Working Without a Net

A Study of
Egocentric Epistemology

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Rational Belief

1. Rationality as a Goal-oriented Notion

Rationality is a goal-oriented notion. At least as a starter, we can say that questions concerning your rationality are questions concerning how effectively you are pursuing your goals. More exactly, this is a starter insofar as the questions are ones concerning a full-blooded notion of rationality. In a weak sense, you are rational simply because you are capable of being rational or irrational in the full-blooded sense. Being rational in the weak sense contrasts with being arational; stones, buildings, and artichokes are arational, whereas you are not. Being rational in the full-blooded sense contrasts with being irrational, and it is this notion of rationality that is goal-oriented.

Any such view invites the question of what makes something a goal. One answer is that your goals are those things that you intrinsically value. This answer manages to be at once too strong and too weak. It is too weak because it implies that anything you intrinsically value is a goal, however feebly you might value it and however trivial it may be. It makes your every passing whim into a goal—a whim for pistachio ice cream, for instance. The answer is too strong because it implies that something might not be a goal even if it is one of the dominating concerns of your life. If you do not intrinsically value the acquisition of wealth, it cannot be one of your goals, no matter how much time and effort you devote to its pursuit.

Suppose we say instead that your goals are those things that you significantly value, or perhaps better, those things that you would significantly value were you to be acquainted with all the relevant facts and were you to deliberate carefully about these facts. This avoids the above difficulties, but it does so at the cost of being vague. Still, a vague but otherwise adequate notion is better than none.

But is it otherwise adequate? An alternative approach is to think of goals not in terms of what is valued but rather in terms of what is valuable, where what is valuable need not be something that you either value or are disposed to value. Some will find this suggestion obvious, noting that it is common for people not to value their true ends, but others will find it unsettling. They will prefer to say of those things that are valuable without being valued by you not that they are among your goals but rather that they should be; valuing such things is part of a
good life. Or they will deny altogether that something can be valuable for you if it is not valued by you.

I will glide over these issues. In what follows, one can pretty much presuppose one's favorite account of goals. I am primarily concerned here not with the theory of goals but rather with the theory of rationality, and my proposal is that it is best to think about judgments of rationality as judgments concerning how effectively individuals or groups are pursuing their goals. This is so regardless of what it is that we are rationally evaluating. Questions of rationality arise about many things—people, groups, beliefs, actions, decisions, strategies, methods, plans, and so on. A desideratum of a theory of rationality is that it provide a uniform way of thinking about all such questions. Rational belief, for example, should not turn out to be a fundamentally different phenomenon from rational action, as if the two shared only a common name. A goal-based approach to rationality, as I will try to show, can satisfy this desideratum. So, there is at least this much to recommend it.

But of course, it has its share of difficulties as well. An especially pressing one is that if questions about your rationality are essentially questions about how effectively you are pursuing your goals, it would seem that we cannot sensibly ask whether your goals are the sorts of things that is rational for you to pursue.

This alone might seem to warrant a fundamentally different approach. Perhaps it would be preferable to take a rules approach, one that makes rationality a matter of following a certain set of rules, rules that are constitutive of the notion of rationality. Or perhaps we could take a virtue-based approach, one that understands rational actions, rational beliefs, rational plans, and so on as being the products of such intellectual virtues as thoroughness, impartiality, judiciousness, and the like.

Both a rules approach and a virtue-based approach can and should leave room for means-end reasoning, just as a goal-based approach can and should leave room for rule-following and virtues. It's a question of what is taken to be fundamental. But by taking rules or virtues as basic, the former two approaches provide us with a way of understanding how it might be irrational for you to pursue your goals. It is irrational if doing so would violate the rules constitutive of rationality or if doing so would be intellectually unvirtuous.

Even so, it is hard to escape the feeling that these approaches will strike us as plausible just to the extent that we are convinced that the proposed rules or the proposed virtues standardly promote our goals. Imagine a case in which this isn't so. Suppose you realize that you almost always are unlikely to achieve your goals if your actions, plans, and beliefs conform with the proposed rules—the rules that are supposed to be constitutive of rationality. Or suppose you realize that you almost always are unlikely to achieve your goals if your actions, plans, and beliefs are products of the proposed virtues. Would such actions, plans, and beliefs nonetheless be rational for you?

Quick remarks such as these are not enough to refute rule-based and virtue-based accounts of rationality, but they are enough to indicate that these accounts have problems of their own and that their superiority cannot be established by equally quick remarks to the effect that goal-based accounts make it impossible to question whether it is rational for you to pursue your goals. The depth of understanding an approach provides is more important than any quick counterargument against other approaches, and in the final analysis it is this that most recommends a goal-based approach over other approaches. It sheds more light on questions of rationality than they do.

Even so, something must be said about the charge that on a goal-based approach, no sense can be made of the idea that you might have goals that are irrational for you to pursue. The first thing to say is that the charge is untrue. There is, for one, the pedestrian point that it can be irrational for you to pursue one or more of your goals if doing so would worsen your chances of satisfying your other goals. Circumstances are typically such that you cannot simultaneously satisfy all of your goals. For lack of time and resources if nothing else, the pursuit of any given goal is likely to preclude the active pursuit of at least some others. Choices have to be made, and if you make these choices badly, you will be pursuing goals that are irrational for you to pursue.

The most obvious cases of this sort occur when your first-level goals come into conflict, but there are also cases in which the potential for irrationality is deeper because the conflict is deeper. Conflicts can arise across levels, for example. You might have meta-goals, goals about what kind of goals it is best for you to have, and these meta-goals might make it irrational for you to pursue some of your first-level goals. They might even make it rational for you to purge yourself of one or more of these goals, assuming that this is possible. For instance, you might have a preference for goals that if followed would generate a balanced, well-rounded life, but some of your first-level goals might encourage just the opposite kind of life. They might even encourage behavior that borders on being obsessive. If so, it may be rational for you to purge yourself of these goals or at least to diminish their importance. Your other goals and your meta-goals may give you a reason to do so.

Moreover, it is not just systemic conflicts among your goals that can make it irrational for you to pursue one or more of them. Some goals may be intrinsically irrational, in the sense that it is irrational for you to pursue them regardless of what your other goals are. This will be the case, for example, if the goal is a recognizably contradictory one, such as being present at your own funeral or belonging to clubs that will not have you as a member. Not every theory of goals will allow these to be among your goals, but if a theory does, it cannot be rational for you to pursue them, since you yourself realize that nothing can possibly satisfy them.

So, a goal-based approach to rationality does leave room for the irrational pursuit of goals. Indeed, there is even room for such irrationality to be pervasive. It would be pervasive if, as Sartre claims, our most fundamental projects typically involve self-contradictory goals, such as that of simultaneously being both wholly an object and wholly a subject.
Nevertheless, there may be an uneasy feeling that any goal-based view of rationality limits too severely our ability to criticize one another’s goals. But insofar as there is this kind of uneasiness, it may arise not so much from a goal-based theory of rationality as from the theory of goals that is being presupposed. Suppose the theory is one that understands your goals in terms of what you value rather than in terms of what is objectively valuable. Such a theory allows you to have goals that seem weird or even perverted to the rest of us; but then, a goal-oriented way of thinking about rationality will imply that it is rational, all else being equal, for you to pursue these weird or perverted goals. If this is thought to be an unacceptable result, it can be avoided by rejecting a theory of goals that allows what is weird or perverted to be among your goals. For a variety of motivations, however, ranging from a healthy respect for diversity in the eyes of some to an unhealthy relativism in the eyes of others, many of us are uncomfortable with placing substantive restrictions upon what can count as a genuine goal. Nevertheless, what we give with one hand we may try to take away with the other. We are tempted instead to quibble with a theory of rationality that allows the pursuit of these goals to be rational.

This temptation arises from a misplaced impulse, but it is an impulse that is common in much of philosophy, to be found in traditions as otherwise dissimilar as the Aristotelian and Kantian ones. It is the impulse to turn every human shortcoming into a failure of rationality. The way to thwart this impulse is to remind ourselves that the charge of irrationality is not the worst, much less the only, criticism we can hurl at one another. We can criticize others as being unimaginative or hypocritical or self-pitying or cowardly or even unintelligent without implying that they are thereby irrational.

This observation may sound trivial when stated in isolation, but an assumption to the contrary does have a hold on many of us. If we cannot say of those who are pursuing weird, perverted, or otherwise unacceptable goals that they are irrational, we have a tendency, especially when doing philosophy, to be puzzled as to what we can say of them by way of criticism. Witness the tradition in ethics that is concerned with proving that egoists must be irrational. The hunt for such a proof is motivated in part by a desire to have a tool for changing the behavior of egoists, as if argument were the best way to alter behavior. This would be merely quixotic were it not for the fact that in the midst of such a hunt, it is easy enough to slide into the idea that the charge of irrationality is the only criticism of egoists worth anything. But insofar as the problem is having something to say by way of criticism of egoists, there is an easy solution. We can say of them that they are pursuing unacceptable goals. Their failures are failures of character or of outlook, failures that result in their caring for the wrong things. They are not necessarily failures of rationality.

Does this demean the role of reason in our lives? Suppose we think of our reason as something like the collection of all those cognitive abilities whose products are subject to rational assessment—the ability to deliberate, evaluate, plan, calculate, form beliefs, and so on. The worry, then, is that goal-based views of rationality tend to eviscerate reason by limiting its scope. Since our goals are subject only to weak kinds of rational assessment—concerning their contradictory nature or their mutual satisfiability, for example—the most fundamental questions of our existence are not the concern of reason. Reason’s role in determining how we are to live our lives is thus a puny one. Its function is simply to find effective means to goals that are given to us independently of reason. As a result, the most fundamental questions of human existence become immune to rational investigation: they are located outside the realm of reason.

There is nothing in a goal-based approach, however, that makes this kind of evisceration of reason inevitable. On the contrary, such an approach leaves plenty of room for rational investigation of the most fundamental questions of our existence, if for no other reason than that questions always arise as to whether something really is a goal or merely appears so. The only way to avoid such questions is to assume that our goals are always utterly transparent to us, but any such view of goals is implausible. Consider, for example, a view that makes our goals simply a function of what we want for its own sake, where it is further assumed that we can unproblematically discover what we want by introspection. Or consider a view that makes our goals a function of our fundamental choices, which are not made with the idea of securing something else that we want but rather are wholly unconstrained; choices made without reason and with complete freedom, and moreover completely transparent to us. On either of these views, reason’s role is severely limited and essentially passive. It does not even play an active role in discovering what our goals are. It simply waits for goals to be given to it from some other source, whether it be human nature or human freedom. Then and only then does reason have a role to play, a role of finding effective means to these goals.

But once these kinds of views are rejected as implausible, nothing prevents the most basic issues of our lives from being the objects of rational inquiry. This is so whether our goals are in some manner given to us or whether we somehow create them in our free choices or whether a combination of the two. If our goals are not simply a matter of our surface wants or choices, if they are instead a matter of, say, our deepest wants and needs (ones that may be a function of the kind of creatures we are or the kind of society in which we live) or our deepest choices (ones that we may have made long ago in a not fully conscious way), and if in addition these needs or choices can change over time (as we mature or as the community in which we find ourselves is altered), then it is no trivial matter to determine what our goals are. We cannot do so simply by looking inward. Nor can we read them off in any easy way from our behavior or our preferences. Rather, discovering our goals is one of our intellectual projects, arguably our most important one, and it is a project that makes use of the entire range of our intellectual faculties.

Moreover, the way we conduct this project is itself open to rational assessment. The goal of the project is to determine what our most fundamental goals are, and questions concerning whether we are conducting the project in a rational
way are questions concerning how effectively we are pursuing this goal. So, given a goal-based view of rationality, this project, like others, is one that can be conducted more or less reasonably.

On the other hand, any goal-based view of rationality does rule out attempts to define goals in terms of what it is rational for us to do or believe. There is an analogy here with realistic views of truth. The realist with respect to truth insists that although reason can help us discover the truth, it cannot be used to define it. Truth is one thing; what it is rational for creatures such as us to believe is another. A goal-oriented approach to rationality requires a similar distinction. Reason can help us discover our goals, and moreover being rational may even be one of our goals, but what makes something a goal cannot itself be defined in terms of rationality.

2. Reasons and Perspectives

A different kind of problem for goal-based approaches concerns the bearing that a decision, action, belief, plan, or whatever must have on your goals if it is to be rational. Consider decisions, for example. It is too stringent to insist that a decision of yours is rational only if it in fact will satisfy your goals. We want to allow the possibility of rational decisions turning out badly. It even seems too stringent to say that the decision is rational only if it is likely to satisfy your goals. After all, it might be that neither you nor anyone else in your position could have been reasonably expected to see that your decision was likely to have unwelcome consequences. Suppose we say, at least as a way of beginning, that your decision is rational provided that it will apparently satisfy your goals. We will then want to know what is to whom this is supposed to be apparent. To you? To the members of your community? To a reasonably knowledgeable observer? The question is what the appropriate perspective is for making judgments of rationality.

This is not the only question that will arise. We will also want to know the extent to which something must apparently satisfy your goals if it is to be rational. Shall we say that your decision is rational only if it seems from the appropriate perspective to satisfy your goals better than any of the alternatives, or might something less than the very best do? Let me make some stipulations. As I use the terms, reasonability admits of degrees whereas rationality does not. Reasonability is a matter of the relative strength of your reasons. The rational consists of that which is sufficiently reasonable. This leaves open the possibility of a number of decisions being rational for you, even though some are more reasonable than others. A decision is rational as long as it apparently does an acceptably good job of satisfying your goals.

What is an acceptably good job? There are many complications here, the most pressing of which is that you have many goals, not all of which are equally important. This makes it natural to treat the rationality of a decision in terms of its estimated desirability, where this is a function of both the apparent effectiveness of the decision in promoting your goals and the relative value of these goals. We are thus driven to the issue of how, if at all, these values are to be measured. For the most part I will take the cowards' path and ignore this issue, since it has received a good deal of attention from others. For the discussion at hand, it will do simply to say that a decision of yours is rational if its estimated desirability is acceptably high given the context, where the context is defined by the relative desirability of your alternatives and their relative accessibility. The fewer alternatives there are with greater estimated desirabilities, the more likely that your decision is rational. Moreover, if these alternatives are only marginally superior or if they are not readily accessible, then it will be all the more likely that your decision is rational. It will be rational because it is good enough, given the context.

Of course, this characterization of rationality is vague, but for purposes here it can be left vague. Indeed, it is probably best left vague for any purpose. In any event, the vagueness need not hinder the discussion of the points in which I am primarily interested, one of the most important of which is to do with the previously posed question of what the appropriate perspective is for making judgments of rationality.

There is no simple answer to this question. Judgments of rationality are judgments about how things look from some perspective, but in making these judgments, we can try to project ourselves into any one of a number of perspectives. Moreover, the same is true of the corresponding judgments that we make about what reasons there are to decide, to do, or to believe something. They too can presuppose various perspectives.

A perspective is essentially a set of beliefs, but it is convenient to identify these beliefs by identifying the individual, real or imaginary, whose beliefs they are. Thus, your perspective is constituted by your beliefs, your reflective perspective is constituted by the beliefs that you would have on reflection, the perspective of a knowledgeable observer is constituted by the beliefs that such an observer would have, and so on. What perspective we adopt in making a judgment of rationality depends upon our interests and the context.

We are sometimes interested in evaluating your decisions from your own ego-centric perspective. Our aim is to assess whether or not you have lived up to your own standards. We try to project ourselves into your perspective, or perhaps the perspective you would have had were you to have been carefully reflective, and we evaluate your decision from it. We then give expression to our evaluations using the term 'rational' or one of its cognates. We are especially prone to project ourselves into your perspective when reconstructing a past decision of yours that from our more informed position we know has turned out badly. It may even be obvious in retrospect why the decision was likely to have turned out as it did. Accordingly, we are perplexed by it. It bewilders us. Dismissing it as irrational does not remove the bewilderment; it merely puts a name on it. Besides, we are inclined to be charitable, assuming that there probably was something in your situation, not immediately apparent to us, that resulted in your missing what now seems so obvious. We try to enter into your situation and see
the decision from your perspective. We bracket to the extent possible any information that is now available to us but that was not then available to you. In addition, we try to identify the method that you thought was appropriate to use in interpreting the available information, a method that we perhaps regard as unreliable but one we nonetheless might grant was natural for you to employ, given your situation. If we discover such a method and if it identifies the decision you made as a satisfactory one, relative to the information available to you, we are likely to think we have shown why this decision was a rational albeit mistaken one for you to make. It was rational by your lights.

Similarly, when we are evaluating the decision of someone from a different culture, perhaps far removed from us in both time and place, it will often seem appropriate to adopt the decision-maker's egocentric perspective. Or short of this, it may seem appropriate to adopt a sociocentric perspective, whereby we evaluate the decision with respect to some standard that is relative to the community of the decision-maker. This perspective can be particularly attractive when the decision-maker belongs to a culture that we judge to be less advanced than our own. The method generally used in the decision-maker's culture may not be the method that we now think is best. Indeed, it might even be that his or her method encountered difficulties that led to the development of ours. Even so, we may think that it is unfair to evaluate the decision in terms of our more sophisticated standards. After all, our method had not yet been developed. However, it is not unfair, we may think, to judge the that person's decision in terms of the ancestor of our method, the one that was standard in his or her community.

In adopting a sociocentric perspective, we are concerned to see the decision not so much through the eyes of the individual as from the point of view of the individual's community. The main question is whether the decision is consistent not so much with the personal standards of the decision-maker but rather with the standards that were "in the air". Once again, we may very well give expression to the results of such an inquiry by using the language of rationality. We may say that decisions that were not in accord with these standards were irrational, even if they were in accord with the decision-maker's personal standards. They were irrational because they failed to meet the standards of excellence embraced by the community.

The simplest versions of such a stance are ones in which we make a generalization about the egocentric perspectives of the individuals who make up the relevant community. We first identify the community, and we then identify what most members of the community would regard as an effective strategy for the decision-maker to use in trying to secure the goal in question. This result then becomes the standard by which we evaluate the decision. In negligence cases, for example, judges instruct juries to decide the issue by employing the standard of what a reasonably prudent individual would have done in the defendant's circumstances. The reasonably prudent person is an abstraction. It is an imaginary individual who embodies the community's standards of behavior and belief, but these standards are not just a matter of statistically normal behavior. They reflect what the community "feels ought ordinarily to be done, and not necessarily what is ordinarily done, although in practice the two would very often come to the same thing." The aim is not for juries to evaluate the defendant's behavior in terms of the defendant's own egocentric standards but to use the views of ordinary members of the community to generate a standard that "eliminates the personal equation and is independent of the idiosyncrasies of the particular person whose conduct is in question".

Evaluations of this sort place great emphasis on the standards of ordinary individuals. For some of our purposes, this emphasis may be too great, especially if there is an institutionalized division of intellectual labor, with it being the responsibility of one group to think carefully about issues of a certain sort and the responsibility of another group to think carefully about other sorts of issues. This division of labor can encourage us to evaluate certain kinds of decisions and beliefs, as well the methods that produced them not from the perspective of ordinary individuals but from the perspective of those who are experts. We take their views, rather than those of ordinary individuals, as providing the best expression of the community's standards of excellence about these matters. The standards of ordinary people may enter into such evaluations but do so only indirectly, by helping determine who the experts are. They then drop out as irrelevant.

Even for such evaluations, however, the issue is one of apparent effectiveness. The concern is with what the experts would regard as the appropriate decision, strategy, or whatever, but of course even the experts can make mistakes. Indeed, like all individuals and groups of individuals, they can make even drastic mistakes. Effectiveness is no more a strict prerequisite of rationality in this sense than it is of rationality in an egocentric sense.

By contrast, effectiveness is a prerequisite of rationality in an objective sense. Nevertheless, even this sense of rationality can be given a perspectival reading. The relevant perspective is that of a knowledgeable observer. A decision of yours is rational in an objective sense only if a knowledgeable observer would take it to be an effective means to your goals. The observer need not be thought of as omniscient. We need not imagine that the observer knows with certainty the consequences of each of the options that are available to you. Rather, we need to imagine "only" that the observer has access to the objective probabilities of the various options yielding various outcomes. Thus, an option is rational for you, at least in the simplest of cases—for example, in which only one of your goals is involved—if the probability that this kind of observer would assign to its bringing about the goal is high enough to make it a satisfactory option.

Our evaluations of decisions that have not yet been made or whose consequences are not yet clear to us are ordinarily best understood in an objective manner. Suppose, for example, that in an upcoming race all the horses are running at the same odds, and we are discussing with our friends the question of which horse they have the best reason to bet on. If we know that all but one of the
horses is less than healthy and that therefore the healthy horse is more likely to
win than any of the others, then regardless of what our friends may believe, we
will be inclined to think that we have what we need to answer the question: our
friends have reason to bet on the healthy horse, since this is most likely to get
them what they want—a winning bet.

Had we been considering one of their past losing bets, we might have been
inclined to proceed differently. There might have been greater pressure to try to
see the betting decision through their eyes, or perhaps through the eyes of the
experts—say, those who are skilled at reading racing forms. But in discussing a
decision that is still up for grabs, this is unlikely to be our tendency. We are
unlikely to be interested in bracketing the information we have or the standards
we think best for interpreting this information. Rather, we try to exploit fully
whatever resources we have in an attempt to assess the objective probabilities of
various options yielding various outcomes. We then give expression to these
assessments using the notion of rationality or one of its cognates. We talk of what
it is rational for our friends to do or what they have reasons to do or what they
ought to do.12

We also make judgments with an objective content: when we are evaluating
our own current decisions. When I say that it is rational for me to do X, I am
ordinarily not saying something about how things look from my own egocentric
perspective. I cannot plausibly be understood to be asserting that from my
perspective, doing X would seem to be an effective way to satisfy my goals. Nor
can I plausibly be understood to be asserting something about how things look
from an sociocentric perspective. I am not asserting, for example, that from the
perspective of an average person in our community, X would seem to be an
effective means to my goals. Rather, I am asserting something concerning the
objective chances of X’s actually satisfying these goals. Of course, whenever I
sincerely assert something, you will be able to make inferences about how things
look from my perspective, but that is irrelevant to the point here, which is about
the content of my assertions.

What is true of my assertions is true a fortiori of my deliberations. When I
am deliberating about what it is rational for me to do or believe, I am not
deliberating about my standards or my community’s standards. I am instead
deliberating—to be sure, from my perspective—about the objectively correct
standards. I am deliberating about what is objectively likely to accomplish my
ends or what is objectively likely to be true. Analogous points hold for first-
person plural deliberations. When we as a group are deliberating about what it is
rational for us to do, we are deliberating about the objective chances of various
options’ bringing about our goals.

First-person but past-tense ascriptions of reasons are a different matter, how-
ever. When discussing our past decisions and beliefs, we often try to project
ourselves into our past egocentric perspective. We try to remember how things
looked to us then. We are especially inclined to do this if the decision or belief
has turned out to be a mistake, since doing so may enable us to present ourselves
in a favorable light. But when it comes to present-tense ascriptions of reasons,
the pressure is reversed.

Initially it might seem odd to regard present-tense, first-person ascriptions of
reasons as objective since it is natural to think of first-person, present-tense
concerns as egocentric. However, the oddity disappears when issues of endorse-
ment are clearly separated from those of content. It is easy to imagine contexts in
which I project myself into your egocentric perspective and agree that from your
perspective you have adequate reasons for X even though I myself do not endorse
these reasons, since I do not think that they are objectively adequate. But this
distinction between reporting reasons and endorsing them tends to collapse in the
first-person. If I judge myself to have reasons for X, I ordinarily cannot withhold
my endorsement. I cannot add the qualification that these reasons are not objec-
tively adequate, that they merely appear so from my perspective. I cannot sensi-
bly do this precisely because the contents of my self-assessments are typically
objective.13

This conclusion points to a limitation of any egocentric or sociocentric ac-
count of rationality. Such accounts are inescapably incomplete. Indeed, their
proponents cannot plausibly understand their current self-ascriptions of reasons
in the way that their own accounts suggest. Ordinarily, only third-person or past-
tense evaluations can be interpreted egocentrically or sociocentrically.

To be sure, there are some exceptions, the most notable ones occurring
during philosophical moments. One way to conceive of epistemology, for exam-
ple, is as an inquiry into our methods of inquiry. We make ourselves and our
methods into an object of study. Within the context of such a study, it can be
natural to make self-ascriptions of reasons that have an egocentric content, or at
least this is what I will argue.14 But for my immediate purposes, I want only to
point out that this is so, granting that it is, because the epistemological inquiry
has led us to look at ourselves from the outside. We are taking the anthropolo-
gist’s stance with respect to ourselves, examining our intellectual projects to the
extent possible as if they were someone else’s. However, this stance cannot be
maintained in nonphilosophical moments. It is not a stance, for example, that
sane people take when they are deliberating whether they have good reasons to
believe that their doctor is competent or their automobile safe. Nor is it the kind
of stance that sane people take when they are constructing a list of reasons for,
say, staying in a marriage or changing jobs. These judgments must be read as
having an objective content.

Nevertheless, this is only to say that egocentric and sociocentric accounts are
inevitably incomplete, not that they are to be dismissed as altogether implaus-
able. In particular, it is only to say that the most charitable interpretation of some
of our judgments of rationality is not the one that these accounts recommend.
However, the same can be said of objective accounts

As I have already suggested, many of our judgments about the rationality of
our own past decisions and beliefs cannot be given a charitable objective inter-
pretation, nor can all the judgments of rationality that we want to make when
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, and, 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 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,\textsuperscript{16} 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\textsuperscript{17}—ordinarily is enough to generate belief.\textsuperscript{18} A belief is a psychological state that by its very nature, in Bernard Williams’s phrase,\textsuperscript{19} “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 . . . ”\textsuperscript{20} 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 ineffectual and hence pointless.\textsuperscript{21}

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
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. There may be times when your belief system will seem to come apart, and some of these may seem to suggest that the belief you are holding is not consistent with the evidence. But this is not necessarily so. The belief you are holding may be consistent with the evidence, but you may adopt it for other reasons.

For example, you may adopt a belief because it is consistent with your values or because it is consistent with your goals. In this way, your belief system will be consistent with the evidence, but it will also be consistent with your values and goals.

The same may be true of your belief system in general. Your belief system may be consistent with the evidence, but it may also be consistent with your values and goals. This is why it is important for you to be aware of your values and goals, and to make sure that your belief system is consistent with them.
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.25

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.26 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.27

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.28 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.
4. Evidence, Belief, and Commitment

If there are good objective reasons to believe the simpler of two hypotheses but these reasons are not evidential ones, then this is yet another way in which evidential and nonevidential reasons for belief can come apart. All things considered, you might have adequate reasons to believe the simplest hypothesis that is empirically adequate, even though you don’t have adequate evidential reasons for thinking that the hypothesis is true. Moreover, cases of this sort may not be particularly unusual. But if they are not unusual, the reassuring idea that your nonevidential reasons for belief ordinarily reinforce your evidential reasons begins to unravel, and it begins to look once again as if your epistemic self might be frequently at odds with your nonepistemic self.

But in fact, we are not forced to this conclusion. We are not forced to it, because we need not grant that when all your goals are taken into account, both intellectual and nonintellectual as well as both short-term and long-term goals, that you really do have adequate reasons to believe the simplest of otherwise equal hypotheses. You need not have adequate reasons, because you need not believe the simplest hypothesis in order to win the benefits of simplicity. Ordinarily, any intellectual or practical benefits of believing simple hypotheses can be won by adopting an attitude that is weaker than belief. They can be won by committing yourself to the truth of the hypothesis. If you are a scientist, for example, you can adopt it as a working hypothesis. You use the hypothesis without actually believing it. You can use it in the design of experiments, the formulation of other hypotheses, and so on.

Admittedly, a policy of commitment may not always be effective. There may be an occasion in which the benefits of simple explanations, like the Pascalian benefits of theism, can be won only with genuine belief. Perhaps only belief would generate the perseverance and optimism necessary to win the benefits. But ordinarily, a sufficiently robust attitude of commitment toward the hypothesis will be as effective as genuine belief.

But if so, your evidential reasons for belief (that is, your reasons insofar as your goal is epistemic) and your total reasons for belief (that is, your reasons insofar as all of your goals are taken into account) do not come apart after all. The distinction between commitment and belief keeps them together. Ordinarily it is rational for you, all things considered, to believe only those hypotheses for which you have adequate evidence, even if believing a simple hypothesis for which you lack adequate evidence would produce significant benefits, for ordinarily, committing yourself to the truth of the hypothesis would also generate these benefits, and it would do so without sacrificing the accuracy of your belief system, that is, without sacrificing your epistemic goal.

Problems of this sort arise for simplicity because it isn’t a mark of truth, or at least so I have been assuming. Similar problems will arise for any proposed condition of rational belief that purports to be objective but cannot be plausibly construed as an evidential criterion, that is, cannot be plausibly construed as a mark of truth. On the one hand, it won’t be possible to provide a plausible rationale for it in terms of a purely epistemic goal, since it is not a mark of truth. On the other hand, with respect to our total constellation of goals, a policy of committing ourselves to the truth of the propositions (hypotheses, theories, and so on) that satisfy the criterion will be preferable to a policy of actually believing these propositions.

For example, consider a criterion that recommends, as objectively desirable, belief in the most fertile of otherwise equal hypotheses; the one that encourages the most research projects of promise. Or consider a criterion that in a more blatant way involves our long-term intellectual interests and pragmatic interests—say, a criterion according to which it is rational for you to believe the hypothesis that most increases your current problem-solving effectiveness. For example, it is at least not obvious that these criteria can be plausibly construed as marks of truth, but if not, they will be subject to the same dilemma to which simplicity is subject. The challenge for the proponents of such criteria is to find some rationale for thinking that the criteria actually are marks of truth.

For purposes here the important point is not so much whether this challenge can be met. Maybe it can. The point is rather that accounts emphasizing simplicity, fertility, problem-solving effectiveness, and the like have no chance of fulfilling the aspirations of their proponents unless there is some rationale for regarding these considerations as marks of truth. The proponents of these accounts want such considerations to have a general applicability to questions of rational belief. There is, they think, something that objectively recommends these considerations to us as reasons for belief. But if so, the considerations must be evidential ones.

This remark isn’t merely a terminological one about the term “evidence.” It is a point about rational belief. If such considerations are going to make it rational for you to believe something, they must be marks of truth. It must be the case that by believing simple theories or fertile theories or ones that increase your problem-solving capacity, you increase the likelihood of having an accurate and comprehensive belief system. It will not do to argue that by believing such theories, you are likely to win various benefits in the future. The case must be made in terms of your present belief system. Otherwise, the criteria will at best identify hypotheses to whose truth it is rational to commit yourself rather than hypotheses that it is rational for you actually to believe.

The corollary, and this returns us to the thesis with which we began, is that ordinarily you have adequate objective reasons to believe only hypotheses for which you have adequate objective evidence. At first glance, it may seem otherwise. It seems as if considerations of simplicity, fertility, problem-solving capacity, and the like provide you with adequate reasons to believe hypotheses for which you lack adequate evidence. But in fact this isn’t so. Either these considerations are marks of truth or they are not. If the former, then they are evidential reasons and there is no conflict; if the latter, then these considerations are best addressed by a policy of commitment rather than belief, and once again there is no conflict.
The cost to this way of thinking about simplicity is significant, however, and will make many philosophers uncomfortable. The cost is irrationality. For if, as I have been assuming, simplicity is not a mark of truth but we nonetheless have a tendency to believe simple hypotheses, we are to that degree irrational. We have neither adequate evidential reasons nor adequate non-evidential reasons for these beliefs. We are thus less rational than we might have hoped.

In itself this isn’t an objection. What we hope for and what is the case are two different things. Still, it is enough to warrant a closer look at the resolution, in hopes of showing that the irrationality here is not as serious as it might initially appear to be. This is precisely what I will be trying to show, but first some preparatory work is needed. A good place to begin is with the notion of commitment.

There are various ways in which you can intellectually commit yourself to the truth of a proposition. You can do so by presupposing it, for example, or by postulating, hypothesizing, or assuming it. Each of these attitudes is distinct from belief, but each is also distinct from merely acting as if the proposition were true. The latter can be entirely a matter of public display. Commitment cannot be: it is a deeper phenomenon, requiring a degree of intellectual engagement that need not be present when you are merely acting as if a claim were true. Commitment requires intellectual resolve, for instance, to think about matters in a certain way.

Nevertheless, committing yourself to the truth of a proposition and merely acting as if it were true have much in common, especially in the ways that they contrast with belief. For example, they are both context-dependent whereas belief is not. When you commit yourself to a proposition, as when you are merely acting as if it were true, you are ordinarily prepared to do so only in a limited range of situations. If you are a scientist, for example, you might commit yourself to the truth of a hypothesis within the confines of your professional life, but if you were asked about the hypothesis in a social setting, you might be reluctant to take its truth for granted. Likewise, in your deliberations about, say, a political problem to which the hypothesis is relevant, you might be reluctant to assume its truth.

Genuine belief is not like this. You don’t believe a hypothesis relative to a context. You either believe it or you don’t. As a result, belief is neither necessary nor sufficient for commitment. Just as you can commit yourself to a hypothesis that you do not really believe, so too you can refuse to commit yourself to a hypothesis that you do believe, since commitment might have unwelcome consequences. Perhaps it would be politically, even intellectually, unwise. Suppose you believe in the truth of a novel hypothesis but recognize that the case to be made for it, while strong, is not yet overwhelming. Then it might be premature for you to commit yourself to it. It might be premature, for instance, to assume it in the design of experiments and the formulation of other hypotheses. Doing so might impede rather promote its acceptance, and as a result impede rather than promote intellectual progress.

There are other parallels between committing yourself to the truth of a proposition and merely acting as if it were true. Consider situations in which you have objective reasons to act as if some proposition were true. Our daily lives are filled with such situations. You may have reasons to act as if the tie that has just been given to you really is your favorite color, despite the fact that you avoid buying ties of that color for yourself. You may have reasons to act as if the fish that has been especially prepared for you really isn’t overcooked, despite its dryness. You may have reasons to act as if your colleague’s presentation really wasn’t overly repetitive, despite the obvious restlessness of the audience. Fear of giving offense may give you an adequate reason to act as if you believed that these propositions were true, but on the other hand it does not give you an adequate reason to believe that they are true.

Even so, you may have a tendency to believe such propositions and not merely a tendency to feign belief. You are touched by the gift, and perhaps this emotion causes you to disregard, at least momentarily, the fact that you have avoided ties of this color in the past. You get caught up in the good spirits of the table, and only later does it occur to you that contrary to your sincere compliments, the fish really wasn’t very good. You want your colleague to do well and this wish prompts you to discount the restlessness of the audience, taking it to be a consequence of the hard, uncomfortable seats rather than an indication of boredom.

In a similar way, considerations of simplicity can play a role in shaping our beliefs, even if they do not provide us with adequate reasons for belief. At the very least, simplicity plays a role in initially filtering hypotheses. Some hypotheses are so complex that we do not take them seriously. We don’t even reflect much about their merits, much less go to the trouble of testing them. It would be too time consuming to do so. Thus, these hypotheses are filtered out. The result is that sufficiently simple hypotheses become candidates for belief while sufficiently complex ones do not.

It is sometimes argued that considerations of simplicity also play a more positive and detailed role in our theorizing. They don’t just eliminate hypotheses they also play a role in determining the particular hypothesis that we end up believing. They might seem to play such a role, for example, in some parts of contemporary physics and some parts of mathematics, and perhaps they play such a role in philosophy as well.32

Even more strongly, it is sometimes asserted that all of us make use of considerations of simplicity in all of our theorizing and that if we did not, we would believe only a fraction of what we do.33 We make use of simplicity, it is said, when we postulate atoms, electrons, and quarks, but also when we try to explain our friend’s rudeness and when we refuse to take seriously the conspiracy theories of the flat earth society. This is perhaps an exaggeration.34 No matter. It is clear that considerations of simplicity do play some significant role in shaping our beliefs, even though, we are now assuming, we don’t have good objective reasons to believe simple hypotheses. At most we have reasons to commit ourselves to their truth.

Nevertheless, this role may be no more worth worrying about than you...
belief about the tie. Believing that the tie really is your favorite color encourages you to act in a way that does not give offense, and even though you lack adequate evidence for this proposition, your believing it need not have widespread detrimental effects. Of course, we can imagine situations in which it would have unwelcome effects; it might somehow prompt you to make a bad decision about some other, more important matter. But this need not be the case, and presumably it often is not.

Similarly for your beliefs in simple hypotheses: even if you do not have adequate evidence for these hypotheses and the benefits that accrue to you from these beliefs could have been secured by committing yourself to the hypotheses instead, none of this may matter much. As long as the beliefs do not adversely affect the rest of your life, as they ordinarily do not, there is no need for great concern.

This compromise will not be enough to satisfy those who think that believing the simplest of otherwise equal hypotheses is positively desirable. For them, it is not enough to point out that having such beliefs is not harmful. There must also be a positive rationale, a rationale for thinking that believing simple hypotheses is preferable to committing ourselves to them.

The problem is that there doesn’t seem to be any such rationale, at least if we continue to assume that simplicity is not a mark of truth. Given this assumption, there is no way to provide the rationale in terms of a purely epistemic goal, and there seems to be no way of doing so in terms of our practical or long-term intellectual goals either. These goals can be won, and at no epistemic cost, by committed ourselves to the truth of simple hypotheses rather than genuinely believing them.

Even so, the point that needs emphasizing here is that the irrationality involved in believing simple hypotheses, if that be what it is, is of a very weak kind. One way to appreciate this point is to make a distinction between the beliefs it is irrational for you to acquire and those it is irrational for you to retain. Even if you did not have adequate reason to acquire a belief, it need not be rational for you to go to the trouble of ridding yourself of it, given that you do have it. This may be the case for belief in a simple hypothesis. If no significant harm is done by your believing rather than merely committing yourself to the hypothesis, it may not be irrational for you to continue believing it, even though you don’t have adequate evidence for it and even though you had no adequate reason to begin believing it either. Going to the trouble of ridding yourself of the belief may not be worth the effort.

Moreover, you may not even have an adequate reason to try to change yourself so that you won’t believe simple hypotheses in the future. After all, doing so may not be easy. If you have an inclination to believe simple hypotheses, then given that simplicity isn’t a mark of truth, you have a disposition to be irrational, that is, a disposition to believe hypotheses that you don’t have adequate reasons to believe. Nevertheless, it might not be rational for you to try to rid yourself of this disposition. Doing so may not be worth the trouble, especially if the disposition is a deep-seated one.

An even stronger and more interesting result may be possible. The set of cognitive dispositions that is best for you, given the kind of creature that you are, may include a disposition to believe rather than merely commit yourself to simple hypotheses. All other sets, or at least those that are real possibilities for you, might be worse. They might be worse even though this set inclines you to acquire one kind of belief that you lack adequate reasons for acquiring—belief in simple hypotheses. Even so, all the other sets might have more serious drawbacks that would make your overall situation worse. Perhaps they would result in your spending more time deliberating over whether to believe or merely commit yourself to the truth of various hypotheses, thereby decreasing the extent of time you have to devote to other more important matters. If so, it may be rational for you to keep the set of dispositions that you now have, despite the fact that these dispositions tend to produce some irrational beliefs. In other words, it may be rational for you to be irrational in this way.

None of these points, not even the last one, implies that it is rational for you to believe, as opposed to commit yourself to, the simplest of otherwise equal hypotheses. On the contrary, they all acknowledge that it is not rational for you to do so. However, they do take much of the sting out of this kind of irrationality. They suggest that it can be rational for you to put up with this kind of irrationality in yourself. It might even be rational for you to encourage it, since the best overall set of cognitive dispositions for you would include the disposition to believe simple hypotheses.

Points of this sort are enormously important for our everyday assessments of beliefs. For the moment, however, these quick remarks will have to do, since pursuing them would blur the main point at issue, which is that neither a crude evidentialism nor a crude pragmatism with respect to our reasons for belief will do. The evidentialist is right to insist that ordinarily it is deeply irrational to undertake a project of worsening our epistemic situation in hopes of securing a belief that will generate pragmatic or long-term intellectual benefits. On the other hand, the pragmatist is right in refusing to dismiss such benefits as altogether irrelevant to questions of rational belief. The correct position is one between evidentialism and pragmatism: pragmatic and long-term intellectual benefits are relevant to questions of rational belief, but in general these benefits are best won by believing that for which we have adequate evidence.

5. Evidence and Reasons for Belief

It is natural to think that evidential and epistemic reasons for belief go hand in hand. When you have one, you have the other. Having adequate evidence for the truth of a proposition always gives you an adequate epistemic reason to believe it, insofar as one of your ends is to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs. Correspondingly, if you lack adequate evidence for the truth of a proposition, you do not have an adequate reason to believe it insomuch as your ends are epistemic.

This is an attractive idea, but unfortunately it isn’t quite right. Belief in accordance with the evidence can itself affect the evidence, and when it does,
evidence and epistemic reasons for belief can come apart. This can happen whether evidence is construed objectively, sociocentrically, or egocentrically. For convenience, I will ignore the sociocentric case and discuss the other two together.

Suppose you know that you will get your degree if you pass the final exam. You currently neither believe nor disbelieve that you will get the degree, but you do nonetheless have adequate evidence that you will pass the exam. You know that you have studied hard and that there is relatively little that you do not understand, and moreover you would concede, at least if you took the time to think about it, that this makes it likely that you will pass and thus get your degree.

So far there is nothing particularly unusual about the case. It’s just another case in which you fail to believe a proposition for which you have good evidence. But now, add this wrinkle. In an attempt to teach you humility, your examiners will alter the exam, making it much more difficult, if you come to believe that you will get your degree. Indeed, they will make the exam so difficult that you are unlikely to pass. Moreover, the examiners are able to anticipate your belief, and thus they can ensure that if you come to believe that you will get your degree, the onslaught of belief and the alteration of the exam will be simultaneous. Finally, suppose you know all of this. You know that the examiners are prepared to act in this way.

Then you are in a bind. You cannot believe that for which you have good evidence without undermining that evidence and thereby making your belief irrational. But notice, the problem is not with your evidence. By hypothesis, the evidence that you will get your degree is perfectly adequate and you realize this. Nor is the problem like those encountered in the familiar paradoxes of belief. The proposition that you believe P and P is false is a proposition that can be true, but there is a legitimate question as to whether you could genuinely believe it to be true. By contrast, there isn’t any question of your being able to believe the proposition that you will get your degree. The problem lies elsewhere. It lies in the fact that belief in accordance with your evidence would destroy that evidence.

Insofar as your goal is epistemic, what attitude is it rational for you to take toward the proposition that you will get your degree? Is it rational for you to believe or disbelieve or withhold judgment on this proposition?

It’s hard to say. None of these options is epistemically desirable. If you disbelieve the proposition—that is, if you believe that you won’t get the degree—you would then be believing what you realize is unlikely to be true. But you won’t do any better by believing that you will get the degree. You realize that if you were to believe this, the exam would be altered, thus making it unlikely that you will get the degree. So once again, you would be believing something that you realize is unlikely to be true. The remaining option is to withhold judgment on the proposition that you will get the degree, but this option too is undesirable, since you would then be withholding judgment on a proposition that you realize is likely to be true.

Thus, insofar as your goal is epistemic, you really are in a bind. There isn’t much to choose among the three options. Appealing to other goals may help some. In particular, you have pragmatic reasons not to believe that you will get the degree, since this belief is likely to have undesirable consequences. It is likely to result in your not getting the degree. So, this would seem to favor no believing over believing.

Still, the main point here has nothing to do with nonepistemic reasons for belief. The point is that believing you will get the degree would be epistemically undesirable, despite the fact that you have adequate evidence for the truth of this proposition. It would be a belief that is unlikely to be true, given what your evidence would be.

This is an important point for epistemology. It illustrates that evidence for the truth of a proposition, whether it be objective or egocentric, need not invariably generate a corresponding reason to believe the proposition, because belief in accordance with the evidence might itself eliminate the evidence.

The reverse is also possible. Belief against the evidence can itself create evidence, as is the case with self-fulfilling prophecies. Consider another exam case. Suppose you don’t have strong evidence for thinking that you will pass the exam. The evidence indicates that your current chances of passing are about the same as your chances of failing. However, you know if you were to believe that you will pass, this would increase your confidence, and you also know that if you were confident, you would do much better on the exam. Indeed, you would do well enough to pass.

Here again, evidence and reasons for belief come apart, only from the other direction. You currently lack adequate evidence for the proposition that you will pass but you nonetheless have a reason to believe it, and not just a pragmatic reason. Believing this proposition is defensible insofar as your goal is to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs. You yourself realize that in believing that you will pass, you would be believing a proposition that is likely to be true.

On the other hand, it is also epistemically desirable to withhold judgment on the proposition that you will pass the exam. After all, you realize that your current chances of passing are only about 50-50, and you realize also that if you withhold judgment on whether you will pass, these chances won’t be altered.

So, with respect to the epistemic goal alone, there is nothing to choose between withholding belief and believing. If you were to believe, then believing would be the best option. But equally, if you were to withhold belief, this also would be the best option.

Is there something to choose between these two options if we take into consideration other kinds of goals? Perhaps, but even here there are considerations on both sides. Since passing the exam is important to you and since believing that you will pass will help you pass, you have practical reasons to acquire this belief, all else being equal. But all else need not be equal. By hypothesis, you realize that you are likely to pass the exam if you come to believe that you will, but this realization need not be enough in itself to prompt belief, especially since you are convinced that your current chances of passing...
are only 50–50. Thus, if you are to acquire the belief, you may have to plot
against yourself in a Pascalian manner so as to get yourself into a position where
you can believe. This maneuver may have significant costs, and if the costs are
great enough, they will outweigh the benefits of belief, making it irrational, all
things considered, to engage in such plottings.

In any event, this discussion is a side issue. The most important point for
epistemology is that this and the previous case illustrate that evidence and episte-
tic reasons for belief do not invariably go hand in hand. They can come apart.
Since belief itself can create evidence, you can have an adequate epistemic reason
to believe a proposition for which you lack sufficient evidence, and since
belief itself can destroy evidence, you can lack an adequate epistemic reason to
believe a proposition for which you do have sufficient evidence.

There is nonetheless a general, albeit more complicated, way in which evi-
dence and epistemic reasons for belief are linked. They are subjunctively linked.
Having sufficient evidence for a proposition gives you an adequate epistemic rea-
son to believe it, unless believing the proposition would itself undermine the
evidence. Correspondingly, if you don’t have sufficient evidence for a proposi-
tion, then you don’t have an adequate epistemic reason to believe it, unless
believing it would itself create adequate evidence for the proposition.40

6. An Evaluation Procedure for Epistemology

The procedure I used to discuss evidential and nonevidential reasons for belief
contains the beginnings of an evaluation procedure for epistemology. It is a
procedure that can be used whenever we wish to assess an account of rational
belief. It tells us, first, how to identify the subject matter of the proposed account
and, second, how to assess the account given its subject matter. Moreover, the
procedure flows naturally out of what I have urged is the best way to think about
claims of rationality.

Claims of rationality, I have said, are to be understood in terms of a goal (or a
set of goals) and a perspective. Every claim makes a proposal concerning how
effectively an individual’s or group’s actions, beliefs, strategies, or whatever
come from the presupposed perspective to satisfy the presupposed goal. How-
ever, the perspective and goal can vary with the context and our purposes.

It is not surprising that this same variety is to be found in philosophical
accounts that propose criteria for rational belief, rational action, or whatever.
They too typically do not wear their subject matter on their sleeves. The way to
make their contents explicit is analogous to the way in which the contents of
particular claims of rationality are made explicit. It is done by identifying the
perspectives and goals that they implicitly adopt. For example, if it is an account
of rational belief that is in question, the way to make its subject matter trans-
parent is to identify an important goal and important perspective such that beliefs
fulfilling the criteria of rational belief laid down by the account seem from that
perspective to be an effective way of satisfying that goal. If we find such a per-
spective and goal, we have a charitable interpretation of the proposed account.

This procedure also makes it easy to see how we can ridicule an account. We
can do so by uncharitably interpreting its subject matter. Suppose an account
implies that a belief is rational if it has characteristic X. If we so wish, we can
display the account in an unflattering light by evaluating it in terms of a perspec-
tive P and goal G, such that from P having beliefs with X does not seem to be a
particularly effective way of satisfying G.

Ridicule of this sort is a thriving industry in epistemology. Consider, for
example, the debate between externalists and internalists. The former propose
conditions of rational belief that need not be introspectively accessible to individ-
ual believers (for example, reliability conditions), and the latter tend to favor
conditions that are easily accessible. Correspondingly, internalists adopt
subjective-leaning perspectives in order to criticize the criteria of their externalist
rivals; externalists return the favor by adopting objective-leaning perspectives in
order to criticize the criteria proposed by internalists. In short, each side adopts a
perspective that is guaranteed to make the least sense of the criteria of rational
belief proposed by the other side and then triumphantly concludes that the criteria
look implausible from its adopted perspective.41

Of course, none of this is made explicit. It is done under the guise of
intuitions. Each side describes a number of cases and then bases its criticisms of the
other side upon intuitions about what it is rational for someone to believe in
these cases. Appeals to intuitions do have a place in epistemology, but the
intuitions that are appealed to in these controversies are unhelpful, since episte-
mosiologists can, and do, tailor their cases to generate the intuitions they want.

Internalists can generate intuitions that make it seem as if what is rational
for us to believe is a matter of how things look from our own perspective. One
way of doing so is to describe situations that we would not be able to distinguish
from our current situation but in which, it is stipulated, the procedures that we
now take to be reliable are unreliable, and vice versa. For example, the situation
might be one in which ordinary perception is not reliable and the reading of tea
leaves is, but where we have no indication of this whatsoever. internalists can
further encourage the intuitions they want by dropping clues as to what kind of
perspective they want us to adopt in thinking about this situation. For instance,
they might ask whether in such a situation we wouldn’t be entitled to rely upon
our senses in just the way that we ordinarily do. Wouldn’t this still be a responsi-
ble way for us to proceed? And wouldn’t it be irresponsible for us to resort to
reading tea leaves, even if, unbeknownst to us, this procedure turns out to be
reliable?

Externalists can play the same game. They can encourage intuitions that
make it seem as if what it is rational for us to believe is a matter of the objectively
correct standards. One way of doing so, for example, is to focus upon situations
where the issue is which of two methods is rational for a contemporary of ours
to use, where we knew full well that one of these methods is reliable and the
other is not. And, externalists, like their internalist opponents, can further encour-
age the intuitions they want by providing us with clues about the perspective they
want us to adopt. They will avoid asking, “Which method would it be responsible for this person to use?” and will instead ask a question such as “Which method would put the person in a position to have knowledge?” A question of the latter sort has the effect of shaping our intuitions about what is rational for the person to believe, especially if it is assumed, as it commonly is in the literature, that knowledge is something close to rational true belief.

The intuitions that are elicited by such means cannot be of much value in settling the dispute between internalists and externalists. They cannot help because the intuitions themselves are shaped by the perspective that we implicitly adopt and because, depending upon the context and the clues we are given, it is sometimes natural for us to adopt one perspective, sometimes another. To have a convincing argument that externalism is the right approach and internalism the wrong one, or vice versa, we would need independent considerations—that is, considerations independent of our intuitions about concrete cases—to defend some perspective as the privileged one for making claims of rationality. But there are no such considerations, and no privileged perspective for making claims of rationality.42

In assessing a proposed account of rational belief, the only alternative is to be charitable. The search should be for the perspective that makes the most sense of the account’s recommendations. There are limits, of course. The interpretation of an account should be in terms of an important perspective and, moreover, an important goal as well. This restriction is needed because for any proposed criteria of rational belief, it will be possible to find some bizarre perspective and some bizarre goal such that beliefs that satisfy the criteria will seem from that perspective to be an effective means to that goal. For example, if the criteria imply that beliefs with characteristics C are rational, the goal might be that of having beliefs that would have pleased de Gaulle and the perspective that of an individual, say, Smith, who thinks that beliefs with C would have pleased de Gaulle. If the only interpretation of an account is one that adopts a perspective and goal that are in this peculiar, the account can be dismissed, but not so much because it is straightforwardly false. There is, after all, an interpretation of the account, one that makes sense of the recommended criteria. Rather, it can be dismissed because it will be what in philosophy is worse than false: it will be uninteresting—both because the goal is one that few if any of us have, de Gaulle himself perhaps having been the exception, and because the perspective is one that we don’t think is an enlightening one from which to make evaluations of an individual’s beliefs. Smith himself perhaps being the exception.

What we want is an interpretation in terms of goals and a perspective that can be interestingly generalized. The goals must be important for us all, or at least almost all of us. Moreover, they must not be gerrymandered. By this I mean that we cannot arbitrarily ignore certain kinds of goals in order to get the results we want. It is easy enough to see why we might be interested in evaluating an individual’s beliefs with respect to a purely epistemic goal, and it is also easy to see why we might be interested in evaluations with respect to the total constellation of the individual’s goals. But if something more than an epistemic goal and something less than the total set of goals are taken into account, there must be a point to this restriction, namely, something that we find particularly useful or interesting about evaluating the individual’s beliefs with respect to how effectively they seem to satisfy this restricted set of goals.

Similarly, the perspective must be the kind from which it is interesting to make evaluations. Two dangers are especially to be avoided. One is that of adopting a perspective that is so powerful as to be irrelevant to questions of human rationality. This is the danger of overidealization, and I will discuss it in some detail later.43

The other principal danger is that of adopting a perspective that is so specific that we would not be interested in using it to evaluate the beliefs of very many people. This is the danger of idiosyncrasy, and it is primarily a danger for egocentric and socioecentric interpretations. For example, suppose an account of rational belief implies that our beliefs are rational just if they satisfy condition C, and suppose some random individual Smith, but almost no one else, thinks that beliefs with C are likely to be true. Then we can give an interpretation of the account in terms of an epistemic goal and the perspective of Smith. But unless there is reason to think that Smith is in a privileged position to determine what is likely to satisfy the epistemic goal, this interpretation won’t be interesting. We are not apt to be interested in using the perspective of Smith to evaluate the beliefs of anyone other than Smith himself. What would be the point?

So, if an egocentric or socioecentric account is to be interesting, it must somehow ensure that its proposed criteria have a general applicability. One way in which this can be done is by making the criteria formal rather than substantive. The criteria can leave open the possibility that the substantive standards that our beliefs must meet if they are to be rational vary from person to person or from community to community. However, the criteria will provide instructions for identifying the relevant standards for each person. They can do so, for example, by explicitly making reference to the perspective that is to be adopted in evaluating an individual’s beliefs. Consider an account according to which it is rational for individuals to believe propositions that they themselves would think defensible, if they were to be adequately reflective and their only goal was to have comprehensive and accurate beliefs.44 Or consider an account according to which it is rational for individuals to believe whatever their communities would let them get away with believing.45 Or consider an account according to which individuals’ beliefs are to be measured against the standards of those who are the experts in their communities.46 Each of these is an egocentric or socioecentric account, but each is also generalizable in a nonsyncretic way, precisely because each proposes formal rather than substantive criteria of rational belief. Each gives us a recipe for identifying the perspective that we are to adopt in assessing the rationality of an individual’s beliefs.

By explicitly making reference to the perspective we are to adopt, these accounts go a long way toward providing their own interpretation.47 But for
other accounts, the interpretations won't be so transparent. We will need to search for an important perspective and an important goal (or set of goals) that make sense of the proposed criteria. Actually, the task is a bit more complicated than this. We also need to identify what the account takes to be the relevant resources of the individual whose beliefs are being evaluated. A claim about the rationality of your beliefs, when made fully explicit, has the following form: It is rational for you to believe ___ because you have resources R and because from perspective P it seems that, given R, believing ___ is an effective way to satisfy goal G.

For example, on some reliabilist accounts your resources are perhaps best understood as the collection of those cognitive processes and methods that are available to you for use. The proposal, as least roughly, is that it is rational for you believe ___ if method M would cause you to believe ___ and if a knowledgeable observer (that is, one who knows the objective probabilities) would regard M as the best available method for you to use insofar as your goals are epistemic. 48 On some foundationalist accounts, by contrast, your resources are perhaps best understood as the collection of your current psychological states—all your beliefs, experiences, thoughts, memories, and so on. The concern, in other words, is to ask whether some from perspective P it seems that believing ___ is an effective way for you to satisfy an epistemic goal G, relative to the information contained in your total psychological state. 49 On still other accounts, your resources are perhaps best construed as being more limited, consisting perhaps only of your beliefs or your degrees of belief. So, if it is possible for you to have experiences that are not represented in any way in your beliefs, they will not be part of your current resources, even if they could easily could make so, say, by drawing your attention to them. 50

Whatever these resources are, they, like the perspective and the goal, must be important ones, and in particular, we must in fact be apt to have them. Otherwise, the interpretation will be of no help in understanding the evaluations in which we are most interested, namely, evaluations of our fellow human beings.

There is room for flexibility in providing an interpretation. There are three elements with which to work: a goal, a perspective, and a set of resources. Different combinations of these three elements can be said to constitute different points of view, and more than one point of view may be capable of generating an interpretation of an account. This presents no difficulty, however. One of these points of view is likely to seem less strained than the others, and even if this isn't the case, it will be an interesting property of the account that more than one point of view can make sense of its recommendations. A problem arises only when there is not even one plausible interpretation of the account.

There is an additional desideratum. We should try to avoid an interpretation that itself makes use of the notion of rational belief or any of its cognates. 51 Suppose an account implies that a belief is rational just in case it has characteristic X. Then it will not do to interpret the account as saying that from the perspective of someone who is rational it seems that having beliefs with charac-

teristic X is an effective way for individuals with resources R to satisfy some goal G. The problem with such an interpretation is obvious. It leaves us with the task of providing an interpretation for the notion of rational belief that it itself employs. What we want is an interpretation that allows us to escape from the circle of notions having to do with rationality, reasons, and the like. 52

This evaluation procedure encourages tolerance. It provides a framework within which a variety of epistemic projects can be seen to have their proper places. At the same time, it provides us with a critical tool, since the framework helps display the limits of tolerance. To illustrate how, consider again accounts that recommend inferences to the simplest adequate explanation. The evaluation procedure tells us to search for a perspective, a goal, and a set of resources such that from this perspective, believing the simplest of otherwise equal hypotheses would seem to be an effective means for individuals with these resources to satisfy this goal. For the sake of the illustration, it won't matter much how we construe the believer's resources. Let me simply stipulate that they are roughly a matter of the individual's current psychological states, plus the cognitive processes that are available to the individual for processing these states.

Suppose that simplicity can be plausibly regarded as a mark of truth. Then these accounts can be construed as accounts of objective evidence. They can be interpreted in terms of the purely epistemic goal and an objective perspective. On the other hand, if simplicity is not a mark of truth, we will need to look for some other interpretation. Suppose we try interpreting the account in terms of an objective perspective and the individual's total constellation of goals (or at least a range of goals wider than just the purely epistemic goal). Then we will have to find some way of avoiding the objection that committing oneself to the truth of simple hypotheses would also achieve these goals but would do so without sacrificing the epistemic goal.

Perhaps, then, we should look for a nonobjective interpretation. The major drawback, however, is that no such interpretation will satisfy the proponents of simplicity. They do not want merely to claim that from some ego-centric or sociocentric perspective there appears to be something to recommend simple hypotheses. They want to claim that a policy of believing simple hypotheses really is a satisfactory means to some important goal. 53

Even so, a plausible nonobjective interpretation will be better than none. However, there are problems even in providing this kind of interpretation. For convenience, I will discuss only interpretations that presuppose the perspectives of individual believers, but analogous problems would arise for sociocentric interpretations.

The simplicity of a hypothesis, we are assuming, is a matter of the number of entities it posits, the number of kinds of entities it posits, the number of fundamental laws it requires, the number of variables related in these laws, and other like considerations. But presumably at least some of us do not think, and moreover would not think even if we were deeply reflective, that simplicity in this sense is a mark of truth. Besides, presumably at least some of us also would
not think that believing the simplest of otherwise equal hypotheses is, all things considered, a satisfactory means to any other important goal. Some of us, for example, may think that committing ourselves to such hypotheses is preferable to believing them, and still others of us may have no opinion on the issue. But if so, there is no interesting, that is, no generalizable, ego-centric interpretation of these accounts—in other words, no interpretation that gives us all a reason to believe simple hypotheses. So, if there are no objective reasons to do so either, the most that can be said in favor of believing the simplest adequate explanation is that some misguided individuals have ego-centric reasons to have such beliefs. This conclusion is neither very surprising nor very interesting.

Moreover, it does not help to assert that we all make constant use of considerations of simplicity in acquiring beliefs. I have suggested that this assertion is perhaps an exaggeration, but even if it isn’t, this won’t be enough to show that it is rational in some interesting sense for all of us to make use of simplicity. It doesn’t even show that it is rational in an ego-centric sense for all of us to do so, for according to the above assumption, at least some of us do not think, and would not think even on deep reflection, that believing the simplest of otherwise equal hypotheses is a satisfactory means to an important goal. Hence, at least some of us don’t even have good ego-centric reasons to have such beliefs. This puts us into an awkward position, given the assumption that we do make constant use of simplicity. It means that we are with some regularity irrational, and not just objectively irrational but also ego-centrically irrational. We do not live up even to our own standards. Sometimes, however, the truth is awkward.

The conclusion, then, is that there is not obviously any promising interpretation of accounts that recommend belief in the simplest of otherwise equal hypotheses. There are three main possibilities, but one seems particularly likely. First, we could try to interpret the accounts in terms of a purely epistemic goal and an objective perspective, in which case we need to find some rationale for regarding simplicity as a mark of truth. Alternatively, we can try to argue that believing simple hypotheses effectively promotes our overall constellation of goals (or at least a wide variety of our goals), in which case we need to find some way of dealing with the objection that committing ourselves to the truth of such hypotheses often seems preferable to believing them. Or finally, we could try to provide an interesting nonobjective interpretation, in which case we need to be able to assert that a policy of believing simple hypotheses is universally (or close to universally) regarded as desirable.

Thus, the proponents of simplicity would seem to be in a bind. However, I have already suggested that the bind may be less severe than it initially appears. In particular, there may be a way, albeit indirectly, of capturing the importance of simplicity in our intellectual lives without being forced to defend the idea that simplicity is a mark of truth or that it is universally regarded as desirable. And we need not reject the distinction between commitment and belief.54

For the moment, however, my aim is not to take a stand on this bind but merely to display it with the help of the above evaluation procedure. The procedure provides a framework within which a discussion of any proposed account of rational belief can take place. The first step is to look for a perspective, a set of goals, and a set of resources such that from this perspective, having beliefs that meet the criteria recommended by the account seems to be an effective way for individuals with these resources to satisfy these goals.55 The next step is to compare this interpretation of the account with the aspirations of its proponents, as reported in their remarks about how they themselves want the account to be construed. If the two are at odds, there is an incoherence between the most natural interpretation of the account and the interpretation upon which its proponents insist. The final step is to ask whether the most natural interpretation, albeit perhaps at odds with the purposes of its proponents, is nonetheless an interesting one, where its interest is a function of the importance of the goals, perspective, and resources that provide the interpretation. If they are important, then the proponents of the account will have succeeded in doing something interesting even if they haven’t succeeded in doing what they thought they were doing. On the other hand, if they are not important, there will be nothing to recommend the account. The most natural interpretation of it is incoherent with the aims of its proponents, and moreover there is nothing in the interpretation that makes the account independently interesting.

Why the talk of incoherence here? It is not unusual for the accomplishments of epistemologists to fall short of their aspirations. When this happens, why not simply say that these epistemologists have made a mistake, that they have taken something to be a condition of rationality that in fact is not?

With questions of rationality, things are rarely this straightforward. If judgments of rationality are essentially judgments concerning how effectively an individual seems from some perspective to be satisfying his or her goals, if there is no privileged perspective for making these judgments, and if, finally, either some or all of an individual’s goals can be taken into account in making such judgments, it will be rare for a proposed account of rationality to be mistaken in any simple-minded way. There will be some perspective and some goal that make sense of the account’s recommended criteria. But if so, the crucial questions to ask of the proposed account will not concern its truth or falsity; rather they will concern the importance of the point of view that provides the most plausible interpretation of it, and they will concern whether this interpretation is at odds with the aspirations of the account’s proponents. There will be a shift away from talk of the account’s truth or falsity and toward talk of its importance and coherence.

7. Further Illustrations of the Procedure

The evaluation procedure tells us how to interpret an account of rational belief charitably. We are to seek the point of view that makes the most sense of the criteria that the account proposes. But frequently this interpretation will be at odds with the one that the proponents of the account endorse.

Consider the view of Descartes. According to him, it is rational for you to...
believe a proposition only if it is impossible for you to doubt its truth if you think carefully enough about it. Descartes asserted that much of what you believe meets this criterion. For example, it is impossible for you to doubt your own existence and impossible as well for you to doubt the truth of your beliefs about your current, conscious mental states. He went on to state, more notoriously, that if you reflect carefully enough, you will find it impossible to doubt the existence of God and, as a result, the truth of many of your other beliefs as well.

It is now a commonplace that, contrary to what Descartes suggested, relatively few of our beliefs are impossible to doubt, and hence, given his criterion, relatively few are rational. I will return to this problem shortly, but for the moment I want to concentrate instead on a problem of interpretation. The problem arises because the most natural interpretation of Descarte's criterion is at odds with the way that he himself apparently thought of it. He seemed to think that his criterion guarantees the acquisition of only true beliefs. In so doing it also guarantees that fully rational people will not disagree, at least when they have similar evidence. However, the criterion is not most charitably interpreted in this thoroughly objective fashion. After all, we might be psychologically constituted in such a way that we find it impossible to doubt the truth of propositions that are in fact false. But if so, there is no non-question-begging guarantee that what we cannot doubt is true. Likewise, there is no guarantee that you and I cannot be rational and have similar evidence and yet still disagree, since you may be psychologically able to doubt what I cannot doubt, or vice versa.

This suggests that the most charitable interpretation of Descartes's criterion is not the one upon which he seems to insist but, rather, one that is more egocentric. In particular, his criterion is most naturally interpreted as presupposing the point of view of what individual believers on careful reflection, using all their resources of thought, imagination, and the like, would take to be an effective strategy to attain the goal of their now having a belief system that is as comprehensive as it can be without encountering any risk of error. Thus, what it is rational for me to believe is a matter of what I would take to be an effective strategy to reach the goal, what it is rational for you to believe is a matter of what you would take to be an effective strategy, and so on. This is a natural interpretation of Descartes's criterion because from each of our individual perspectives on reflection, the beliefs that we should have insofar as we are interested in having a comprehensive yet risk-free belief system are just those that we cannot imagine being false.

The goal appealed to in this interpretation is extremely demanding. The goal is not to balance the comprehensiveness of a belief system against its riskiness. Rather, the avoidance of risk operates as an absolute constraint. There must be no risk of error whatsoever, regardless of the benefits in increased comprehensiveness that might result from incurring some risks. Indeed, this is such a demanding goal that it would not seem to be of much interest. The problem isn't that we would not value an altogether risk-free belief system. We obviously would. The problem, rather, is that this isn't a realistic goal for us, given the kind of creatures we are. As a result, it is not all that interesting to evaluate our beliefs in terms of how effectively they satisfy this goal.

An analogous suspicion will arise about any account of rationality according to which there is little if anything that we can rationally do or believe. The suspicion will be that the account is presupposing an unrealistic point of view. When we are evaluating one another's actions, beliefs, and strategies, we are ordinarily interested in points of view that provide us with a realistic chance of being able to sort them in terms of their desirabilities. We recognize that people sometimes find themselves in situations in which all of their options are equally ineffective at promoting their goals. On the other hand, we normally won't be interested in a point of view that makes all options equally ineffective as a matter of course.

Yet, this is precisely what some epistemologies do. They adopt points of view that preclude or at least minimize any sorting of beliefs. All of our beliefs, or at least almost all of them, are ones from the presupposed perspective don't seem to satisfy the presupposed goal. Descartes's epistemology, with its insistence that you believe only what you cannot doubt on reflection, is but one example of this. The most natural interpretation of his criterion is in terms of the goal of having a belief system that is as comprehensive as it can be, subject to the constraint that it be utterly risk-free. But even from your own egocentric perspective, it will seem that insofar as you have such a goal, you ought to have few if any of the beliefs that you in fact have. As a result, all or at least almost all of your beliefs will seem lacking from this point of view. Indeed, we can be pretty well assured in advance that this will be the case for all of your beliefs other than a few trivial cases. Thus, there won't be any significant sorting of your beliefs, and just because of this, the criterion threatens to become uninteresting.

This threat may not arise for every position with skeptical overtones, but it will arise for those that try to achieve their skeptical aims simply by stipulating that your beliefs must meet impossibly demanding standards if they are to be rational. Any such position will face a threat analogous to the one faced by Descartes. The threat is not so much that it can be proven false as that it can be proven boring. Indeed, it is likely to be every bit as boring as an account whose criteria imply that your beliefs, whatever they may be, cannot help but be rational. For either kind of account, there is likely to be some point of view that is capable of making sense of the recommended criteria. So, it is not as if either account is straightforwardly false. The problem, rather, is that the points of view capable of making sense of their recommendations will be ones that we are interested in using to evaluate one another's beliefs.

Accordingly, the above interpretation of Descartes's criterion, with its emphasis on the egocentric perspectives of individual believers, does not solve the problems for Descartes's account. But unlike his own interpretation, it at least has the virtue of satisfying his proposed criterion of rationality. Hence, charity dictates that it be preferred over the official interpretation, the objective one that Descartes himself usually seems to favor. The cost of this charity, however, is
incoherence, an incoherence between Descartes's own interpretation of his project and the most plausible interpretation of it. 61

It is not hard to explain how this incoherence arises. It is a direct consequence of Descartes’s attempt to collapse into one another two perspectives that cannot be collapsed, the reflective egocentric perspectives of individual believers and an objective one. The method of doubt is supposed to allow the two to be collapsed, the idea being that there is introspectively available to every normal adult a method of belief acquisition, namely, the method of believing only that which is impossible to doubt, that is guaranteed to generate only true beliefs. In this method Descartes thinks he has found a method of belief acquisition that is not only subjectively convincing but also guaranteed to be objectively flawless. The failure of his project results from the fact that he cannot have it both ways. There is no such method.

Descartes is not the only epistemologist with a meta-epistemology that is at odds with his epistemology. A number of contemporary epistemologists have also proposed interpretations of their criteria of rational belief that are at odds with most charitable interpretation of those criteria.

Consider, for example, Laurence Bonjour, who says that “the goal of our distinctively cognitive endeavors is truth,” and who then goes on to add that “being epistemically responsible in one’s beliefs is the core of the notion of epistemic justification.” 62 This statement sounds as if Bonjour is interested in a notion of epistemic justification that emphasizes a purely epistemic goal and the perspectives of individual believers, albeit perhaps the perspectives that they would have had they to have been sufficiently careful, sufficiently thorough, sufficiently unbiased, and so on. Thus, what is rational for you to believe is a matter of what you would believe were you to be responsible in your efforts to believe truths, and what is rational for me to believe is a matter of what I would believe were I to be responsible in my efforts to believe truths, and so on for every other individual.

The actual criterion of justified belief that Bonjour defends, however, has little to do with how things would look from the perspective of a responsible believer. According to Bonjour, if your beliefs are to be justified, they must be coherent, and coherence for Bonjour has both negative and positive aspects. For a set of beliefs to be coherent, they must not be inconsistent, and they must have a minimum of what he calls “probabilistic inconsistency.” But this feature is not enough. The beliefs must also positively support one another, where this is a matter of there being objectively valid, inferential relations among the beliefs: “The basic requirement for such an inference relation . . . is that it be to some degree truth-preserving; any sort of relation which meets this requirement will serve as an appropriate positive connection between beliefs, and no other connection seems relevant here.” 63

If coherence is understood in this way, however, it often will not be easy for you to tell whether or not your beliefs are coherent. It is not always easy, for example, to discern inconsistency, much less probabilistic inconsistency. It may even be less easy to tell whether there are objectively valid, positive inferential relations among your beliefs. Thus, even if you are careful, thorough, and unbiased—even if, in other words, you are a perfectly responsible believer—you might make mistakes about these matters. You might think your beliefs are coherent when they are not. Bonjour himself admits as much. Indeed, he admits that his recommended criterion is so demanding that perhaps no one has ever satisfied it. 64 But then, we want to know, what has happened to the idea that being epistemically responsible is at the core of the notion of epistemic justification?

Similar tensions can be found in the epistemological system of Roderick Chisholm. At the heart of Chisholm’s system is a set of interrelated epistemic principles, and with the help of years of refinement and qualification, the set now has a formidable complexity. This complexity ensures that Chisholm’s critics will have ample opportunity to quibble over the implications of his principles, but for purposes here, the most interesting issue is not how such principles might be best formulated but rather how they might be best interpreted.

Chisholm himself provides plenty of hints. He remarks, for example, that one of the fundamental issues that his epistemology is meant to address is how to balance what William James called “our [two] great commandments as would-be knowers”: know the truth and avoid error. 65 So, Chisholm’s concern, like Bonjour’s, is with a purely epistemic goal. In addition, he intends his principles to express necessary truths. 66 As such, they are meant to describe how it is rational for all of us to proceed intellectually, insofar as our aims are epistemic. On the other hand, the principles are also such that there is no guarantee that we won’t fall into serious error, even if we proceed in accordance with them. Most roughly expressed, the principles give expression to the idea that in general it is rational for us to trust memory, perception, introspection, and the like. Most of us would be prepared to admit that this intellectual advice is sound, but it is not advice that altogether immunizes us against either error or the likelihood of error. 67

Once this is noticed, it becomes tempting to think of Chisholm’s principles in a more subjective fashion than he himself does. We can admit that in at least one important sense it is rational for us to have beliefs that conform to Chisholm’s principles, but the sense would seem to be a subjective one. These principles, or something similar to them, reflect our own deep standards about how best to reach our primary intellectual end, namely, truth.

But of course, this interpretation is at odds with the interpretation that Chisholm himself insists upon, which is to interpret the principles in an objective manner. He regards them as necessary truths. Thus, he would say that they would apply even to people whose reflective, stable views about how to seek truth are quite different from those held by most of us. They too are rationally required to proceed in the way dictated by the principles.

The more subjective and, I am suggesting, more plausible interpretation of his principles suggests otherwise. According to this interpretation, the principles are best regarded as generalities that we from our perspective regard as plausible.
ways of making these revisions, and the evaluation procedure can be of help in telling us what these ways might be. Indeed, frequently this will be the real value of the procedure. It is obvious enough even without the procedure that the proposals of Chisholm, Bonjour, and Goldman must be altered in some way, but how to do so is likely to stay unclear until we have a plausible interpretation of their proposed criteria. We need some way of understanding the point of Chisholm's principles and the point of Bonjour's and Goldman's recommendations, especially since what they take to be the point of their principles and recommendations is at odds with a sympathetic interpretation of them. In particular, we need to describe a point of view from which their principles and recommendations make sense. If we find such a point of view and it is an important one, we will be able to pinpoint why the interpretation that each of these philosophers places upon his criteria is misguided. We will also be able to see why they have succeeded in doing something important, even if it is not exactly what they thought they were doing.

On the other hand, if we fail to find an important point of view that satisfies the announced criteria, this too will be significant. It will indicate that something has gone wrong with the criteria, and often enough we will have clues as to what this something is. Maybe the only point of view that satisfies the criteria makes use of a strange perspective. Or maybe there is a wafting between two perspectives, the result of which is that no unified point of view can make sense of the entire account. Various aspects of the account are best understood in terms of different goals and perspectives.

So, the procedure has both heuristic and therapeutic value. It provides us with a way of identifying the subject matter of a proposed account of rational belief, and in so doing also provides us with a way of diagnosing and correcting any tensions within the account. Just as our everyday claims of rationality are not readily transparent, so too our philosophical accounts of these claims are not readily transparent. We need some procedure that will help us understand them. The above procedure does this, and it has the additional virtue of tolerance. It allows us to see that questions of rational belief can give rise to a variety of projects.

This variety creates opportunities for confusion, and at no time have the opportunities been greater than at present. Epistemologists, philosophers of the physical sciences, philosophers of the social sciences, decision theorists, and many others are concerned with broadly normative issues about the formation and sustenance of beliefs, and they all give expression to their views on these issues by using the term 'rational' and its cognates. Even so, these accounts are not always rivals of one another. Often their proponents have different aims, despite their shared terminology.

Why there is this variety deserves attention. Part of the answer is simply that there is an enormous diversity in our everyday claims of rationality. We evaluate one another's beliefs in a range of contexts for a range of purposes, and the point of view we think is most appropriate for making these evaluations will depend
upon these contexts and purposes. This variety is then reflected in the accounts of these evaluations that philosophers propose.

For a deeper explanation, however, we need to look at the history of the notion of rationality, and there is no better way to do so than to look at the history of philosophy. In large measure, its history is just the history of our notion of rationality.

The history of philosophy is doubly relevant for contemporary epistemologists. First, it has helped shape our current, everyday judgments of rationality, which are the touchstones of philosophical accounts of rationality. In addition, it has given us the discipline of epistemology with its characteristic puzzles. The problems and concerns with which contemporary epistemologists are occupied have in large measure been passed down to them by their philosophical ancestors. Every contemporary project on rational belief is to some extent a descendant of the great epistemological projects of the past, projects of the sort found in the works of Descartes and Locke, for example, just as Descartes's and Locke's projects were the descendants of still earlier ones.

These projects of the past were intricate. They had various aims and background assumptions, some of which we now think do not fit particularly well with one another and others that we find implausible on independent grounds. Contemporary philosophers who are interested in questions of rational belief are inclined to retain some aspects of these older projects while rejecting others. However, what one philosopher retains and rejects is not always the same as what another retains and rejects—hence the differences in their projects.

The Cartesian project, for example, involves a search for a method of belief acquisition that is Janus-faced. The aim is to find a method that is guaranteed to be both subjectively persuasive, thereby making us invulnerable to intellectual self-criticism, and objectively reliable, thereby putting us in a good position to have knowledge. This is a conjunction of aims that must be rejected. Considered individually, each is defensible. We can ask what has to be the case in order for us to have beliefs that are immune to self-criticism. Likewise, we can ask what has to be the case in order for us to have knowledge. The mistake is to think that the answer to the first question provides an answer to the second, or vice versa. 73

Whereas Descartes saw only one project with two aspects, an egocentric one and an objective one, we must see two projects, and in doing epistemology, we must choose between them. Without always realizing that they are doing so, some epistemologists choose one way, some the other. Some choose to pursue the more subjective aspect of the Cartesian project, the one that sees rationality essentially as a matter of having beliefs that are defensible, given our own individual perspectives. The result is some kind of egocentric-leaning account of rational belief. Others take the opposite tack, embracing the more objective aspect of the Cartesian project, the part that is more closely connected with the search for conditions of knowledge. The result is some kind of externalist account of rational belief, one that deemphasizes the perspective of the individual believer.

An analogous story can be told about the influence of Locke. Again, the tendency is to try to separate various aspects of his project. The problem, however, is that the aspects we are inclined to separate are not so easily separable. Locke placed great emphasis on the idea that we all have an obligation to be rational, as well as on what he took to be the indispensable accompanying ideas that we have access to the conditions of rationality and that we have a good deal of control over what we believe. Many contemporary epistemologists are reluctant to endorse the latter two ideas. They resist voluntaristic conceptions of belief, and they resist as well the idea that the conditions of rational belief are such that we always have access to them. Nevertheless, the Lockean idea that questions of rationality are intimately linked to questions of obligation and responsibility is pervasive, both in our everyday lives and in philosophy. These same epistemologists find it natural to conceive their projects in this way. They assert that their accounts tell us what a responsible inquirer would believe or what an inquirer is obligated to believe. Often the result is incoherence, an insistence on the part of an account's proponents that the account be understood in terms of such notions as intellectual responsibility, intellectual duty, and the like, even though the actual criteria of rational belief proposed in the account cannot be charitably interpreted in these terms.

In any event, whether or not these quick historical remarks are ultimately defensible, the important point here is that the above evaluation procedure provides a framework within which the otherwise bewildering variety of past and contemporary projects on rational belief can be understood. It is a framework within which their similarities and differences can be precisely but also charitably articulated. It allows us to see how each might have its proper place. In addition, the procedure has therapeutic value. For one, it provides a tool for displaying incoherence. This is especially useful for accounts that are relatively complete, in the sense that their proponents not only put forward specific criteria of rational belief but also describe what they take to be the nature of their projects. The procedure shows us how some such accounts can be deconstructed. Take epistemologists to be narrators and their theories to be stories. The procedure can help us illustrate that the narrator's intended reading of the story is at odds with the story as it is actually told.

The procedure also provides us with a straightforward way to raise questions about the importance of an account of rational belief. There are a variety of such projects that can be done, but not all of them will be of equal importance. For an account to be significant, it is not enough for there to be some plausible interpretation of the criterion it recommends, and it is not even enough for the interpretation of the account to mesh with what its proponents say about it. Internal coherence is only the least we should expect. The account must also be linked in a natural way with our theoretical or practical concerns.

Epistemology is not meant to stand in splendid isolation. It is not simply an interesting intellectual puzzle. There must be some point to the criteria of rational belief that the epistemologist proposes. The evaluation procedure helps us to
understand what this point might be. The procedure tells us to interpret the proposed criteria in terms of a point of view—a perspective, a goal, and a set of resources. The account is significant only if this point of view is significant. The resources must be ones that we in fact are apt to have, and the perspective and goal must be central to our practical or theoretical concerns.

Notes


3. Thus, just as the field of competition in moral theory can be divided among consequentialist views, deontological views, and virtue-based views, so too there is a roughly analogous field of competitors in the theory of rationality.


5. The expression 'estimated desirability' is Richard Jeffrey's; see The Logic of Decision, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

6. Much of the work on understanding primitive cultures focuses upon the difficulties of avoiding just this kind of unfairness. For a sampling of these discussions, see Bryan Wilson (ed.), Rationality (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

7. It is generally acknowledged that the chess strategies used by Bobby Fischer in 1972 were superior to those used by Paul Morphy in 1861. Does this then mean that Fischer was the better player? Not necessarily. Chess strategies evolve over time, and Fischer had the advantage of being able to draw upon an additional century of developing strategies and counterstrategies, one that Morphy's play helped generate. See Simon, "From Substantive to Procedural Rationality," 146, who cites this example to make a different point.

8. Sometimes the key to seeing behavior as rational is to view it as a part of a larger practice or policy in which there are reasons to engage. Suppose you have been married three times previously but that you now promise to love and cherish your new spouse "until death do you part," despite there being every indication that this marriage will also be short-lived. When we hear you utter these words, we need not conclude that you are giving expression to a deeply irrational belief or that you are blatantly lying or even that you are deceiving yourself. Rather, your utterance can be "rationalized" by seeing it as a part of a larger ritual—the marriage ceremony—in which you have reasons to participate.


10. "Behavior is substantively rational when it is appropriate to the achievement of given goals within the limits imposed by given conditions and constraints. Notice that, by this definition, the rationality of behavior depends upon the actor in only a single respect—his goals. Given these goals, the rational behavior is determined entirely by the characteristics of the environment in which it takes place." Simon, "From Substantive to Procedural Rationality," 130.

11. Compare with Moore's paradox. You can believe as well as say that I believe that P but that P is false, and of course you may be right. On the other hand, it is odd or perhaps even impossible for me to believe or think this of myself.


13. Compare with Thomas Nagel, The View from Nowhere (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). One of Nagel's theses is that our ability to make judgments about how things appear from perspectives other than our own makes it possible for us to have an objective conception of reality. This same ability, he argues, gives rise to some of our deepest philosophical problems, e.g., ones having to do with personal identity, the nature of the mental, human freedom, and skepticism. Moreover, the intractability of these problems, Nagel argues, is largely due to tensions between egocentric and objective perspectives. What seems plausible from an egocentric perspective seems implausible from an objective perspective, and vice versa.

14. See W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in Lectures and Essays, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1879, 183): "It is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." Also see John Locke, "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," in The Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke, ed. P. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Book IV, chap. 17, sec. 24; "For he governs his Asent right, and places as he should, who in any Case or Matter whatsoever, believes or disbelieves, according as Reason directs him. He that does otherwise, tangles against his own Light, and misuses those Faculties, which were given him to no other end,
but to search and follow the clearer Evidence, and greater Probability." For a contemporary evidentialist, see Alan Gibbard, Wise Choices, Apt Feelings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), especially 36–7.

17. Below I distinguish evidential reasons from the more general category of intellectual reasons.

18. Compare with Thomas Reid, who says, "... nor is it in a man's power to believe anything longer than he thinks he has evidence." Essays on the Intellectual Powers, in The Philosophical Works of Thomas Reid (London: James Thin, 1895), chap. 10, sec. 1.


21. Compare this with reasons to intend (or to try, or to choose) something. Just as the reasons we cite for believing P are ordinarily ones that purport to show that P is true, so the reasons we cite for intending to do X are ordinarily ones that purport to show that doing X is worthwhile. Still, there can be reasons for intending to do X that do not even purport to indicate that doing X is worthwhile (just as there can be reasons for believing P that do not even purport to indicate that P is true). Think of cases in which the intention to do X will produce benefits even if we don't do X. Here is an extreme example: someone offers you a million dollars if tomorrow you form an intention to drink a toxin on the day after tomorrow; if you form the intention tomorrow, you will get the money whether or not you actually drink the toxin on the day after tomorrow. (This is Gregory Kavka's example. See Kavka, "The Toxin Puzzle," Analysis 43 [1983], 33–36.) Something analogous, albeit less dramatic, may be true of everyday intentions, namely, they too may have consequences that are independent of the intended acts. The puzzle, then, like the puzzle for belief, is why we aren't inclined to take much notice of these consequences in arguing about the rationality of our intentions. Part of the solution is similar to the one above for belief. Becoming convinced that you have these kinds of reasons is ordinarily not enough to generate a genuine intention to do X. So, insofar as someone is trying to persuade you to have this intention, it will normally be pointless to cite such considerations. By contrast, if someone convinces you that doing X is worthwhile, you normally will acquire the intention.

22. Again there is a parallel with reasons for intending, trying, choosing, etc. You can have reasons for intending to do X that are not reasons for regarding X as worthwhile, but ordinarily considerations of this sort won't be enough to generate a genuine intention; you need to be convinced that doing X is worthwhile. Still, considerations of this sort might give you a reason to engage in Paschal manipulations, in hopes of convincing yourself that X is worthwhile, which in turn would lead to the intention. But such a project is likely to have significant costs. It is likely to require even a measure of self-deception. These costs help ensure that ordinarily you have reasons to intend only that which you also have reasons to do. Compare with Michael Bratman, Intentions, Plans, and Practical Reasons (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), especially sec. 6.6.

23. The goals do have to be important ones, however. If we regard a goal as relatively trivial, e.g., the goal of thinking more highly of yourself than your acquaintances, then we will also regard as trivial whatever reasons for belief it might generate. Indeed, insofar as we are convinced that such reasons have shaped your beliefs, we will to that degree be dismissive of the beliefs as merely self-serving. Contrast this with the above cases, where your beliefs are also self-serving, but the "self-serving" goal is one that we regard as more substantial, i.e., the saving of the relationship or better prospects for health. For a discussion of some related issues, see sec. 3.2.

24. Verisimilitude, for example, is a purely epistemic goal, the goal of now having beliefs that are approximately true. See Karl Popper, Objective Knowledge (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). Likewise, the goal of now having a comprehensive belief system can without encountering the risk of error is a purely epistemic goal (see the discussion of Descartes in sec. 1.7), as is the goal of now having degrees of belief that are calibrated with the objective probabilities (see the discussion of probabilism in sec. 4.4).

25. Still, it is not worth quibbling over terminological points. Suppose someone insists that only future states of affairs can be goals, since (1) all means are causal means, and (2) something cannot be a goal unless there are means of bringing it about. Then I will introduce new terms to capture what I have in mind. I will say, e.g., that now believing those propositions that are true and not believing those that are false is a value or a desideratum, and I will talk about what appears, from various perspectives, to satisfy this value or desideratum.

26. "... a hypothesis is complex rather than simple in this sense to the extent that it contains elements within it, some of which are unlikely to be true relative to others, thus making the hypothesis as a whole unlikely on a purely a priori basis to be true; it is simple to the extent that this is not the case," Laurence Bonjour, The Structure of Empirical Knowledge (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 183. Bonjour is well aware that this is a minimalistic conception of simplicity. Indeed, that's what makes it suited for his special purpose. His strategy is to use this seemingly innocent notion of simplicity in an attempt to argue against skeptical hypotheses.


28. For example, it will not do to argue that the history of the physical sciences is characterized by progressively greater predictive power and that the simplest explanation of this predictive power, to contradict half of Wilde's aphorism, is that the truth is rarely pure but usually simple. This is a common enough argument. It is sometimes argued that the simplest explanation of the increasing predictive power of the physical sciences is in terms of the increasing verisimilitude (i.e., approximate truth) of physical theory. The simplest explanation of this, it is further argued, is that the criteria of theory choice that scientists actually use, among which (it is asserted) is simplicity, are marks of verisimilitude. The problem with this argument is obvious: the explanations being invoked themselves presuppose that simplicity is a mark of verisimilitude. I will later argue (see sec. 2.5) that this kind of question-begging enterprise is not as trivial as it might appear to be, but on the other hand it is also not particularly helpful if we are casting about for some rationale, even a vague one, for thinking that simplicity really is a mark of truth.


30. Of course, it is easy enough to imagine benefits that could be won by belief but not by commitment. Suppose, e.g., that you derive aesthetic pleasure from believing simple, elegant theories but not from merely committing yourself to them. This then gives you a reason for believing such theories as opposed to committing yourself to them. The hitch is that not very many of us actually have such reasons. Although some of us may
find it aesthetically satisfying to use even merely to contemplate simple theories, there are not very many of us for whom this aesthetic satisfaction is dependent upon believing that these theories are true.


32. Just because of this role, many philosophers have antirealist views about physics, mathematics, and philosophy. Sometimes these views are expressed in a semantic thesis, according to which the theories in question, strictly speaking, are neither true nor false, and sometimes they are expressed in an epistemological thesis, according to which we don’t have adequate reasons to regard them as true. Whether such antirealist theses are defensible hinges in part on the question of how extensively the data have guided the development of the theory, as opposed to how extensively considerations of convenience and simplicity have done so. It hinges on this question precisely because neither side to the debate generally feels comfortable in regarding the latter kinds of considerations as marks of truth.


34. Nelson Goodman has suggested that “it is almost a commonplace that it was considerations of simplicity that led to the rejection of the Ptolemaic system.” What is the commonplace is that with enough alteration, the Ptolemaic system could have been made adequate to the observations. It is also true that if the existing background theory and information had been held fixed, these alterations would have required a more complex theory. On the other hand, it is far from obvious that if clever enough changes had been made in the background theory, the resulting overall theory, i.e., the Ptolemaic system plus the background theory, would have been any less simple in an objective sense. Of course, changes in the background theory would have required complex revisions of existing beliefs. So, in this nonobjective, belief-relative sense, retaining the Ptolemaic system would have been less simple, but on the other hand it also would have been lacking in credibility relative to these beliefs. Contrast with Nelson Goodman, “The Test of Simplicity,” in Goodman, Problems and Projects (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972), 279.

35. I return to the issue in sec. 3.2.


37. Once again, analogous problems arise with respect to intentions, planning, choosing, trying, etc. Ordinarily, if you now have reasons to do X at some later time, you also now have reasons to form an intention to do X at that time. There are exceptions, however. The intention itself might undercut your reasons for doing X and hence your reasons for intending it. For example, you might have adequate reasons to confront your bosses tomorrow with your suspicions of the firm’s illegal dealings even though you know that if you were now to form an intention to do so, this would make you nervous. You might also know that when you are nervous, you have a tendency to be more insulating than you mean to be and that this in turn is likely to make your bosses defiant and hence even less willing than they are to look into the matter. Contrast with the Kafka case discussed in note 21 above.

38. Ordinarily, becoming convinced that you have good evidence for a proposition is enough to prompt belief in it, but the above situation seems to be one of the exceptions to this general rule. One way of illustrating this is to suppose that it is not an exception. Then the moment you become convinced that your evidence makes it likely that you will get your degree, you will come to believe that you will get it. But then at the next moment, assuming that you are aware of this belief, you will realize that your evidence now makes it likely that you won’t get your degree and hence you will come to believe you won’t. Moreover, matters won’t stabilize there. You will continue to vacillate between belief and disbelief until either the exam is given or exhaustion sets in. The alternative and more plausible suggestion is that in this kind of situation, where you are fully aware of your predicament, you might not believe that you will get the degree despite being convinced that you have good evidence for this. For a contrasting view, see Richard Swinburne, Faith and Reason (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), chap. 1, who argues that believing P is likely to be true is equivalent to believing P.

39. Assume that you cannot believe a proposition without thinking it (i.e., conceiving it). Let P be the proposition that you have never thought the proposition that $25^2 = 625$, and suppose that you have adequate evidence for P—e.g., you know that you have never tried to square any number greater than 15. Then this is another kind of case in which belief in accordance with the evidence might eliminate that evidence (since believing P itself involves thinking the proposition that $25^2 = 625$).

40. Compare with Richard Jeffrey’s view that decisions must be rivalifiable; see Jeffrey, The Logic of Decision.

41. For a painfully clear instance of this kind of criticism, see sec. 1 of my “What’s Wrong with Reliabilism?” Mentis, 68 (1985), 188–200.

42. See sec. 1.2.

43. See especially sec. 4.4.

44. This is at least roughly the kind of account I will be defending in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.


46. See Stich, “Could Man Be an Irrational Animal?”

47. Indeed, the first of the above accounts identifies both the relevant perspective and the relevant goal. It entirely provides its own interpretation.


50. Some versions of coherenceism (for beliefs) and probabilism (for degrees of belief) seem to presuppose resources of this sort.


52. Of course, it may be desirable to define some epistemic notions in terms of others, but if so, we will want a neutral interpretation of the defining notion, i.e., an interpretation that does not itself make use of the notion of rationality. This is my strategy in sec. 3.2, where I explicate “responsible belief” in terms of what it is epistemically rational for us to believe and where “epistemically rational belief” is explicated without recourse to any other notion of rationality.