

What Am I to Believe?

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The central issue of Descartes's *Meditations* is an intensely personal one. Descartes asks a simple question of himself, one that each of us can also ask of ourselves, "What am I to believe?" One way of construing this question--indeed, the way Descartes himself construed it--is as a methodological one. The immediate aim is not so much to generate a specific list of propositions for me to believe. Rather, I want to formulate for myself some general advice about how to proceed intellectually.

If this is what I want, I am not likely to be content with telling myself that I am to use reliable methods of inquiry. Nor will I be content with telling myself to believe only that which is likely to be true given my evidence. It is not as if such advice is mistaken. It is just unhelpful. I knew all along that it is better for me to use reliable methods rather than unreliable ones, and I also knew that it is better for me to believe that which is likely to be true rather than that which is not. Besides, I cannot simply read off from the world what methods are reliable ones, nor can I read off when something is likely to be true given my evidence. These are just the sorts of things about which I want advice.

An appeal to the prevailing intellectual standards will not provide what I am looking for either. I will not be satisfied with a recommendation that tells me to conduct my inquiries in accordance with the standards of my community, or alternatively in accordance with the standards of those recognized in my community as experts. I will want to know whether these standards are desirable ones. The dominant standards in a community are not always to be trusted and those of the recognized experts are not either.

My question is a more fundamental one and also a more egocentric one. It is not that I think that the task of working out intellectual guidelines is one that is best conducted by myself in solitude. If I do think this, I am being foolish. A task of this sort is better done in full public view, with results being shared. This increases the chances of correction and decreases the chances of self-deception. In the end, however I must make up my own mind. I must make up my own mind about what is true and who is reliable and what is worth respecting in my intellectual tradition. It is this that prompts the question, what am I to believe? The question is one of how I am to go about making up my own mind.

Here is one way of answering this question: I am to make up my mind by marshalling my intellectual resources in a way that conforms to my own deepest epistemic standards. If I conduct my inquiries in such a way that I would not be critical of the resulting beliefs even if I were to be deeply reflective, then these beliefs are rational for me in an important sense, an egocentric sense. There are various ways of trying to spell out exactly what this amounts to, but for the purposes here the details can be left open. The basic idea is that if I am to be egocentrically rational, I must not have internal reasons for retraction, ones who force I myself would acknowledge were I to be sufficiently reflective.

An answer of this sort has the right egocentric flavor, but as advice it is not very satisfying. It seems misdirected. When I am trying to formulate some intellectual advice for myself, or more generally when I am deliberating about what to believe and how to proceed intellectually, my concern is not with my own standards. The point of my

deliberations is not to find out what I think or would think on deep reflection about the reliability of various methods. My concern is with what methods are in fact reliable; it is with the objective realities, not my subjective perceptions.

Be this as it may, the recommendation that I conform to my own standards is an appropriate answer to the egocentric question, "What am I to believe?" More precisely, it is an appropriate answer if the question is interpreted as one about what I am to believe insofar as my ends are epistemic. Even more precisely, it is an appropriate philosophical answer to this question, the one that should be given if the question is pushed to its limit. The reflection prompted by the egocentric question initially has an outward focus. The object of my concern is the world. I wonder whether this or that is true. If pushed hard enough, however, the reflection ultimately curls back upon me. I become concerned with my place in the world, especially with my place as an inquirer. I want to know what methods of inquiry are suitable for me insofar as I am trying to determine whether this or that is true. Should I trust the evidence of my senses? Should I use scientific methods? Should I rely on sacred texts? Should I have confidence in my intuitions?

These questions can lead to still others. They can make me wonder about the criteria that I am presupposing in evaluating various methods. Meta-issues thus begin to occupy me. My primary concern is no longer with whether it would be more reliable for me to use this method rather than that one. Nor is it with what each would have me believe. Rather, it is with my criteria for evaluating these various methods and in turn with the criteria for these criteria, and so on. This is the point at which the egocentric question can be appropriately answered by talking about me. What am I to believe? Ultimately, I am to believe that which is licensed by my own deepest epistemic standards. An answer of this sort is the appropriate one for epistemologists. It is the appropriate answer for those whose reflections on the egocentric question take them to this level.

Insofar as nonepistemologists raise the question of what they are to believe, they are principally interested in a different kind of answer. They want an answer that gives them marks of truth and reliability. Epistemologists also want such marks, but once their deliberations reach the meta-level that is characteristic of epistemology, they are forced to admit that regardless of how they marshal their intellectual resources, there are no non-question-begging guarantees that the way that they are marshalling them is reliable. Vulnerability to error cannot be avoided. It is built into us and our methods. However, vulnerability to self-condemnation is not, and it is essentially this that egocentric rationality demands. It demands that we have beliefs that we as truth-seekers would not condemn ourselves for having even if we were to be deeply reflective. This is the post-Cartesian answer to the Cartesian question.

It is also an answer that is bound to be disappointing to anyone who thinks that an essential part of the epistemologist's job is to provide intellectual guidance. Much of the attractiveness of the Cartesian method of doubt is that it purports to do just this. It purports to provide us with a way of proceeding intellectually, and a concrete one at that. The proposed method tends to strike the contemporary reader as overly demanding, but it would nonetheless seem to be to Descartes's credit, indeed part of his greatness, that he at least attempted to provide such guidance. Contemporary epistemology is apt to seem barren by comparison. Concrete intellectual advice has all but disappeared from it. Of course, no one expects epistemologists to provide advice about local intellectual concerns. The specialist is better placed to give us that – the physicist, the mathematician,

the meteorologist, whoever the relevant expert happens to be. What we might like from epistemologists, however, is useful advice about the most basic matters of intellectual inquiry, but it is just this that contemporary epistemology fails to provide.

This is to be regretted only if epistemologists are in a privileged position to give such advice, but they are not. They may be in a privileged position to say something about the general conditions of rational belief. Likewise, they may be able to say interesting things about the conditions of knowledge and other related notions. The mistake is to assume that these conditions should provide us with useful guidelines for the most basic matters of intellectual inquiry. They cannot. The conditions will either be misdirected or not fundamental enough or both.

Consider the proposal that at least in one sense, being rational is essentially a matter of using methods that are reliable. Perhaps this is so, but if a proposal of this sort is meant to provide me with intellectual guidance, I must be able to distinguish reliable from unreliable methods. However, this is precisely one of the matters about which I will want advice. It is also a matter about which epistemologists are not in a privileged position to give advice, except indirectly. They may have useful and even surprising things to say about what reliability is, but once these things are said, it will be up to the rest of us to apply what they say. We will have to determine what methods and procedures are in fact reliable. So, no condition of this sort will be able to provide me with fundamental intellectual advice. On the contrary, if such conditions are to help guide inquiry, I must already be able to make the kind of determinations that they themselves imply are fundamental for me to make if I am to be rational. I reliably must be able to pick out which methods are reliable.

The same is true of other proposals. One proposal, for instance, is that I am rational only if I conform to the standards of the acknowledged experts.¹ If I am to use this to guide inquiry, I once again must be able to make determinations of just the sort that are said to be fundamental to my being rational. How am I to determine what the relevant expert standards are? Presumably by conducting an inquiry that itself conforms to the standards of the experts. But which standards are these, I want to know.

Suppose that the proposal is more inwardly looking. In particular, consider the proposal that it is rational in an important sense, an egocentric sense, for me to believe only that which I would not be motivated to retract even on deep reflection. If what I want is advice, this proposal is a non-starter. It is misdirected. Besides, I do not have the time to be deeply reflective about everything that I believe. So, even here I would be confronted with the problem of knowing how to apply the recommendation. How am I to determine whether my practices and my resulting beliefs conform with my own deep epistemic standards, the ones that I would approve of on reflection? Presumably by conforming to those very standards. But what I want to know, and what is often by no means obvious, is how I am to do this, short of being deeply reflective about all of these practices and beliefs?

The only way to avoid problems of this sort is to make the conditions of rationality ones to which we have immediate and unproblematic access. But this has a familiar and unpromising ring to it. Recall Bertrand Russell's epistemology, for example. He claimed that we are directly acquainted with certain truths and that these truths make various other propositions probable for us. If this kind of epistemology is to provide us with fundamental intellectual advice, we must be capable of determining immediately

and unproblematically when we are directly acquainted with something and when we are not. Likewise, we must be capable of determining immediately and unproblematically what propositions are made probable by the truths with which we are directly acquainted. Otherwise we will want advice about how to make these kinds of determinations. Russell's epistemology leaves room for the possibility that we do have these capabilities. Being directly acquainted with something is itself the sort of phenomenon with which we can be directly acquainted with the truth that one thing makes another thing probable.²

An epistemology of direct acquaintance or something closely resembling it is our only alternative if we expect the conditions of rationality to give us useful advice about those matters that the conditions themselves imply are fundamental to our being rational. It is also the kind of epistemology that the few are willing to take seriously anymore. But if not, we must give up the idea that epistemology is in the business of giving fundamental intellectual advice. For that matter, we must give up the whole idea that there is such advice to be had. There can be no general recipe for the conduct of our intellectual lives, if for no other reason than that questions can always arise about how to follow the recipe, questions to which the recipe itself can give no useful answer.

By contrast, consider the kind of advice that logic professors sometimes give their students. They sometimes tell them to try to solve difficult proofs from "both ends," working alternatively down from the premises and up from the desired conclusion. This is advice that is often useful for students, but it is also advice that has no pretenses of being about the most fundamental issues of inquiry. It is not even about the most fundamental matters of logical inference. This is no accident. It is useful precisely because it is embedded in a prior intellectual enterprise, one in which certain skills and abilities are taken for granted.

This is an obvious enough point once it is made explicit, but it is nonetheless a point that is easy enough to overlook. It is overlooked, for instance, by those internalists who argue against externalist conditions of rational belief on the grounds that they are unhelpful insofar as we are interested in advice about how to go about improving our belief systems. As a complaint against externalism, this will not do, but not because externalist conditions of rational belief provide us with useful advice. They do not. It is not especially useful to be told that we are to have beliefs that are products of reliable cognitive processes, for example. The problem, rather, is that internalist conditions of rational belief do not provide us with genuinely useful advice either.

Of course, internalists have often thought otherwise. One of Descartes's conceits, for example, was that the method of doubt provides advice to inquirers that is at once both useful and fundamental. By this I do not mean that Descartes intended his method to be used by everyone, even the fishmonger and the butcher. He did not. He intended it to be used only by philosopher-scientists, and he intended that even they use it only for a special purpose. It was not to be used in their everyday lives. It was to be used only for the purpose of conducting secure theoretical inquiry. However, the method was intended to provide advice at the most fundamental level about how to conduct such inquiry.

But, in fact, it fails to do this. It faces the same difficulties as other attempts to give intellectual advice that is both fundamental and useful. Either it presupposes that philosopher-scientists can make determinations of a sort that the recommendation itself says is fundamental or it is misdirected advice or perhaps both. Which of these difficulties Descartes's advice is subject to depend on how we understand it.

Suppose the advice is for philosopher-scientists to believe just those propositions whose truth they cannot doubt when they bring them clearly to mind. Then the advice faces both difficulties. First, it is not fundamental enough. It need not be immediately obvious to philosopher-scientists just what is indubitable for them in this sense and what is not. They thus can have questions about that which the advice says is fundamental to their being rational, and these will be questions that the advice cannot help them answer. Second, the advice is misdirected. It is advice that looks inward rather than outward. Insofar as the goal of philosopher-scientists is to conduct theoretical inquiry in an absolutely secure manner, their interest is to find propositions that cannot be false rather than ones that cannot be doubted. Of course, Descartes thought that there was a linkage between the two. He thought that what cannot be subjectively doubted cannot be objectively false, but there is no reason to think that he was right about this.

Suppose, then, that we interpret Descartes as offering more objective advice. He is telling philosopher-scientists to believe just those propositions that are clear and distinct for them, and he is stipulating from the very beginning that only truths can be genuinely clear and distinct. Then this exacerbates the first difficulty. If philosopher-scientists try to take the advice to heart, the question of whether something really is clear and distinct in this sense becomes one of the fundamental issues about which they will want advice.³

So, contrary to his hopes, Descartes did not succeed in providing advice that is both useful and fundamental. More precisely, he did not succeed in providing advice about the conduct of inquiry as opposed to its goals. For despite the above difficulties, we can still view Descartes as making a recommendation about what our intellectual goal should be. He is advising us to make certainty our goal, at least for theoretical purposes. We should try to believe as much as possible without encountering the risk of error. Of course, even this is advice that few of us would be willing to take seriously. The goal is far too demanding. Almost all of us are willing to put up with some risks of error in our theoretical pursuits.

But the important point here is that even if I did have this as my intellectual goal, Descartes has no good, substantive advice for me about how to achieve it. The advice he gives is either misdirected or not fundamental enough. If the advice is to believe what is clear and distinct, where by definition only truths are clear and distinct, it is not fundamental enough. If the advice is to believe what I cannot doubt, it is misdirected. At best, it is a piece of meta-advice. Indeed, when stripped of its spurious guarantees of truth, the advice amounts only to this: insofar as my goal is to believe as much as possible without risk, then from my perspective the way to go about trying to achieve this goal is to believe just that which strikes me as being risk-free and then hope for the best.

This is a sensible enough recommendation but also an altogether safe one. After all, someone can give me this kind of advice even if she has no conviction one way or the other about whether or not I am constituted in such a way that what I find impossible to doubt is in fact true. It is not much different from telling me to do what I think is best about the problem I have confided to her, even though when she has no idea whether what I think best really is best.

Of course, if she were presumptuous enough, she could go on to advise me about what I myself deep-down really think is the best way to deal with the problem. Indeed, this would be the counterpart of Descartes' strategy. He first recommends that I believe

just those propositions that I cannot doubt, and he then tries to tell me, albeit with a notorious lack of success, which propositions these are. On the other hand, if she is not in this way presumptuous, if she simply tells me to do what I think is best and then leave matters at that, this is not so much genuine advice as a substitute for it. She is not trying to tell me what is best for me. She leaves this to me to figure out for myself.

The recommendation that I have beliefs that I as a truth-seeker would not condemn myself for having, even if I were to be deeply reflective, has a similar status. This recommendation is internalistic in character, since it emphasizes matters of perspective. But insofar as it is conceived as a piece of advice, it is at best meta-advice. If it were interpreted as an attempt to provide me with something more than this – if it were interpreted for example, as an attempt to provide me with serious, substantive intellectual guidance - it would be clearly inadequate. So, this cannot be the charitable way to interpret it. It must instead be conceived as a different kind of recommendation.

What kind of recommendation? It is a recommendation about the conditions of rational belief - more exactly, the conditions for a certain kind of rational, egocentrically rational belief. The goal is to provide a notion of rational belief that is both enlightening and recognizable: enlightening in that it helps us think more clearly about related notions – truth, knowledge, skepticism, dogmatism, and intellectual disagreement, to name a few; and recognizable in that it helps us to understand the ascriptions of rationality that we want to make, both the ones we are inclined to make in our everyday lives and also the ones we are inclined to make when doing epistemology.

This conception takes epistemology, even internalist epistemology, out of the business of giving intellectual advice. The primary epistemological project is to offer an account of the conditions of rational belief, and there is no reason why this project must generate useful advice. Indeed, epistemology is not even the part of philosophy that is most closely tied to the giving of intellectual advice. Studies in logic and probability are more likely to generate useful advice than is epistemology proper. But even here, expectations should not be too high. Nothing extensive in the way of advice will come out of these studies either.

In part, this is so because logic and probability theory do not tell how to react when we discover logical inconsistency and probabilistic incoherence. There will be any number of ways for us to restore consistency or coherency. Similarly, when inconsistency or incoherency threatens, there will be any number of ways for us to avoid them. In neither case does logic or probability theory have anything to tell us about which of these many ways is preferable.⁴

So, there will not be much in the way of concrete positive advice that can come out of either logic or probability theory. In addition, there are limits even to the usefulness of the negative advice they are able to generate. Part of this is because of a familiar problem. Insofar as the advice is always to avoid inconsistency and incoherency, this is often difficult advice to follow. To do so, we need to be able to determine whether or not a set of opinions is inconsistent or incoherent, but the original advice cannot help with this. For help with this problem, we will need new advice – in effect, advice about how to apply the original advice.

Moreover, there is an even more basic limitation on this advice. It is not always good advice. It is not always and everywhere desirable to avoid inconsistency and incoherency. Doing so might make my overall situation worse. It might even make it

intellectually worse. If I recognize that my opinions are inconsistent or incoherent, I know that they cannot possibly all be accurate. So, I know that my opinions are less than ideal. But from this it does not immediately follow that it is irrational for me to have these opinions. What is rational for me in such situations depends upon what realistic alternatives I have.⁵ In betting situations, it is often rational to adopt a strategy that I know in advance is less than ideal, one in which I am sure to lose at least some of my bets. Moreover, this can be rational even when there are available to me other strategies that hold out at least some possibility of flawless outcome. These other strategies may be unduly daring or unduly cautious. The same is true of beliefs. Sometimes it is rational for me to have beliefs that I know cannot possibly all be accurate. Indeed this is the real lesson of the lottery, the preface, and other such paradoxes.⁶

None of this is to say that logic and probability theory do not have a special role to play in intellectual guidance. They obviously do. Logical inconsistency and probabilistic incoherence indicate that my opinions are less than ideal. They thus put me on guard about these opinions. What they do not tell me is how to react to this situation. From the fact that my opinions are less than ideal, it does not automatically follow that I must on pains of irrationality change any of these opinions. And even in those cases where I do have to change something, nothing in logic or probability theory tells me which opinions to change. They give me no concrete advice about this.⁷

Of course, things are different when it is issues of logic and probability theory that are themselves being debated. Similarly, they are different when other specifically philosophical issues are being debated. The relevant philosophical experts will then be in a special position to give me substantive advice. But when it is not philosophical matters that are at issue, advice will have to come from other sources. Fortunately, there is no shortage of such sources. Most are relatively specific in nature. I am confronted with an intellectual problem. So, I go to an expert on the topic in question or consult a reference work or perhaps simply ask a knowledgeable friend.

There are also sources that hold out the hope of more general advice, and it is no accident that among the richest of these are ones in which philosophers have become more and more interested – cognitive science and the history of science. Of course, there are other philosophical motives for interest in these fields. Nevertheless, there is a story to be told here, one whose rough outlines are that as it became increasingly obvious that epistemology could not be expected to give fundamental intellectual advice, philosophers became increasingly interested in empirical disciplines that had human intellectual inquiry as part of their subject matter.

It is not as if these disciplines can be expected to provide the kind of fundamental advice that epistemology fails to provide. If this were their aim, they would encounter all the familiar problems. There would be problems of how to apply the advice, for example. But with these disciplines, unlike epistemology, there is not even a pretense of their being able to provide fundamental advice. This is so not just because we can have questions about the way inquiry is conducted within these disciplines themselves, although this is true enough. It is also because the kind of information that these disciplines are in a position to provide will itself call for interpretation. The fact that scientists have historically used procedures of a certain kind or the fact that we are disposed to make inferences of a certain kind are themselves facts that need to be evaluated before they can provide us with intellectual advice. We will especially want to know whether these

procedures and inferences are reliable ones. But to answer this question, we will need to appeal to something more than the history of science and cognitive science.

On the other hand, if what we seek is not advice about the most fundamental matters of inquiry but rather some useful rules of thumb, these disciplines can be of help. At their best, they are able to provide a rich supply of data from which, with persistence and with the help of still other disciplines, we may be able to tease out some useful advice.

Sometimes it may not even take much teaching, especially for negative advice. Recent cognitive science is filled with studies that purport to show recurrent patterns of error in the way that we make inferences. The errors arise, for example, from an insensitivity to sample size or an underutilization of known prior probabilities in making predictions or an inclination in certain kinds of situations to assign a higher probability to a conjunction than one of its conjuncts.⁸ These are data from which we can fashion intellectual advice for ourselves – advice that alerts us about our tendency to make these kinds of errors.

Extracting intellectual advice from the history of science is seldom so straightforward a matter, but it, too, can provide us with useful data. It does so in part because historical examples are less easily manipulable than purely hypothetical ones. This is not to say that dreamed-up examples cannot instruct. They obviously can, and indeed they are often more convenient, since they are more neat than real life examples. They can be designed to our purposes, with extraneous features deleted. But, of course, this is just the danger as well. It is sometimes all too easy to tailor them to suit our purposes. Actual cases in all of their detail are not so malleable.⁹

Suppose, then, that I have looked at the history of science and at the findings of cognitive science and at various other studies that provide data about human inquiry. So, I now have all this data. How am I to go about using the data to generate some rules of thumb for the conduct of inquiry? Sometimes it will be obvious, since sometimes the data will reveal that I have a tendency to make what I myself readily concede to be errors. But matters will not always be so obvious, and besides, I want positive as well as negative advice. Is there any general advice to be had about this, the process of using the available data to generate intellectual advice?

Those who have been influenced by contemporary moral theory might advise me to employ something akin to the method of wide reflective equilibrium. The rough idea would be that I am to begin with my initial intuitions about what constitute sound methods of inquiry. Then I am to test these intuitions against all the data and all the cases that strike me as relevant – data from cognitive science about characteristic patterns of inference, cases from the history of science, imaginary cases, and anything else that I take to be relevant. Finally, I am to use my best judgment to resolve any conflicts among these intuitions, data, and cases. Sometimes I will judge that my original intuitions are sound. Other times the data or the cases will convince me to alter the original intuitions, and still other times I will be disposed to alter both by a process of give-and-take.¹⁰

The problem with this recommendation is the familiar one. It is not so much mistaken as unhelpful. At best, it is meta-advice. Indeed, it is essentially the same meta-advice that is implicit in the notion of egocentric rationality. It tells me essentially this: take into account all the data that I think to be relevant and then reflect on the data, solving conflicts in the way I judge best. On the other hand, it does not tell me what kinds

of data are relevant, nor does it tell me what is the best way to resolve conflicts among the data. It leaves me to muck about on these questions as best I can.

And muck I must, for this is part of the human intellectual predicament. It is not that there is no useful intellectual advice to be had. There obviously is. It is just that philosophy is not in a particularly privileged position to provide it. The kind of intellectual advice that philosophy has been sometimes thought to be in a privileged position to give-viz., general advice about the most fundamental issues of intellectual inquiry-is precisely the kind of advice that cannot be usefully given. Attempts to provide this kind of advice are inevitably misdirected or not sufficiently fundamental.

On the other hand, philosophy in general and epistemology in particular has no special claim on more modest kinds of advice-e.g., specific advice on local intellectual concerns or general rules of thumb about the conduct of inquiry. The relevant expert is better positioned for the former, while the latter is best produced by reflection upon all of the available data. We can potentially use anything to fashion intellectual rules of thumb, from the findings of cognitive science to studies in the history of science to mnemonic devices and other intellectual tricks, even relatively trivial ones, such as carrying nines, for example.

This is a project to which philosophers can make important and diverse contributions. They can help us to appreciate that there are various ends at which inquiry might be aimed, for example. Some of these ends are epistemic in nature, in that they are concerned with the accuracy and comprehensiveness of our belief systems. Others are more pragmatic. Moreover, there are distinctions to be made even among those ends that are epistemic. Some are synchronic (roughly, getting things as right as we can for the moment), while others are diachronic (roughly, getting things right eventually). Such distinctions can be important when we are trying to provide ourselves with intellectual advice, since certain kinds of recommendations-for example, the recommendation that we prefer the simplest of otherwise equal hypotheses-will seem plausible relative to some of these aims and not so plausible relative to others.

There is much else of relevance that philosophers can tell us. They can tell us what it is to have an explanation of something, or what it is to have a merely verbal disagreement as opposed to a substantive one. They can distinguish different sorts of arguments for us, emphasizing that different criteria are appropriate for evaluating these arguments. More generally, they can act as intellectual gadflies, examining and criticizing the developments in other intellectual disciplines. And of course, they can also try to describe the conditions under which inquiry is conducted rationally, only these conditions will not be of a sort that provides us with much useful intellectual guidance.

There are those who will insist that this will not do. They will insist that one of our most important intellectual projects is that of generating sound intellectual advice and that we need guidance about how to conduct this project. There are better and worse ways of doing so, and it is epistemology's special role to instruct us about this. Nothing else is positioned to do so. Science, for example, cannot do so, since what we need is advice that is prior to inquiry rather than the result of inquiry. It is only epistemology that can provide us with this kind of fundamental guidance.

This is a view that sees epistemology as the arbiter of intellectual procedures. The presupposition is that epistemology can be prior to other inquiries and that as such it is capable of providing us with a non-question-begging rationale for using one set of

intellectual procedures rather than another. Just the reverse is true. Epistemology begins at a late stage of inquiry. It builds on preexisting inquiry and without that inquiry it would be subjectless. One consequence of this is that there is no alternative to using antecedent opinion and methods in thinking about our intellectual procedures. There is no way of doing epistemology *ex nihilo*, and hence it is no more capable of giving us non-question-begging advice about basic issues of intellectual procedure than is anything else.

There is a deeper presupposition that also must be abandoned, the presupposition that it is important for us to have such advice. Descartes and the Enlightenment figures who followed him-Locke, for example- thought that this was important, since they thought that the alternative was intellectual anarchy, and perhaps as a result religious and political anarchy as well. Their assumptions seemed to be that there are countless ways of proceeding intellectually, that we are pretty much free to choose among them as we please, and that there must be a non-question-begging rationale for preferring one of these ways over the others if intellectual chaos is to be avoided. Descartes and Locke saw it as their task, the task of the epistemologist, to provide such rationale.

If this were an accurate description of our intellectual situation, they might have been right. But in fact, this is not our situation. It is not as if we are each given a menu of basic intellectual procedures and that our task is either to find a non-question-begging way of choosing among these procedures or to face intellectual anarchy. Our problem tends to be the opposite one. By the time we reach the point at which it occurs to us that there might be fundamentally different kinds of intellectual procedures, we are largely shaped intellectually. We come to this point equipped not only with a battery of assumptions about the world but also a battery of intellectual skills and habits. All of our intellectual inquiries are grounded in these resources, and the bulk of our intellectual lives must be conducted using them in largely automatic fashion. We have no choice about this. Fundamental rules for the direction of the mind would do us little good even if we had them. We would not have the time or resources to make proper use of them. Insofar as our goal is intellectual improvement, the emphasis is better placed on the development of skills and habits that we think will help make us more reliable inquirers.

The project of building up such skills and habits lacks the drama of the Cartesian project. It is inevitably a piecemeal project. To engage in it, we must draw upon an enormous number of background assumptions, skills, and habits, ones that for the time being we are content to use rather than reform. Questions can still arise about this background. We may realize that had we been born with significantly different cognitive equipment or into a significantly different environment, these assumptions, skills, and habits might have been considerably different. These possibilities are mainly of theoretical interest, however. They are of interest for epistemology. They can be used to discuss skeptical worries, for instance. On the other hand, they normally will not be of much interest insofar as our purpose is epistemic improvement. After all, most of these fundamentally different ways of proceeding will not be real options for us. It is not as if we are radically free to reconstitute ourselves intellectually in any way that we see fit and that we need some guidance about whether to do so or how to do so.

Of course, we are not entirely without options. We cannot alter our fundamental intellectual procedures by a simple act of will, but by making incremental changes over a long enough period of time, we perhaps could train ourselves to use procedures that are very different from those that we currently employ. Perhaps there are even ways of

bringing about the changes more immediately. Drugs might do the trick, for instance. There are those who have recommended peyote or LSD as a way to truth. But even here, insofar as our worry is intellectual chaos, the search need not be for a non-question-begging way of deciding which procedures, our present ones or the drug-induced ones, are the more reliable. It is enough to point out that from our present undrugged perspective, most of us have no reason to think that the drugged perspective is the more reliable one. Quite the contrary, from our current perspective it seems far less reliable. Thus, insofar as our ends are epistemic, we 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. Little in life 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 this cannot be the basis of our intellectual autonomy. It 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 but rather in terms of our own standards. This ability creates a space for intellectual autonomy.

But it is only space. Self-monitoring in terms of our own personal standards does not altogether eliminate the threat of intellectual domination. As Foucault emphasized recently and as Marx had argued earlier, the most effective kind of control is that which is internalized.¹¹ 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 this possibility and thus 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 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. When they do, intellectual autonomy as well as egocentric rationality requires that I conform to my standards rather than the prevailing ones.