

# An Epistemology That Matters

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The two most fundamental questions for an epistemology are, what is involved in having good reasons to believe a claim, and what is involved in meeting the higher standard of knowing that a claim is true? The theory of justified belief tries to answer the former, whereas the theory of knowledge addresses the latter.

The history of epistemology, however, can in large part be read as a history of trying to establish that there is a necessary connection between the answers to these two questions. A traditional view is that justified beliefs are ones arrived at using an appropriate methodology and that use of an appropriate methodology produces knowledge. Descartes, for example, argued that one is justified in believing that which one clearly and distinctly understands, and that if one restricts oneself to such beliefs, one can be assured of knowledge. Locke had an only slightly less optimistic position. He asserted that one is justified in relying on one's reason and the evidence of one's senses, and that provided one's opinions conform to one's reason and sensory evidence, most of one's beliefs will be instances of knowledge.

Neither Descartes nor Locke, however, could find a way of keeping justified belief and knowledge cemented to one another without invoking God. Descartes maintained that God would not permit us to be deceived about what we clearly understand, while for Locke the general reliability of our cognitive faculties is assured because they were created by God.

Contemporary epistemologists are reluctant to use theological assumptions to solve epistemological problems, but they are also reluctant to abandon the view that justification and knowledge are inextricably connected. So semantic stipulation has replaced theology as a way to ensure the connection. Knowledge is said by definition to involve justified belief.

On this view, the direction of the link is reversed from that sought by Descartes and other classical foundationalists. Having justified beliefs does not guarantee knowledge. The idea, rather, is that knowing P implies that one's belief P is justified, because knowledge by definition is a matter of having a true belief that is also justified.

My proposal, by contrast, is that at least at the beginning of the enterprise epistemologists should resist the temptation to assume any kind of necessary tie between justified belief and knowledge. The initial presupposition should rather be that the theories of justified belief and knowledge are distinct—separate and equal, as it were. It may well turn out that as the two theories are independently developed interesting connections between the concepts of justified belief and knowledge will emerge, but it should not be simply assumed from the start there is a simple, necessary link between them.

Relaxing the tie, moreover, is liberating. If knowledge is assumed to imply justified belief, the theory of knowledge is pressured either to pretend that people can always provide adequate intellectual justifications of what they know or to invent some kind of duly externalized notion of justified belief because the definition of knowledge is thought to require this.

The theory of justified belief is likewise liberated. If it is stipulated that the properties that make a belief justified must also be properties that turn true belief into a good candidate for knowledge, the concept of justified belief is placed in the service of the theory of knowledge and is thereby distanced from the everyday assessments we actually make of each other's opinions, which tend to focus on whether individuals have been appropriately careful and responsible in regulating their opinions rather than on whether they have satisfied the prerequisites of knowledge.

The presupposition that there is a necessary tie between knowledge and justified belief also does damage to the theory of rational belief. The concepts of rational and justified belief ought to be close cousins, but if justified belief is closely linked with knowledge, then rational belief will be linked with it as well. But the more closely rational belief is coupled with the prerequisites of knowledge, the more it tends to be separated from our ways of understanding the rationality of actions, decisions, strategies, plans, and the like, the result being that the rationality of beliefs is treated as if it were an entirely separate category from the rationality of other phenomena.

These are all regrettable outcomes. It ought to be possible to develop an approach to issues of justified and rational belief that makes these concepts relevant to the kinds of assessments of each other's opinions we make in our everyday lives and that also views them as not fundamentally different in kind from the concepts of rational actions, decisions, plans, strategies, and so on. In what follows, I will be outlining just such an approach, one that sets aside the presupposition that knowledge and justified belief are necessarily connected and in so doing reorients epistemology in new and beneficial ways.

A way into this approach is through the concept of rationality, understood as a goal-oriented notion. Whether the question is the rationality of actions, beliefs, decisions, intentions, plans, or strategies, what is at issue is the effective pursuit of goals.

Actual effectiveness is not, however, a necessary condition of rationality. What is rational can turn out badly. After all, in some situations no one might have been reasonably expected to foresee that the seemingly best option was likely to have unwelcome consequences. Considerations such as these suggest a general template of rationality: an action A (or decision, plan, intention, strategy, belief, etc.) is rational for a subject S if it is rational for S to believe that A would acceptably satisfy her goals.

An obvious drawback of this suggestion is that it makes reference to rational belief, thus leaving us within the circle of notions we wish to understand and, hence, without an adequate philosophical account of rationality. I will return this drawback shortly. I need first to clarify a couple of other matters.

The first is that it is possible for an action to acceptably satisfy one's goals even if, of the available options, it is not the one that does the single most effective job of satisfying these goals. Something less than optimal may be good enough. As I am employing the concepts, reasonableness admits of degrees whereas rationality does not. In particular, reasonableness varies with the strengths of one's reasons, while the rational is that which is sufficiently reasonable. Thus, in some situations, more than one option meets the standard of being rational, even if some of these options are somewhat more reasonable than others.

To conclude that an action would acceptably satisfy one's goals is to make a judgment about its estimated desirability, which is a function of its probable effectiveness in promoting various goals and the relative importance of these goals.<sup>1</sup> Contextual factors are also relevant, however. The fewer alternatives there are with greater estimated desirabilities, the more likely it is that the action in question is rational, and if these alternatives are only marginally superior or are not readily accessible, it is all the more likely that the action is rational. It is rational because it is good enough, given the context.

A second clarification is that in assessing the effectiveness of an action (decision, plan, intention, strategy, belief, etc.), different kinds of goals can be taken into account. For example, if it is rational for S to believe that doing A would effectively promote her economic wellbeing, then A is rational at least in an economic sense. A can be rational in this economic sense, however, even if it is not rational all things considered because it does not do an acceptably good job in promoting the full range of S's goals, noneconomic as well as economic. There are, in other words, different kinds of rationality corresponding to different kinds

of goals, and this suggests a further refinement of the general template of rationality: an action A (or decision, plan, intention, strategy, etc.) is rational in sense X for S if it is rational for S to believe that A will do an acceptably good job of satisfying her goals of type X.

Being clear about the kinds of goals, and hence the kinds of rationality, at issue is of particular importance when the questions concern the rationality of beliefs. When assessing someone's beliefs, we are typically not interested in the total constellation of his or her goals. Our interest, rather, is usually only in those that are distinctly intellectual. For example, when considering what it is rational for S to believe about some matter P, we as a rule would regard it as irrelevant that were S to believe P, it would make her feel more secure, which we can assume might be one of her goals. More notoriously, in assessing whether it might be rational for S to believe in God, we would be unlikely to join Pascal in regarding as relevant the possibility that S might increase her chances of salvation by having such a belief.

But why is this? Why do we ordinarily treat the potential practical benefits of belief as irrelevant in assessing what it is rational for someone to believe? On the face of it, this seems puzzling. What a person believes, like what she does or decides or intends, can have important consequences. Why shouldn't such consequences be taken into account in our assessments about what it is rational for her to believe? Yet our intellectual practice seems to dismiss these consequences as irrelevant.

I will return to this puzzle later and suggest an answer to it, but first, another distinction. In evaluating the rationality of beliefs, epistemologists have traditionally been concerned with not just any intellectual goal but rather a very specific one, that of now having beliefs that are both accurate and comprehensive.

There are interesting issues about how to balance appropriately the value of accuracy versus that of comprehensiveness, but I am going to pass over these issues in order to focus on another. Namely, the relevant goal is not to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs at some future time but rather to have such beliefs now. To understand the significance of characterizing the goal in this way, imagine that S's prospects for having accurate and comprehensive beliefs in a year's time would be enhanced by believing something for which S now lacks adequate evidence.

For example, suppose P is a more favorable assessment of S's intellectual talents than the evidence warrants, but suppose also that S's believing P would make her intellectually more confident, which would make her a more dedicated inquirer, which in turn would enhance her long-term prospects of having an accurate and comprehensive belief system. Despite these long-term intellectual benefits, there is an important sense of rational belief, indeed the very sense that traditionally has been of the most interest to epistemologists, in which it is not rational for S to believe P. One way of marking this distinction is to say that it is not rational for S in a purely epistemic sense to believe P, where this purely epistemic sense is to be understood in terms of the present-tense goal of now having accurate and comprehensive beliefs.

Foundationalists, coherentists, reliabilists, and others have different views about how best to explicate this notion of epistemically rational belief, but I am not going to try to adjudicate among these various views because what matters for purposes here is not their differences but rather something that they have in common. In particular, each account attempts to explicate the concept of epistemically rational belief without reference to any other concept of rationality. Foundationalists, for example, understand epistemic rationality in terms of basic beliefs and a set of deductive and probabilistic support relations by which other beliefs are supported by those that are basic. Moreover, foundationalists would view it a defect if they had to make use of some other notion of rationality (or a related notion, such as reasonability) in characterizing basicity or these support relations. Coherentists, on the other hand, try to explicate epistemic rationality in terms of a set of deductive and probabilistic relations among beliefs and a set of properties such as simplicity, conservativeness, and explanatory power, but they too would regard it as a flaw if their

explication smuggled in a reference to a concept of rationality or a related concept. The same is true of other accounts of epistemically rational belief.

This point is of great importance for the general theory of rationality because it provides the theory with a potential escape route from circularity. In particular, the general template of rationality can be expressed using the concept of epistemically rational belief: an action A (decision, plan, intention, etc.) is rational in sense X for S just in case it is *epistemically rational* for S to believe that A will do an acceptably good job of satisfying goals of kind X.

Because accounts of epistemically rational belief do not make use of any other notion of rationality or any of its close cognates, the template is now theoretically respectable. It makes no noneliminable reference to a concept of rationality. In effect, the concept of epistemically rational belief serves as a theoretical anchor for other concepts of rationality.

Of particular interest for epistemology is that epistemically rational belief potentially provides a theoretical anchor even for other concepts of rational belief. Let me explain.

According to the template, an action A (decision, plan, strategy, etc.) is rational in sense X if it is epistemically rational for S to believe that A will do an acceptably good job of satisfying goals of kind X. Recall that “X” can refer to all of S’s goals or only a subset of them. This creates a risk of confusion. If, for instance, only economic goals are taken into consideration, it may be rational (in an economic sense) for S to do A, but if all of S’s goals, both economic and noneconomic, are taken into consideration, it might not be not rational (all things considered) for S to do A.

These same possibilities for confusion arise when the issue is the rationality of beliefs. S’s beliefs can be assessed in terms how well they promote the purely epistemic goal of now having accurate and comprehensive beliefs, but there is nothing in principle wrong with assessing them in terms of how well they promote the total constellation of S’s goals. If it is epistemically rational for S to believe that believing P would effectively promote her overall constellation of goals, then it is rational for her to believe P, all things considered.

There are two kinds of rational belief being referred to here. The first is epistemically rational belief, which is defined in terms of the purely epistemic goal. The second is a notion of rational belief that is defined in terms of epistemically rational belief and S’s total constellation of goals. With this distinction in hand, we can reformulate the puzzle I raised earlier in terms of the following question: Why do we so rarely evaluate beliefs in terms of this second notion?

Part of the solution is that our discussions and debates concerning what it is rational to believe usually take place in a context of trying to convince someone, perhaps even ourselves, to believe something. But insofar as our aim is to persuade, introducing nonepistemic goals is ordinarily ineffective.

Suppose that one of your goals is to be promoted but that you are skeptical about your chances. I am trying, however, to get you to believe that you are in fact going to be promoted. Even if I point out to you that you have strong pragmatic reasons to believe this claim (perhaps your nervousness about the promotion is adversely affecting your job performance, thus making the promotion less likely), this will ordinarily not be enough to convince you. By contrast, if I marshal evidence and information in support of the claim, belief often does follow.

Thus, insofar as we are interested in persuading someone to believe something, there is a straightforward explanation as to why we ordinarily are not concerned with pragmatic reasons for belief. Namely, it is normally pointless to cite them because they are not the kind of reasons that generate belief.

Similarly, in our own deliberations, we ordinarily do not consider what pragmatic reasons we might have for believing this rather than that, and the explanation is the same as in the third-person case. Deliberations concerning our pragmatic reasons for belief are ordinarily inefficacious and hence pointless. Hence, our practice is to ignore them.

There is a second and complementary explanation for why in general we do not deliberate about the pragmatic reasons we have for believing something. It is ordinarily redundant to do so, because ordinarily our overriding pragmatic reason is to develop and maintain an accurate and comprehensive overall stock of beliefs.

We are all constantly faced with the need to make an enormous number of decisions, and we usually do not know in advance the information we will need to make the full range of these decisions well. This might not be terribly important if, when faced with decisions, we had the opportunity to gather information and then deliberate in terms of it about which alternative is best, but ordinarily we do not. Most decisions have to be made without the luxury of extensive evidence gathering, consultations, or deliberations. We are instead forced to draw upon our existing stock of beliefs, and if that stock is either small or inaccurate, we increase the likelihood of making unfortunate decisions.

So ordinarily the beliefs that are likely to do the best overall job of promoting the total constellation of our goals are those that are both comprehensive and accurate. Only by having such beliefs are we likely to be able to fashion effective strategies for achieving our various goals. But then, since epistemically rational beliefs are by definition beliefs that are rational for us insofar as our goal is to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs, it is ordinarily rational, all things considered (that is, when all of our goals are taken into account), to believe those propositions that are epistemically rational for us. Thus, for all practical purposes, taking this phrase literally, we can usually safely ignore pragmatic reasons in our deliberations about what to believe.

To be sure, there are conceivable situations in which our epistemic reasons and our overall reasons for belief might be pulled apart. Pascal famously argued that belief in God is such an example, but it is not difficult to concoct nontheistic examples as well. If you are aware that a madman will kill your children unless you come to believe, and not merely act as if you believe, that the earth is flat, it is presumably rational for you to try to find a way, difficult as it may be, of getting yourself to believe this proposition.

In the vast majority of cases, however, the pragmatic benefits of belief are not nearly so powerful. So although what it is rational to believe, all things considered, in principle can be at odds with what it is epistemically rational to believe, in practice this is rare.

Nevertheless, pragmatic considerations do deeply influence what it is rational for one to believe—only they do so indirectly. In particular, the amount of time and effort it is reasonable to devote to acquiring accurate and comprehensive beliefs about an issue is largely determined by pragmatic considerations. In purchasing a laptop, for example, I will want to sort through information about various makes and models, but I need to decide how thoroughly to do so. Should I merely visit a computer store and rely on the salesperson, or should I in addition ask friends who are more expert than I, or should I study recent reviews in the literature, or all of the above? Similarly, if I am interested in how safe some prescription medicine is, I need to decide how much time to spend investigating the issue. Should I be content with the advice of my physician, or should I seek out a specialist, or should I go to the trouble of looking up articles in the

relevant medical journals? And if it turns out that to understand these articles I need to brush up on my chemistry, should I do that?

The reasonable answer to such questions is a function of how important the issue is and how likely it is that additional effort on my part will improve my reliability. So it is not unusual for pragmatic considerations to influence what it is rational for us to believe, but they do so indirectly by determining the direction and extent of our intellectual endeavors. Within the confines of these endeavors, however, we regard it as irrelevant whether believing the claim in question would be useful. We are concerned only with its truth or likely truth.

Keeping these points in mind, consider again the concept of epistemic rationality. All of us have an enormous variety of ends, many of them overlapping but a number of them also in tension with one another. Epistemic rationality is concerned with only one of these ends, that of now having accurate and comprehensive beliefs. It is thus an idealized concept. No one is a purely intellectual being. On the other hand, its idealized character has advantages, one of the most important of which is that it makes the concept suitable to serve as a theoretical anchor for other concepts that are less idealized and hence potentially more relevant to our everyday intellectual concerns.

The complication is that the most straightforward way of introducing a derivative concept of rational belief is too crude to be of much relevance. According to the general template of rationality, it is rational, all things considered, for S to believe P if it is epistemically rational for her to believe that the overall effects of believing P are sufficiently beneficial. But it is rare, for the reasons already cited, for nonintellectual considerations to enter directly into our assessments of what we ourselves or others have reasons to believe. So if the concept of epistemic rationality is to anchor a derivative concept that is relevant for our everyday intellectual assessments of each other's beliefs, it has to do so in a subtler, more indirect way.

An initial step toward such an anchoring is to note that our everyday evaluations of each other's beliefs are reason-saturated. We tend to be interested in whether, in forming her beliefs about a topic, S has been *reasonably* thorough in gathering evidence and then *reasonably* thorough in sorting through and deliberating about this evidence. The standards of reasonability at work in these assessments are realistic ones. They reflect the fact that we all have nonintellectual interests, goals, and needs that constrain the amount of time and effort it is appropriate to devote to investigating an issue. Only a concept that is sensitive to such questions of resource allocation is capable of capturing the spirit of these everyday evaluations. I will be arguing that justified belief is just such a concept, only as I understand it, the concept is closely associated with responsible believing rather than with what is required to turn true belief into knowledge.

Justifiably believing a proposition is a matter of its being rational, all things considered, for one to have acquired (and subsequently retained) the belief. More precisely, again using the general template of rationality, S justifiably believes P if it is epistemically rational for S to believe that her procedures with respect to P have been acceptable: that is, acceptable given the limitations on her time and capacities and given all of her goals.

Justified belief, so understood, is sensitive to the fact that having accurate and comprehensive beliefs about some topics is not especially important and thus that it would be inappropriate to spend significant time and effort gathering information and thinking about them. About other topics, by contrast, it is terribly important to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs, and accordingly it is also appropriate to devote considerable time and effort in investigating and thinking about them.

The standards of justified belief thus vary with the importance of the issue. High importance translates into demanding standards; low importance into less demanding standards.

Accordingly, S can have justified beliefs about some topics even if she has spent little or no time gathering evidence or deliberating about them. Indeed, she can have justified beliefs even if she is in the possession of information that, had she reflected upon it, would have convinced her that what she believes is incorrect. This is one of the ways in which justified belief and epistemically rational belief can diverge. Even if S has evidence that makes it epistemically irrational to believe P, she may justifiably believe P because, given the unimportance of the topic, it would have been inappropriate for her to have taken the time and effort to sift through and think about this evidence.

The core intuition here is that having justified beliefs requires one to be responsible, but being responsible does not necessarily require one to go to extraordinary lengths in trying to discover the truth about an issue. More exactly, it does not require this unless the issue itself is extraordinarily important. When weighty issues are at stake, it takes more to be a responsible believer, and hence the standards of justified belief are correspondingly higher. Indeed, they can be more stringent than those of epistemically rational belief. If, for example, having inaccurate opinions about some matter would put people's lives at risk, one should conduct especially thorough investigations before settling on an opinion. If one fails to do so, the resulting beliefs will not be justified, but they might still be epistemically rational. This is possible because epistemically rational belief does not require certainty, even moral certainty, whereas moral certainty sometimes is required for being a responsible believer.

The intellectual standards one must meet in order to have justified beliefs vary not only with the importance of the topic but also with one's social role. If it is S's job but not R's to keep safety equipment in good working order, the intellectual demands upon S are more stringent than those upon R. R's belief that the equipment is in good working order might be justified even if he has done little investigation of the matter. He need not have tested the equipment, for example. A cursory look might suffice for R, but this won't do for S. It would be irresponsible for her not to conduct tests of the equipment, and thus the standards of justified belief are higher for her.

One's social role can be relevant even when the issue at hand is primarily of theoretical interest. If S is an accountant and R is a geologist, S's justifiably believing in continental drift is likely to be a very different matter from R's justifiably believing this. S's familiarity with the issue may derive exclusively from popular science writing, and this kind of information may well be sufficient for her belief to be responsible. No more can be reasonably expected. On the other hand, much more is reasonably expected of the authorities themselves. They are part of a community of inquirers with special intellectual responsibilities. Thus, to have responsible beliefs about continental drift, they presumably need to have a working knowledge of the larger theory of plate tectonics and the fossil evidence for the theory.

In these and other ways, nonepistemic ends help determine what one justifiably believes, but not in the way Pascal envisioned. The idea is not they give one good reasons to believe a proposition for which one lacks adequate evidence. Rather, they define the extent of evidence gathering and processing that it is reasonable to engage in. They thus shape what it is justified for one to believe in an indirect rather than a direct way. They impose constraints on inquiry, but subject to these constraints the aim is to determine which beliefs are true, not which ones are useful.

One of the major virtues of this approach to epistemology is that epistemically rational belief and justified belief both become parts of a philosophically respectable, general theory of rationality. At the heart of the theory is a template: an action A (decision, plan, strategy, or whatever) is rational in sense X for S if it is epistemically rational for S to believe that A will do an acceptably good job of satisfying her goals of type

X. This template is altogether general. It can be used to distinguish different kinds of rationality, for example, economic rationality and rationality all things considered, and it can be used to understand the rationality of different kinds of phenomena, for example, the rationality of decisions as well the rationality of strategies and plans.

Even epistemically rational belief can be represented by the template. Inserting the purely epistemic goal into the template for “goals of type X” results in the following: Believing P is rational in an epistemic sense if it is epistemically rational for S to believe that believing P would acceptably contribute to the epistemic goal of S’s now having accurate and comprehensive beliefs. This instantiation of the template is tautological, but for the sake of the generality of schema, this is just what is called for. It ensures that every belief that satisfies the requirements of epistemically rational belief will also be an instance of the general schema, where the relevant goal is that of now having accurate and comprehensive beliefs.

So the template is altogether general, and because the concept of epistemically rational belief, which the template uses as an anchor, is explicated without reference to any other concept of rationality, it is also philosophically respectable. As such, it can be used to understand various, derivative concepts, and among the most important of these, I have been arguing, is a concept of justified belief that is closely aligned with responsible believing. Understanding justified belief in this way has the additional advantage of making the concept of justified belief closely analogous with the concepts of justified behavior, decisions, plans, and so on.

The result is a cluster of overlapping concepts that are both theoretically respectable and capable of giving expression to the everyday concerns we have in evaluating our own and each other’s beliefs. These concerns tend to focus not on whether we have met all the prerequisites of knowledge but rather on whether we are reasonably careful, reasonably cautious, and reasonably thorough in our opinions, where the standards of reasonability can vary from one situation to another and from one belief to another. This is the beginning of an epistemology that matters.<sup>ii</sup>

### Notes

I first began to develop the ideas of this essay while participating in an epistemology working group that met regularly during the 1980s at the University of Notre Dame. Phil Quinn was a core member of the group along with Mike De-Paul, Marian David, Aron Edidin, and Al Plantinga. The meetings of that group were paradigms of philosophical discussions, and Phil was one of the principal reasons why.

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<sup>i</sup> The expression *estimated desirability* is Richard Jeffrey’s; see *The Logic of Decision*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>ii</sup> This paper reworks the arguments in Richard Foley, “The Foundational Role of Epistemology in a General Theory of Rationality,” in *Virtue Epistemology*, ed. L. Zagzebski and A. Fairweather (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).