

*This book is dedicated to my parents, William and Gladys Foley,  
to whom I owe everything.*

# *Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others*

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## *Future Opinion and Current Opinion*

### 1. EPISTEMIC ULYSSES PROBLEMS

How should future opinion when known affect current opinion? If I discover that in one year I will believe P, how should this affect my current belief about P?

Ulysses cases offer a compelling way of addressing these questions. Recall the story of Ulysses and the Sirens. The Sirens had the power of so charming sailors by their songs that the sailors were irresistibly drawn to throw themselves overboard, where they drowned in the strong currents surrounding the island where the Sirens lived. Although Ulysses was warned by the sorceress Circe about the Sirens, he nonetheless wanted to hear their songs. Following instructions from Circe, he took steps to protect himself. He had his men stop their ears with wax, so that they would not be able to hear the Sirens, and had himself tied to the mast, so that upon hearing the Sirens sing, he would not be able to throw himself overboard.

The problem that confronted Ulysses, most generally expressed, was that of how to take his future wants and values into account in his current deliberations about what to do. Problems of this sort are especially pressing when the future wants and values are at odds with one's current wants and values. Ulysses, for example, knew that the Sirens' songs would alter his wants in ways he currently did not approve.<sup>1</sup> Epistemic Ulysses problems are the counterparts of these problems within epistemology. They are problems of how to take future opinions

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Schelling and Jon Elster were among the first to emphasize these problems. See Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); and, Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

into account in current deliberations about what to believe, especially when these future opinions are at odds with current opinions. Such conflicts raise questions about the epistemic authority not only of one's future self but also one's current self. If I become aware that my future opinions are going to conflict with my current opinions, I am confronted with the question of whether to trust my current self or defer to my future self.

Notice, however, that although we sometimes speculate about what our future opinions will be, we generally do not base our deliberations about what now to believe on opinions about what our later opinions will be. Thus, epistemic Ulysses problems do not arise with any frequency in our everyday intellectual lives. Nevertheless, they are of significant theoretical interest, in part because the best account of them mimics the account of the intellectual authority of other people developed in Chapter 4 and the account of the intellectual authority of one's past self developed in Chapter 5. The structural similarities among these three accounts suggests that it is possible to develop a perfectly general approach to questions of intellectual authority, that is, an approach that provides an adequate framework for addressing such questions wherever they arise. I return to this point at the end of this chapter.

In addition, epistemic Ulysses problems are intriguing precisely because of their rarity. Why is it that such problems do not arise with any frequency in our everyday intellectual lives? We constantly rely on the opinions of others. Why are we not equally inclined to rely on our own future opinions when we know what they will be? I will propose an answer to this puzzle, but I first need to consider why we might have reasons to take future opinion into account in current deliberations about what to believe.

## 2. TRUST IN FUTURE OPINION

Most of us have a general attitude of trust in our future intellectual efforts and in the opinions these efforts will generate. The trust is not absolute. We know all too well that we are capable of making mistakes. Likewise, the trust does not extend indefinitely into the future. We know that our intellectual abilities are likely to decline if we live long enough. Still, we assume that we generally will be reliable inquirers in the future, even though we cannot prove this.

There is something short of a proof, however. There are internal pressures on us to trust our own future opinions. We are pressured to do

so on threat of inconsistency. The threat arises because we generally trust our current faculties and opinions, and we generally assume that our future opinions will be extensively shaped by our current opinions and faculties. Thus, insofar as we trust our current opinions and faculties, we are pressured to trust our future opinions as well.

Of course, our future opinions will also be influenced by whatever additional information we acquire. However, we generally assume that this additional information will be collected and then processed using faculties and methods not greatly different from our current faculties and methods, and we assume also that these faculties and methods will be interacting with an environment not greatly different from our current environment. Thus, once again, we are pressured to trust our future opinions. If we withheld such trust, we would be hard pressed to explain why it is that our current opinions and faculties are to be generally trusted while our future opinions are not.

Indeed, our intellectual projects invariably presuppose such trust. These projects are temporally extended. They take time to complete and, thus, would not be worth pursuing if we did not assume that our future selves will be generally reliable. Recall an analogous claim made by Peirce, who argued that unless scientists had trust in the community of future inquirers and saw themselves as a part of this community, there would be no point to their inquiries. There would be no point, he thought, because the goal of scientific inquiry is nothing less than the complete truth about the topic being investigated, but given the relative shortness of human lives, there is no realistic hope of individual scientists achieving this goal on their own. Peirce concluded that it is rational for individuals to devote themselves to scientific work only if they view themselves as part of a temporally extended community of inquirers, because it is only such a community that has a realistic chance of achieving the principal intellectual goal in doing science.<sup>2</sup>

My claim about the importance of trusting one's future self is analogous to Peirce's claim about science, only less grandiose and more personalized. No doubt our lives are too short to get the complete truth about very many topics, but on the other hand something less than the complete truth is enough for most of our purposes, even most scientific purposes, and we assume that this is often achievable in a manageable

2 For a discussion of Peirce on these issues, see C. F. Delaney, *Science, Knowledge and Mind: A Study in the Philosophy of C. S. Peirce* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

short period of time. So, we engage in various intellectual projects. Some are personal projects that do not involve a community of inquirers, at least not in any direct way. Moreover, some are very narrowly defined, balancing a checkbook, for example. But even these small personal projects are temporally extended and, thus, even they would have no point if we did not trust our future selves. It takes time and effort to get the answers we are seeking. If we did not think that we would continue to be reliable for the duration of these projects, we would not have a rationale for engaging in them.

Underlying the above argument for trusting future opinion is a consistency claim. If I generally have intellectual trust in my current self, I am pressured for reasons of consistency to trust my future self as well. The pressure arises because it is reasonable for me to think both that my future opinions will be thoroughly influenced by my current opinions and that my future intellectual faculties and environment will be broadly similar to my current intellectual faculties and environment. To be sure, there are no shortage of considerations that can defeat this trust. I can have reasons to think that my evidence will be misleading or that something will interfere with my normal cognitive functioning, to name just two possibilities. Such possibilities are compatible with the above argument, which asserts only that I have a prima facie reason to trust the opinions of my future self. I have this prima facie reason because I believe that my future opinions will be built out of my current opinions supplemented by additional information, where this additional information will be generated by faculties broadly similar to my current faculties interacting with an external environment that is broadly similar to my current environment. I am thus pressured, all else being equal, to extend the trust I have in my current opinions and faculties to my future opinions.

There are ways of trying to block the general force of this argument, but none of these ways is especially plausible. One strategy is for me to deny that my future external environment will be broadly similar to the environment in which I currently form my beliefs. Another is to deny that my future intellectual faculties will be broadly similar to my current ones.

Most of us occasionally entertain the notion that at some future stage of our lives we will be thinking and processing information differently from how we now think and process information. Even so, in its most radical form, this is not a view that many of us are willing to endorse. In our thoughtful moments, we are willing to grant that there will be

broad commonalities between our future selves and our current selves. We assume that in the future we will not be fundamentally different intellectually from what we are now, or, more cautiously, this is so at least for most of us and for most of our future life. If one projects oneself into a distant enough future, assuming longevity, it is not difficult to envision deterioration of one's cognitive faculties. And as the similarities to one's current faculties begin to decrease, so too do the pressures to trust one's opinions at these future times.

Thus, there is nothing inherently incoherent in thinking that one's future intellectual abilities will be vastly different from one's current ones or even that one's future environment will be vastly different. Accordingly, there is nothing inherently incoherent in refusing to grant intellectual authority to one's future self. Yet, it is not an utterly categorical requirement of epistemic rationality that one do so. The claim I am arguing for is more cautious and contingent than this. The claim is that intellectual trust in one's current self normally creates a pressure to trust one's future self as well, a pressure that is extremely difficult to avoid.

This result makes it all the more puzzling that in our everyday intellectual lives future opinion does not play much of a role in shaping current opinion. If, all else being equal, we have reasons to trust our future selves, it seems as if future opinion ought to influence current opinion in much the way that the opinions of others do. Why doesn't it?

I propose an answer to this question in the following sections. Part of the explanation is that the presumption in favor of future opinion is only prima facie and, hence, can be defeated by other considerations. Another part of the explanation is that the prima facie credibility of future opinion is defeated when it conflicts with current opinion. However, a final part of the explanation concerns how we typically get information about what our future opinions will be.

### 3. REASONS FOR BELIEVING THAT I WILL BELIEVE P

If it is to be rational for me to alter my opinion of P on the basis of your believing P, it is not enough for me to believe that you believe P. It must also be rational for me to believe this. It is no different with my own future opinions. If it is to be rational for me to alter my opinion of P on the basis of my future belief P, it must be rational for me to believe that I will believe P. Mere belief won't do.

What kinds of considerations might give me a reason to believe that

I will believe a proposition P? The most common reason is that I now believe P. I currently believe that water is H<sub>2</sub>O, that I was born in the United States, and that hawks are usually larger than finches, and presumably it is rational for me to think that a year from now I will still believe these propositions. Of course, I do not have reasons to think this of every proposition that I currently believe. I believe that I am now wearing a tan shirt, but it is probably safe for me to assume in a year's time I will have forgotten what I was wearing today. Even so, the most routine reason for me to believe that I will believe a claim is that I now believe it. Notice, however, that in such cases, future opinion has no significant role to play in influencing current opinion. These are not cases in which my future beliefs about P give me a reason to alter what I now believe about P. Rather, it is the other way around. The fact that I currently believe P gives me a reason to believe that I will believe P.

Assume, then, that I do not now believe P. Under these circumstances, what might give me a reason to believe that I will believe P? One possibility is that I might have evidence for P itself, evidence that I have somehow overlooked or not fully appreciated. As a result, I do not now believe P, nor do I believe that I will believe P, but this evidence might nonetheless make it rational for me to believe that in a year's time I will have come to appreciate the force of this evidence and, hence, will have come to believe P.

But once again, this is not a case in which my future opinion alters what it is rational for me now to believe. It is precisely the reverse: what I now have reason to believe about P determines what I have a reason to believe about what my future opinion will be. By hypothesis, I do not now believe what it is rational for me to believe about P, but this failure is not the result of my overlooking my future opinion. It is the result of my overlooking my current evidence.

So, if there are to be cases in which it is rational for future opinion to shape or constrain current opinion in some interesting way, they will have to be ones in which my reasons for believing that I will believe P are not derived from my current evidence for P or from my current belief in P. The cases of this sort that come most readily to mind, however, are ones in which I have reasons for thinking that my future opinions will be unreliable. For example, David Christenson describes a case in which I know that I have just taken a psychedelic drug that in one hour will make me very confident that I have the ability to fly. Christenson correctly points out that this does not mean that it is rational

for me now to be confident that I will be able to fly.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Patrick Maher discusses a case in which I know I will be overly confident of my ability to drive home from a party after ten drinks,<sup>4</sup> and Brian Skyrms devises a case in which I know I will be infested with a mindworm, which will cause me to have a variety of strange beliefs.<sup>5</sup> In each of these cases, my reasons for thinking I will believe P are not derived from my current evidence for P or my current belief in P, but on the other hand the reasons impugn my future reliability and, hence, defeat the prima facie credibility I am pressured to grant, on threat of inconsistency, to future opinion. So once again, these are not cases in which future opinion ought to have an effect on current opinion.<sup>6</sup>

Consider a different kind of situation, one in which my reasons for thinking I will believe P have nothing to do with drugs, mindworms, diseases, and the like. As discussed in Chapter 3, studies in cognitive psychology indicate that a large percentage of normally functioning individuals tend to make certain kinds of mistakes with predictable regularity. For example, in some contexts, we tend to assign a higher probability to a conjunction than to one of its conjuncts; in other contexts, we regularly ignore base rates in evaluating statistical data for causal influences; and in yet other contexts, the way we store data in memory adversely affects in a predictable way our estimates of likelihood.

Suppose I am now attentive to my tendency to make mistakes of this sort, having just read the literature that documents them. As a result, I am currently managing to avoid these errors, but I also know that in a year's time I will have dropped my intellectual guard and, as a result, I will once again be guilty of making such mistakes. Among the mistakes,

3 David Christenson, "Clever Bookies and Coherent Beliefs," *Philosophical Review*, 100 (1991), 229-47.

4 Patrick Maher, "Depragmatized Dutch Book Arguments," *Philosophy of Science*, 64 (1997), 291-305.

5 Brian Skyrms, "The Value of Knowledge," in C. Wade Savage, ed., *Justification, Discovery, and the Evolution of Scientific Theories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

6 Christenson, Maher, and Skyrms develop these cases in criticizing a proposal by Bas Van Fraassen, which implies that one's current degree of belief in a proposition P ought to lie within the range of possible opinions one may come to have about P at a later time, as far as one's present opinion is concerned. For example, if I know that in a year I will believe P with a degree of confidence between .7 and .9, then according to van Fraassen, my present degree of confidence in P ought to be between .7 and .9; future opinion in this way constrains current opinion. See van Fraassen, "Belief and the Will," *The Journal of Philosophy* 81 (1984), 235-56; and van Fraassen, "Belief and the Problem of Ulysses and the Sirens," *Philosophical Studies*, 77 (1995), 7-37.

let us suppose, is the belief P. Thus, I might have reasons for thinking that in a year's time I will believe P, and these reasons are not derived from evidence for P or from the fact that I currently believe P. On the other hand, these reasons do impugn my future reliability and, hence, defeat the prima facie credibility of future opinion. Thus, once again, these are not cases in which future opinion ought to influence current opinion.

Suppose it is the testimony of other people whose reliability I have strong reasons to trust that gives me reasons for thinking that I will believe P. The question for me then to ask is why it is that they think I will believe P, given that I do not now believe it? Is their belief based on the presupposition that I will be a reliable inquirer, or do they rather have other kinds of reasons for thinking I will believe P? For example, do they believe that someone will deceive me or that my abilities will deteriorate or that additional information will confuse me, making me prone to errors? If it is reasonable for me to think that considerations of this latter sort have led them to believe I will believe P, my future reliability is again being challenged and along with it the prima facie trustworthiness of my future opinion.

On the other hand, suppose it is reasonable for me to assume that they have no such special reasons for thinking I will believe P, and they are instead presupposing that I will be a reliable inquirer. If so, it is also reasonable for me to think that they themselves believe that P is true and that I as a reliable inquirer will eventually come to agree. But then, there is not a significant difference between this case and an ordinary case of testimony. In effect, their saying that I will believe P, is an indirect way of telling me that P is true.<sup>7</sup>

The lesson that emerges from these various cases is that it is extremely difficult to find situations in which my future opinions should influence my current opinions, and a large part of the explanation for the rarity of

<sup>7</sup> A minor complication is that it is not altogether impossible for others to think that although I am a reliable inquirer, my reliable procedures will unluckily lead me to the wrong conclusion about P. If so, they may think that I will come to believe P even though they do not believe P themselves and, thus, their telling me that I will believe P is not necessarily an instance of indirect testimony. Nevertheless, the relevant issue is what it is reasonable for me to believe of them, given that it is reasonable for me to assume that they are presupposing I will be a reliable inquirer. Although it is possible that they think I will believe P because my reliable procedures will unluckily lead me to the wrong conclusion, by its nature this is an unlikely possibility. So, unless I have concrete evidence indicating otherwise, it will be reasonable for me to assume that they believe P and have inferred that I, as a reliable inquirer, will eventually come to believe it as well.

such situations has to do with the kind of considerations that can make it rational for me now to believe that I will have a belief P. Sometimes my reasons for believing that I will believe P impugn my future reliability, in which case the prima facie credibility of my future opinion is defeated. In other situations, my reasons for thinking I will believe P are based on my current belief in P or my current evidence for P, in which case my current opinion either does or should coincide with what my future opinion will be, but not because the future opinion in any way affects what it is rational for me now to believe. Rather, it is the other way around; it is my current opinion or evidence that shapes what it is rational for me to believe about what my future opinion will be. Agreement between current and future opinion is a by-product in such cases, not something that itself rationally shapes or constrains current opinion.

Are there any cases in which I have neutral reasons to believe that I will believe P, 'neutral', that is, in the sense that they are based neither on a current belief P nor on current evidence for P nor on considerations that impugn my future reliability? It is possible to imagine some such cases, but they tend to not be realistic and, hence, confirm yet again how unusual it is for future opinion to affect current opinion. Even so, it is worth considering one such case.

Imagine that I am in possession of a device that I know reliably predicts what people will believe, and imagine in addition that the way I come to know this has no obvious implications for the reliability of the beliefs predicted. For example, I have no reason to think that the device is better at predicting true beliefs than false ones, or vice-versa. It occurs to me to use the device on myself, to predict my own future opinions, and when I do so, it tells me that I will believe P in a year's time.

By hypothesis, the belief-predicting device gives me a reason to believe that I will believe P. Since I have a prima facie reason to trust future opinion, its being rational for me to believe that I will believe P gives me a prima facie reason now to believe P. Moreover, by hypothesis again, my reasons for believing that I will believe P do not involve evidence of future unreliability.

So here at last is a situation, although admittedly a highly artificial one, in which my reasons for thinking I will believe P are based neither on my current belief P nor on current reasons for P nor on considerations that impugn my future reliability. Thus, it is a situation in which future opinion might potentially play a role in shaping current opinion.

But even here, future opinion should play this role only if the presumption in its favor is not defeated by my having a conflicting current opinion.

#### 4. CONFLICTS BETWEEN CURRENT AND FUTURE OPINIONS

When future opinion conflicts with current opinion, the *prima facie* reason I have to trust future opinion is defeated, thus limiting in another way the potential of future opinion to affect what it is epistemically rational for me now to believe. By "conflict" I mean, as in Chapters 4 and 5, something more than a mere difference in doxastic state. If I will believe P but have no current opinion about P, there is no conflict with my future belief P. Alternatively, if P now strikes me as unlikely, but this attitude is little more than the doxastic counterpart of a whim, then once again there is no real conflict.

A conflict with current opinion defeats the presumption of trust in a future opinion, because the presumption is based on trust in my current self. For the most part, my future opinions will be built out of my current opinions using faculties that are not unlike my current faculties. Thus, insofar as it is reasonable for me to trust my current opinions and faculties, I am pressured to trust my future opinions as well. The broad commonalities between my current self and future self create this presumption, but by the same token, trust in my current self defeats the *prima facie* credibility of my future self with respect to an issue P when there is a conflict between my current and future opinions about P. The credibility of my future self on P is defeated because by my current lights, my future self will be unreliable with respect to P. Trust in my current self creates a presumption in favor of my future opinions, but this same trust dissipates the presumption when there is a conflict with current opinion.

Thus, when my future opinion about P conflicts with a current opinion, my future opinion gives me no reason to alter my current opinion unless I have special reasons for thinking that my future self will be in an especially good position to assess P. By "special reasons" I mean reasons beyond those generated by the general trust I am pressured to have in my future opinions on threat of inconsistency. However, special reasons of this sort are hard to come by when current opinion conflicts with what it is rational for me to believe my future opinion will be. As discussed in the previous section, a more likely scenario is for the consid-

erations making it rational for me to believe that I will believe P to impugn my future reliability. Suppose, however, that the situation is an unusual one. For example, suppose the belief-predicting device mentioned earlier gives me reasons to believe that I will believe P and that I also have reasons to think that I will be in a better position to evaluate P in the future. Perhaps P concerns a future state of affairs, or perhaps P belongs to a field of inquiry in which rapid progress is being made, or perhaps in the future I will be more skilled at evaluating issues of this kind because by then I will have received additional training. In such a situation, even if I currently have a conflicting opinion about P, my reasons for believing that I will believe P can combine with background information about my future reliability to provide me with a reason to alter my current opinion of P.

On the other hand, if I do not have any such special reasons to think that my future self will be in a better position than my current self to judge the truth of P, I have no reason to defer to my future opinion. The *prima facie* reason that my future belief gives me to believe P is defeated by my having a conflicting opinion, and there are no other considerations giving me a reason to defer.

#### 5. FUTURE OPINIONS AND CURRENT DELIBERATIONS

One reason that future opinion so rarely affects what it is now rational for us to believe, despite the former's *prima facie* credibility, is that its credibility can be so easily defeated. It is defeated if there is a conflict with current opinion or if there is evidence of future unreliability. This can be only a partial explanation, however, because the same is true of the opinions of others. The *prima facie* credibility attaching to the opinions of others is defeated when our own opinions conflict with theirs or when we have evidence of their unreliability. Yet, we commonly do rely on the beliefs of others in our deliberations about what to believe. What, then, is the difference?

The biggest difference is in the way we get information about our own future beliefs as opposed to the way we get information about the beliefs of others. The most common reason I have for thinking that I will believe a proposition P is that I now believe P, but in such cases there is not much point in taking future opinion seriously in my deliberations about what to believe. My future belief P, like my other future opinions, is *prima facie* credible, but because I already believe P, it does

not provide a motivation for revising my current opinion. Nor does it add force to my current reasons for P, given that my reasons for thinking that I will believe P are derived from my now believing P.

By contrast, when I have reasons to believe that you believe P, there usually is a point in my taking your opinions seriously. If I have no opinion about P myself, your belief P gives me at least a weak reason to believe P myself. And even if I already believe P, the fact that you also believe P can provide me with additional assurances that P is true, if the considerations leading you to believe P are independent of those leading me to believe P.

Admittedly, there are situations in which my reasons for thinking that I will believe P are not based on my currently believing P and likewise not based on current evidence for P. They are based instead on the likelihood that my memory will by then be unreliable or on the prospect of my then being depressed or even on the knowledge that I will then be under the influence of a drug. In such situations, I am viewing myself more from the outside than is usual, and in extreme cases, I may come close to regarding my future self as a distinct other self rather than an extension of my current self. But, it is precisely in these cases, where my future self most resembles a distinct self, that I have the most reasons to doubt the reliability of my future self. Thus, it is not epistemically rational for these future opinions to influence what I now believe, despite the fact that my reasons for thinking I will have these opinions are independent of my currently having them. This independence potentially makes my future opinions relevant to my current deliberations in much the way that the opinions of others are relevant, but the independence comes at a price, namely, evidence of the unreliability of my future opinions.

#### 6. SELF-TRUST RADIATES OUTWARD

The above account of the epistemic relevance of future opinions is identical in structure with the account of the epistemic relevance of the opinions of others defended in Chapter 4, and also identical in structure with the account of the epistemic relevance of past opinions defended in Chapter 5. The system of reasons and defeaters is the same in all three cases.

At the heart of this structure is a credibility thesis, asserting that we have a prima facie reason to trust the opinions of others, our own future opinions, and our own past opinions. In each instance, the credibility

thesis is made plausible by a combination of self-trust and consistency constraints. It is reasonable for most of us to trust, by and large, our own current opinions, but these opinions have been extensively shaped by the opinions of others and our own past opinions, and in turn they will extensively shape our own future opinions. Thus, insofar as we reasonably trust our current opinions, we are pressured, at risk of inconsistency, also to trust the opinions of others, our future opinions, and our past opinions. Moreover, there are broad commonalities between our current selves on the one hand and other people, our future selves, and our past selves on the other. The kinds of methods, faculties, concepts, and environments that combine to produce the beliefs of other people, the beliefs of our future selves, and the beliefs of our past selves are broadly similar to the kinds of methods, faculties, concepts, and environments that combine to produce or sustain our current beliefs. Thus, once again, insofar as it is reasonable for us to trust our own current opinions, we are pressured to trust also the opinions of others, our own future opinions, and our own past opinions.

At the next level in the structure is a priority thesis, which describes an especially common way for the prima facie credibility of the opinions of others, future opinions, and past opinions to be defeated. Namely, their credibility is defeated by conflicts with current opinions. Trust in my current self creates for me the presumption in favor of the opinion of others, my own future opinions, and my own past opinions, but by the same token, trust in my current self defeats this presumption when there is a conflict with current opinion. So, for the prima facie credibility of someone else's opinion about P to be defeated, I need not have information about the specific conditions under which the person formed the opinion. It is enough that I have a conflicting opinion about P. Similarly, for the prima facie credibility of my past or future opinion about P to be defeated, I need not know anything special about the conditions under which I formed or will form the opinion. It can be enough that I currently have a conflicting opinion.

However, the structure also incorporates a special reasons thesis, which acknowledges that it can be reasonable to defer to the opinions of others, future opinions, and past opinions even when their prima facie credibility is defeated by a conflict with current opinion. It is reasonable for me to defer if I have reasons to think that the other person, my future self, or my past self is better positioned than my current self to assess the truth of the claim at issue.

This structure produces very different results when applied to the



opinions of others, our own future opinions, and our own past opinions. The opinions of others rationally influence our current opinions much more frequently than do our own future or past opinions, but this is because we normally get information about the opinions of others in a different way than we get information about our own past and future opinions. The most common reason I have for thinking that I will or did believe P is that I now believe it, but in such cases there is no point in taking future or past opinion seriously in my deliberations about what to believe. My future or past belief P, like my other future and past opinions, is prima facie credible, but since I already believe P, it does not provide any motivation for revising my current opinion. Nor does it provide me with independent, additional assurances that P is true, insofar as I believe that I will or did believe P only because I now believe P. On the other hand, when considerations other than my currently believing P give me a reason to believe that I will or did believe P, these considerations frequently also give me reasons to doubt my future or past reliability, thus defeating the prima facie credibility of my future or past opinions. For example, if I think that I will believe P because I will be drunk or severely depressed, the prima facie trustworthiness of my future opinion is undermined. Similarly, if I recall that I formerly believed P because of a newspaper article that I now recognize to have been misleading, the prima facie credibility of my past opinion is undermined.

So, there are sharp differences in the ways we typically get information about what we will believe or did believe as opposed to the ways we typically get information about what others believe, and these differences help explain why our own future and past opinions rarely give us adequate reasons to alter our current opinions, whereas the opinions of others frequently do so. Nevertheless, the overall structure of reasons and defeaters is identical in all three cases.

These three accounts are mutually supporting. The case for each is made stronger by the fact that the same structure is operative in the other two cases. This structure, with its three characteristic theses – the credibility thesis, priority thesis, and special reasons thesis – constitutes a theoretically unified approach to questions of intellectual authority. It provides a framework for thinking about issues of intellectual authority wherever they arise.

As to be expected, within this framework there are many complications that I have only hinted at and that a complete account of intellectual authority would have to treat in detail. One of the more important

of these complications is that the prima facie reasons to trust the opinions of others, as well as past and future opinions, come in different degrees of strength, which vary in accordance with factors that I have mentioned only in passing.

For example, the opinions of others, future opinion, and past opinion give me a reason to alter my current opinion only if I have reasons for believing that others have the opinion in question, or that I will or did have it. However, these reasons come in varying strengths and, hence, the strength of my prima facie reason to believe what they believe, or what I will or did believe, varies accordingly.

Moreover, the basic argument in favor of the credibility thesis varies in strength in accordance with the force of the similarity claim on which the argument in part relies. According to the argument, the kinds of methods, faculties, concepts, and environments that combine to produce the beliefs of other people, our future selves, and our past selves are ordinarily broadly similar to the kinds of methods, faculties, concepts, and environments that combine to produce our current beliefs. Thus, insofar as it is reasonable for us to trust our own current opinions, faculties, methods, and procedures, we are pressured, on threat of inconsistency, to trust also the opinions of others, our own future opinions, and our own past opinions.

Similarities come in degrees, however. The methods, faculties, concepts, and environments that combine to produce the beliefs of the Masai, for example, are less similar to mine than those that combine to produce the beliefs of my two brothers. Likewise, the methods, faculties, concepts, and environments that will combine to produce my beliefs twenty years from now are likely to be less similar to my current ones than those that will combine to produce my beliefs twenty days from now. Analogous claims are true of my past methods, faculties, concepts, and environments. Those of the recent past are likely to be more similar to my current ones than those of the distant past.

The strength of the prima facie reason referred to by the credibility thesis thus varies in accordance with the strength of the relevant similarity claim. In particular, it varies as a function of distance in time, place, and circumstance. The smaller this distance, that is, the more extensive the similarities of time, place, and circumstance, the stronger the force of the argument. Correspondingly, the prima facie reason to trust the opinions of others, future opinions, and past opinions is also stronger. On the other hand, the greater the distance, the weaker the force of the argument is and the weaker the prima facie reason is.

The basic argument for the credibility thesis also appeals to considerations of influence. My own past opinions and the opinions of others have influenced my current opinions, and my current opinions will in turn influence my future opinions. Thus, insofar as it is reasonable for me to trust my current opinions, I am pressured to trust the opinions of others and my own past opinions, because they have influenced current opinion, and to trust as well my own future opinions, since current opinion will influence them. However, influences, like similarities, come in degrees. The opinions of the recent past and the opinions of those people in my immediate environment ordinarily have a greater degree of influence on my current opinions than do opinions of the distant past and opinions of those far removed from me. Analogously, my current opinions are likely to have a greater degree of influence on my opinions of the near future than those of the distant future. Accordingly, the prima facie reasons I have to trust the opinions of others, my own past opinions, and my own future opinions once again vary as a function of distance.

The varying strengths of such reasons is just what one should expect, given the account of intellectual authority I have been defending. According to this account, trust in the overall reliability of our current opinions and in the faculties, methods, and procedures that produce or sustain these opinions is a nearly inescapable feature of our intellectual lives. This self-trust, which can be reasonable even if we have no non-question-begging assurances that we are reliable, radiates outward to make trust in others, our own future selves, and our own past selves prima facie reasonable as well. For, insofar as we reasonably trust our current selves, we are pressured, on threat of inconsistency, to trust also the opinions of others, our own future opinions, and our own past opinions. However, as self-trust radiates outward, the force of the reasons it produces diminishes as a function of the distance between our current selves on the one hand and our own future selves, our own past selves, and other people on the other hand.