intellectual autonomy is instead based upon our ability to use our existing opinions and existing methods to examine our opinions and methods. It resides in our ability to make ourselves into an object of study, to evaluate and monitor ourselves, and moreover to do so not so much in terms of the prevailing standards as in terms of our own standards. This ability creates a space for intellectual autonomy. But it is only a space.

Self-monitoring in terms of our own personal standards does not altogether eliminate the threat of intellectual domination. As Foucault argued recently and as Marx argued earlier, the most effective and therefore most chilling kind of control is that which is internalized.<sup>46</sup> We accept as our own the very norms by which we are controlled. Be this as it may, our only alternative is to monitor ourselves for this as well, to try as best we can to make ourselves aware of the possibility and thereby prevent it. Of course, there is no guarantee that we will be successful. If the domination is thorough enough, leaving no trace of its influence, then no amount of self-monitoring will do much good.

But in this respect, the possibility of complete and utter domination is not much different from the possibility of complete and utter deception. Just as a powerful enough demon could use our own experiences to deceive us thoroughly without our being aware of it, so too a powerful enough dominating force could use our own standards to control us thoroughly without our being aware of it. But neither of these gives us a rationale to be dismissive of our intellectual projects. The possibility of radical error does not mean that knowledge is altogether impossible for us, and the possibility of radical domination does not mean that intellectual autonomy is altogether impossible for us.

Our intellectual standards cannot help but show the effects of our intellectual environment, but they need not be swallowed up by it. My standards can and presumably sometimes do differ from the standards of the people who surround me. And when they do, intellectual autonomy as well as egocentric rationality requires that I conform to my standards rather than the prevailing ones.

#### ***4. Why Be Egocentrically Rational?***

Why should you care whether your beliefs are egocentrically rational? Part of the difficulty in answering this question is that different kinds of worries might be prompting it. For example, the concern might be with the purely epistemic goal.

By definition, egocentric rationality is a matter of what you have reasons to believe insofar as your goal is to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs. But is this really one of your goals? Do you or should you care whether or not your beliefs are accurate and comprehensive?

Most of us do care about this, and perhaps even care about it intrinsically. We tend to be curious about our world. We are curious about its origins, its history and its future. We want to have true and comprehensive beliefs about these matters, and we want this independently of whether or not these beliefs are useful. But of course, we also think that they are useful. They may not be useful in each and every case. There are plenty of examples where the discovery of a truth does more harm than good. But in general, this isn't so. Having accurate and comprehensive beliefs is ordinarily helpful in our attempts to secure those things that we value. Or at least so we think. And insofar as we do think this, we value having accurate and comprehensive beliefs. We value them as a means.<sup>47</sup>

But there may be other worries that are prompting the above question. One has to do with the restricted nature of egocentric rationality. Your egocentric reasons to believe something are the reasons you have to believe it insofar as your goal is to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs. But in fact, you have many goals, not just epistemic ones. But then, why should you be especially interested in being rational in this restricted, epistemic sense?

If this is the worry, it should be granted. Epistemic goals are only one kind of goal, and they need not be overriding goals. Thus, it need not be rational, all things considered—that is, when all of your goals are taken into consideration—for you to have egocentrically rational beliefs. To be sure, there are pressures that tend to keep these two notions from falling too far apart.<sup>48</sup> But the two can diverge, and when they do, it is not particularly important for you to have egocentrically rational beliefs. On the contrary, it will be important for you not to have them. If someone threatens to kill your children unless you come to believe P, then you had better find some way of getting yourself to believe P regardless of what your current evidence for P is.<sup>49</sup> But this is not to say that being egocentrically rational isn't valuable. It's only to say that its value can be overridden.

There is also a more radical worry that may be prompting the above question. Egocentric rationality is concerned with purely epistemic goals. Even so, there is no guaranteed connection between egocentric rationality and truth or likely truth. Being egocentrically rational does not ensure that most of your beliefs are true. It does not even ensure that this is likely. But if not, why should you care whether or not your beliefs are egocentrically rational? Why should you care about this even if your only concerns are epistemic ones?

It is not altogether clear what the above question is asking. One natural way to interpret it is as a request for reasons. In asking why you should be egocentrically rational, you are asking what reasons you have to believe the propositions that are egocentrically rational for you. But if this is your question, there is a straightforward answer to it. By hypothesis there are considerations that from

your perspective seem to indicate that these propositions are true. Hence, you have egocentric reasons to believe these propositions. You have such reasons insofar as your goal is to have accurate beliefs.

The ease of this answer suggests that if you are tempted to ask the question, Why be egocentrically rational? you must have something else in mind. But what else? Perhaps your question is not best construed as a request for reasons, since this invites an uninteresting response. The question, rather, is one about egocentric rationality itself. You want to know what there is to be said for it. You want to know why it should be valued.

But again, there is a straightforward answer. You want or need to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs, and insofar as you are egocentrically rational, you are by your own lights effectively satisfying this end. This is what can be said for being egocentrically rational. Perhaps this still does not strike you as enough. You grant that you are interested in having true beliefs. That's not the issue. What you cannot see is why you should value having beliefs that by your lights seem to be an effective means to this goal. There is something to this. In your deliberations about what to believe, your primary interest is not to determine what is egocentrically rational for you. Your interest is not you and your own deep epistemic standards. It's the world that you are interested in. You want to determine what's true of it.

So, if determining what's true of the world is what you have in mind when you insist that you cannot see why you should be interested in egocentric rationality, you may be right. Your primary intellectual goal, presumably, is not to have egocentrically rational beliefs. It's to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs. Considered in itself, it may not be all that important for you to be egocentrically rational. On the other hand, this doesn't mean that being egocentrically rational is of no value whatsoever to you. After all, in believing propositions that are egocentrically rational for you, you are believing propositions that on reflection you would think effectively satisfy the goal of having an accurate and comprehensive belief system. But this is one of the ways in which a thing can have value for you. It can have value for you because you think it would effectively promote something else that is of value. Valuing something as a means is still a way of valuing it.

In addition, egocentric rationality is something that can be valued for its own sake as well. Being egocentrically rational is essentially a matter of being invulnerable to a certain kind of intellectual self-condemnation, and there is nothing especially implausible about the idea of this kind of invulnerability's being intrinsically valuable to you. It may be important to you, important for its own sake, that you not be intellectually at odds with yourself. You want to be beyond self-reproach in intellectual matters. Being so, you may realize, gives you no guarantee that you won't make mistakes. It doesn't even give you a guarantee that you are not a brain in a vat, being radically deceived. But your reaction may be, "Perhaps so, but if I am a brain in a vat, I can at least be a good brain in a vat, one with no motivation for intellectual self-reproach."

So, being egocentrically rational is the sort of thing that you might very well intrinsically value. Still, it would be at least a little peculiar for this to be your primary source, much less your only source, of intellectual motivation. To see why, consider two inquirers. The first is motivated by a desire to know the truth. This prompts her to be thorough and careful in her inquiries, and as a result she believes that which is egocentrically rational for her. The second is motivated by a desire to avoid intellectual self-condemnation. This prompts him to be thorough and careful in his inquiries, and as a result he believes that which is egocentrically rational for him. The result is the same in each case: each is egocentrically rational. Nevertheless, we are more likely to look askance at his intellectual motivation than hers. His motivation seems shallower, more self-indulgent.

There is an analogy here with at least some views about moral motivation. Suppose one person acts in the morally required way because she feels genuine sympathy for the suffering of others and she believes that suffering is bad, and a second person acts in the morally required way because he wants to be a morally good person.<sup>50</sup> Her motivation does not involve any particular thoughts of herself, but his does involve thoughts of himself. Indeed, this is his primary motivation. Once again, her motivation seems more morally advanced and hence more admirable than his. This is so precisely because doing the morally right thing is for her merely a means, while for him it is an end in itself, one that is intrinsically valuable. This makes his motivation seem shallow, perhaps even narcissistic.<sup>51</sup>

And so it is with matters of rationality, including those of egocentric rationality. To be sure, you might intrinsically value being rational, but there would be something misdirected, something narcissistic, about this rather than a desire for the truth to be your primary source of intellectual motivation.

Besides, even if being rational were your principal intellectual goal, it is a goal that is best sought indirectly. It is like happiness in this respect. Trying to be happy ordinarily won't make you happy. Happiness is best won as a by-product. You engage in activities and projects that you regard as worthwhile, and happiness is the result. The same goes for rationality. Trying very hard to be rational ordinarily isn't a good way to become rational. A better way is to try very hard to believe truths and not to believe falsehoods.

Suppose, then, that the desire to be rational isn't the principal source of intellectual motivation for you and that, hence, the value you attach to being egocentrically rational is for the most part a derivative value. It has value for you because insofar as you are egocentrically rational, you have beliefs that by your own lights seem to be an effective means to the goal of having an accurate and comprehensive belief system. But this still might not seem to be enough to answer your questions about the value of egocentric rationality. After all, egocentric rationality may not help get you to the truth. What by your own lights seems to be an effective means to the truth may in fact not be an effective means to it. What then? What is there to be said for egocentric rationality in this kind of situation, where you are rational but misguided?

But notice, you are not aware that you are misguided. On the contrary, your beliefs are such that even on deep reflection you would be satisfied with them. Even on reflection you would continue to think that they are highly likely to be true. Of course, it might be obvious to the rest of us that you are misguided. We might even be in a position to see that you would do better by being egocentrically irrational than rational. But if it is this possibility that is worrying you and causing you to wonder why you should care about being egocentrically rational, you are merely raising the issue of guarantees once again. What you are saying is that egocentric rationality is valuable only if there are assurances that egocentric reasons to believe something are reliable indicators of truths. Or at the very least you are demanding assurances that you will do better by being rational than irrational. But there are no such guarantees. So, if in asking the question, Why be egocentrically rational? you are demanding assurances of this sort, there is little to be said to you.

The most we can do is to point out to you that the reality of your intellectual life is that like the rest of us, you are working without a net. Regardless of how you marshal your cognitive resources, you are not going to have non-question-begging guarantees of truth or reliability. No procedure, no amount of reflection, no amount of evidence gathering can guarantee that you won't fall into error and perhaps even great error. As a result, all of your intellectual projects require at least an element of intellectual faith in yourself.

If you cannot accommodate yourself to the reality of your intellectual life, if on reflection you would not be satisfied with anything short of guarantees, then you are something rare: a genuine skeptic. Your deep epistemic standards are such that little if anything can possibly satisfy them.

## Notes

1. For the sake of the argument, I'm assuming here that committing yourself to the proposition wouldn't be sufficient to produce these benefits. Only genuine belief will do. See sec. 1.4.

2. See sec. 3.2, where these issues are discussed in more detail.

3. See Richard Feldman, "Foley's Subjective Foundationalism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1989), 149–58.

4. See sec. 3.2.

5. I return to the issue in Chapter 4.

6. Roderick Chisholm's attempts to make this suggestion precise have their problems, however. In *The Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 7, Chisholm says that "epistemic reasonability could be understood in terms of the general requirement to try to have the largest possible set of logically independent beliefs that is such that the true beliefs outnumber the false ones." But this implies that a belief system of size  $n + \mu$ , where  $\mu$  is as small as one likes, that has just one more true belief than false belief is always epistemically preferable to a belief system of size  $n$  that has only true beliefs. Later, in the third edition of *Theory of Knowledge*, 13, Chisholm tries to emphasize the value of comprehensiveness by committing himself to the following principle: if  $P$  is beyond reasonable doubt and if  $Q$  is beyond reasonable doubt, then the conjunction ( $P \& Q$ )