RATIONALITY, BELIEF AND COMMITMENT

Epistemologists have tended to treat questions about the rationality of our beliefs as if they were fundamentally different from questions about the rationality of our decisions, actions, strategies, and plans. A more promising strategy is to construe the theory of rational belief as a part of a general theory of rationality. In any event, the following will be my strategy. I shall sketch a way of thinking about questions of rationality wherever they arise, whether they be questions concerning the rationality of our decisions, actions, strategies, or whatever. This perfectly general theory of rationality can then be applied to questions of rational belief.

But this sketch will be a preliminary to the main matter to be discussed, which concerns the different kinds of reasons we can have to believe something. The most interesting divide is between evidential and non-evidential reasons for belief. The general theory of rationality that I sketch provides a framework within which this distinction can be appreciated and possible conflicts between the two kinds of reasons assessed. In doing so, it reveals a middle ground between ‘evidentialists’, who insist that there are never good non-evidential reasons for belief, and ‘Pascalian’, who insist that non-evidential reasons are in no way inferior to evidential ones. The correct position, I shall argue, is between the two: pragmatic benefits are in principle relevant to questions of rational belief, but in general these benefits are best won by believing that for which we have adequate evidence.

One way of challenging this position is to cite the important role that simplicity and other theoretical virtues play in our intellectual lives. On the face of it, considerations of simplicity might seem to give us a good pragmatic but not a good evidential reason to believe a hypothesis. But, if so, our evidential and non-evidential reasons for belief threaten to come apart, not just occasionally but regularly.

The threat is more apparent than real, however, and the way to see this is to be careful enough about two distinctions. The first is the distinction between evidential reasons and non-evidential reasons for belief, and the second is the distinction between genuine belief and

intellectual commitment. An added benefit of these distinctions is that they pave the way for a better understanding of the role that simplicity and other like considerations play in a rational intellectual life.

1. A SKETCH OF A THEORY OF RATIONALITY

Rationality is a goal-oriented notion. Questions about the rationality of our decisions, strategies, plans, and projects are essentially questions about how effectively they promote our goals. The same is true of our beliefs. Questions about their rationality are also essentially questions about how effectively they promote our goals.

For the moment, I shall put issues of rational belief to one side. There are complications enough without it. One of these complications is that we want to allow the possibility that things might turn out badly for you even if you are 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. It is even too stringent to say that the decision is rational only if it is likely to satisfy your goals. After all, perhaps you could not have been reasonably expected to see that your decision was likely to have the unwelcome consequences that it in fact had. So, suppose we say, at least as a way of beginning, that your decision is rational provided that it will apparently satisfy your goals. If we do say this, however, we shall want to know from the outset to whom this is supposed to be apparent. To you? To the members of your community? To a reasonably-knowledgeable observer? The question is one of perspective. What perspective is the appropriate one for making judgments of rationality?

This is not the only question that will arise. We shall also want to know about 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 while rationality does not. Reasonability is a matter of the relative strength of your reasons. The rational is that which is sufficiently reasonable. This leaves open the possibility that a number of decisions might be 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? Here again there are many complications, 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 your decisions in terms of their 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.\(^1\) We are thus driven to the issue of how, if at all, these values are to be measured. But for purposes here, this issue can be largely ignored. It will do simply to say that a decision of yours is rational just 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 it is 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.

This is vague, of course, but the vagueness won’t hinder the discussion of the points in which I am primarily interested, one of which has to do with the above question of perspective: What perspective is the appropriate one for making judgments of rationality?

My answer is that there is no simple answer to this question. Judgments of rationality are judgments about how things look from some presupposed 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 we make about what reasons you have 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 presuppose in making a judgment of rationality depends upon our interests and the context.

We are sometimes interested in evaluating your decisions from your own egocentric perspective. Our aim is to assess whether or not you have lived up to your own standards. So, 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 de-
cision from it. We then give expression to our evaluations using the
term ‘rational’ or one of its cognates. We are especially prone to do
this when we are reconstructing a past decision that, from our more
informed position, we know has turned out badly. It may even be
obvious to us 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 seems so obvious to
us. So, we try to enter into your situation. We try to see the decision
from your perspective. We bracket to the extent possible any infor-
mation that is now available to us but that was not then available to
you. In addition, we try to identify the method that you yourself thought
was the appropriate one to use in interpreting the available information,
a method that perhaps we regard as unreliable but one whose employ-
ment we nonetheless might grant was natural for you to employ, given
your situation. If we discover such a method and if it, relative to the
information available to you, identifies the decision you made as a
satisfactory one, 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 own ego-
centric perspective. Or, short of this, it might 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 will seem 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 this culture to make decisions about
matters of the sort in question may not be the method that we now
think is best. Even so, we may think it is unfair to evaluate their
decisions in terms of our more sophisticated standards. However, it is
not unfair, we may think, to judge their decisions in terms of the
method that was standard in their community. And, once again, we
may very well give expression to the results of such an inquiry by using the language of rationality.

By contrast, we sometimes are interested in evaluating the actual effectiveness of a decision and, once again, we tend to express these evaluations using the language of rationality. If we are evaluating one of your decisions, we talk of ‘what it is rational for you to do’ or ‘what you have reasons to do’. These evaluations can also be given a perspectival reading. A decision is rational in an objective sense only if a knowledgeable observer would take it to be an effective means to your goals. So, in making an objective judgment of rationality, we are in effect trying to see the decision from the perspective of such an observer. This observer need not be thought of as omniscient. We need not imagine that the observer knows with certainty what the consequences would be of each option available to the decision-maker; rather, we imagine that the observer is able “only” to determine infallibly the objective probabilities of the various options yielding various outcomes. Thus, an option is rational for you, at least in the simplest of cases – ones, for example, in which only one of your goals is involved – just 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. The concern is not so much to see the decision from your viewpoint or even from the viewpoint of your community. We are not interested in bracketing the information we have; rather, we try to exploit fully that information in an attempt to assess the objective probabilities of various options yielding various outcomes. And as I have said, we then tend to give expression to these assessments using the language of rationality.

Thus, there is no single perspective that is adequate for understanding the entire range of our judgments of rationality. We make such judgments for an enormous variety of purposes and in an enormous variety of contexts, and the kind of judgment we are inclined to make varies with these purposes and contexts. Nevertheless, we can formulate a general thesis about judgments of rationality and irrationality; namely, they are all judgments about whether from some presupposed perspective a decision, action, strategy, or whatever would appear to be an effective means to a set of presupposed goals. Any one of a number of
perspectives might be presupposed for the purposes of this evaluation, including, for example, the perspective of the individual whose decision or action it is, the perspective of a typical member of this individual's community, the perspective of an expert in the community, or the perspective of a knowledgeable observer.

Our everyday claims of rationality and irrationality ordinarily do not make explicit the perspective that they are presupposing. They are commonly elliptical. Accordingly, if we are to understand these claims properly, we must take care to identify the perspective. Sometimes this isn't difficult. If, for example, someone says, "I don't care what you or anyone else may think, the rational thing for you to do is...", then we can be pretty well assured that the perspective being presupposed is an objective one. Sometimes, however, the perspective will not be at all obvious, but if it is not we can always 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?".

2. THE THEORY OF RATIONAL BELIEF

For the moment, I shall restrict my attention to claims of rationality that purport to be objective. So, we need not worry about identifying the relevant perspective for these claims. Nevertheless, there is a second way in which claims of rationality can be elliptical. Depending upon the context and our purposes, we can take into consideration all or only some of the individual's 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 one of your decisions only with respect to those 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 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 non-prudential, it is not rational for you to decide in favor of X.

Thus, to prevent misunderstandings, we need to be clear about what goals are being presupposed by a claim of rationality. Just as we are always entitled to ask of someone making a claim of rationality, "From
what perspective, is this 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 is an especially important point when it is the rationality of beliefs that is at issue. Claims about what it is rational for you to believe, like all other claims of rationality, are claims about what would effectively satisfy your goals, only here we typically do not seem interested in the total constellation of your goals. Our interest is in only those goals that are distinctly intellectual. Thus, we typically regard as irrelevant the fact (if it is one) that were you to believe that the workmanship on Japanese cars is shoddy, you would be more likely to buy a European or an American model and, thus, 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 non-evidential reasons for belief, there is nothing in principle wrong with evaluating the rationality of your beliefs in terms of how well they promote your non-intellectual 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 your beliefs, we generally are 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 convince you to believe some proposition. In an effort to persuade you, 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 is ordinarily not 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 this proposition, but in itself it won’t be enough to persuade you that the earth really is flat.

By contrast, if you become convinced that you have good intellectual reasons to believe something – in particular, good evidential reasons\(^3\) – this ordinarily is enough to generate belief.\(^4\) A belief is a psychological state that by its very nature, in Bernard Williams’ phrase,\(^5\) “aims at truth”. John Searle expresses essentially the same point in terms of direction of fit: “It is the responsibility of the belief, so to speak, to match the world . . .”.\(^6\) When we propose non-evidential reasons for belief, we are not even trying to meet this responsibility. Our reasons do not aim at truth. As a result, they normally do not 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 – viz., it is normally pointless to cite them, since they are not the kind of reasons that normally generate belief. Similarly, in our own deliberations about what to believe, we ordinarily do not consider what practical reasons we might have for believing something, and part of the explanation is similar to the third-person case. Deliberations concerning our practical reasons are ordinarily inefficacious and, hence, pointless.\(^7\)

There is another kind of explanation as well. Such deliberations are ordinarily redundant. Although you do have practical reasons as well as evidential reasons for believing, ordinarily your overriding practical reason with respect to your beliefs is 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 do not know in advance in any detailed way what kinds of decisions these will be. Consequently,
you do not know in advance the kind of information you will require in order to make these decisions well. This might not be terribly important were it not for the fact that a number of these decisions are ones that will need to be made relatively quickly, without the luxury of time either to engage in lengthy research or to seek expert opinion. You will be forced to draw upon your existing resources and in particular upon your existing stock of beliefs. If that stock is either small or inaccurate, you increase 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 one that 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 ordinarily these practical reasons 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 find some way of believing this.

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. So, if you are to believe these propositions, you may need to plot against yourself in Pascalian fashion. 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 this involves manuevering yourself into what you would now regard as a worse
evidential situation. You may need to get yourself into a situation in which you have misleading but nonetheless persuasive data about these propositions.

Such plottings 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 altered. Thus, 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, in order 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 that you have deliberately manipulated your situation in order to garner data favoring the proposition. Otherwise, at the end of your manipulations you won’t be convinced by the evidence. You will be aware that it is biased in favor of the proposition.

If the proposition is $P$ and if your children will be killed unless you believe $P$, it will be rational for you to engage in this kind of desperate manipulation. But in less extreme cases, the costs of such manipulations are likely to be unacceptably high relative to the benefits of the resulting belief. After all, Pascalian plottings require considerable effort, and they are likely to affect adversely the overall accuracy of your beliefs and, thus, the overall effectiveness of your decision making. So, except in those rare cases in which huge benefits are in the offering, it will be irrational, all things considered, to engage in this kind of plotting against your epistemic self.\(^8\)

Drastic plots against yourself may not always be necessary, however. Suppose that you have reasons to believe that your lover has been faithful despite credible testimony to the contrary, since believing this is the only way, given your attitude toward infidelity, of saving the relationship. Or suppose you have reasons to believe that you will recover from your illness despite clear indications to the contrary, since only this belief will generate the resolve needed to follow a regimen that increases your slim chances for recovery. These kinds of practical reasons for belief will be no more capable of directly persuading you to believe the propositions in question than the threat of the madman or the offer of a million dollars. It is not enough for you to be convinced that having these beliefs will be good for you. But, on the other hand, for you to believe these propositions, it may be not necessary for you
to engage in full-fledged self-deception either. More modest deceits may do. You may be able to find ways to take your mind off the evidence of your lover’s infidelity or the symptoms of your illness. Simultaneously, you can fasten onto any sign of fidelity and health. You might even unconsciously adjust your standards of evidence. In the case of your lover, you may find yourself insisting on higher standards of evidence, and as a result it may take unusually good evidence to convince you of the infidelity. In the case of your illness, just the opposite might occur. You might adjust your standards downward, thus making it easier for you to believe in your recovery.

Even these cases confirm the general rule, however, since it is precisely in these cases, where your practical reasons and your evidential reasons come apart, that we are most prone to take practical reasons for belief seriously. Most of us will admit, for example, that it is not unreasonable for you to believe in your lover’s innocence until you have something close to irresistible evidence to the contrary. If this involves closing your ears to the sort of testimony that in other matters you would find credible, then so be it. The not-so-hidden presumption is that in this situation, where the practical consequences of belief are so significant, it is not irrational, all things considered, for you to resist your evidence. In effect, we are saying that although it would be rational for you to believe that your lover has been unfaithful were you exclusively an epistemic being – that is, were you exclusively concerned with having an accurate and comprehensive system of beliefs – there are other considerations that make it important for you in this matter not to view yourself in this way.

3. EVIDENTIAL AND NON-EVIDENTIAL REASONS FOR BELIEF

There are other ways in which your evidential and non-evidential reasons might seem to come apart, and some of these ways seem to be such that not even a hint of self-deception is necessary in order for you to believe that which you have good practical reasons to believe. These kinds of cases are especially troublesome for epistemology, and I shall discuss them in a moment, but in preparation I need first to take a step backward.

I have been presupposing a rough, intuitive distinction between evidential and non-evidential reasons for belief, but for what follows this distinction needs to be made with some care. No doubt it is hopeless
to make it in a way that will satisfy everyone, but a promising way to begin is to say that \( A \) provides you with an evidential reason to believe \( B \) only if you stand in an appropriate relation to \( A \) and only if, in addition, from some presupposed perspective \( A \) seems to be a mark of \( B \)'s truth. The appropriate relation that you must bear to \( A \) can be left open for the discussion here – perhaps you must know \( A \) or, perhaps, you must rationally believe it or, perhaps, it is enough for you to have some sort of access to its truth. Similarly, the notion of a mark can be left somewhat vague. My purpose here is not to defend a particular account of evidence but, rather, only to sketch a general approach. So, let me simply say, without any illusion that this is deeply illuminating, that \( A \)'s truth is a mark of \( B \)'s truth just in case \( A \)'s truth makes \( B \)'s truth objectively probable, where objective probability is given an empirical reading. It is a frequency or a propensity of some sort.

One noteworthy feature of this approach is that it allows a factoring of evidence that is analogous to the one that I have already proposed for rationality. In an objective sense, \( A \) provides you with evidence for \( B \) only if, from the perspective of an observer who knows the objective probabilities, \( A \)'s truth seems to be a mark of \( B \)'s truth. Alternatively, \( A \) provides you with egocentric evidence for \( B \) only if, from your own perspective (perhaps on reflection), \( A \)'s truth seems to be a mark of \( B \)'s truth. And similarly for a sociocentric conception of evidence.

Each of these notions ties evidence to what might be called ‘a purely epistemic goal’. Purely epistemic goals are those that are concerned solely with the accuracy and comprehensiveness of our current belief systems. Thus, the goal of now believing those propositions that are true and now not believing those propositions that are false is a purely epistemic goal. There can be other purely epistemic goals as well, but they all can be regarded as variations on this one. So, I shall restrict my attention to it.

But first, a quick terminological remark: when I speak of the goal of now having an accurate and comprehensive belief system and speak also of what might be a means to this goal, I am using ‘means’ in a broad sense. In particular, there are constitutive means as well as causally effective means. A constitutive means to a goal is itself a part of the goal. For example, if we think of good health not just as a state in which you currently lack disease but also one in which you are not 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. This cannot be a causally effective means to the goal of now having an accurate and comprehensive belief system, since this goal is a present-tense one, but it can be a constitutive means 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.¹⁰

The most important point here, however, is that no other goal is tied to your evidence in the way that the purely epistemic goal is. In particular, 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 – say, that of believing over the long run those propositions that are true and not believing over the long run those propositions that are false. This may be one of your goals, but it is not a goal that is 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 your own intellectual shortcomings. 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. It is the same with other goals. Your evidence indicates, or at least purports to indicate, what beliefs are likely to satisfy the purely epistemic goal, but it need not even purport to indicate what beliefs are likely to satisfy your other goals.

This 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 conception of evidence, an egocentric conception, or a sociocentric conception. Whatever one’s criteria of evidence, those criteria must make sense, from the presupposed perspective, of this tie. The criteria must be ones that “aim” at identifying beliefs that are likely to satisfy a purely epistemic goal.
This restriction has more bite than it might appear to have 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, the account may not be 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 to the truth eventually but also to do so now.

Consider, for example, 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 would trivially make the above rule an evidential one. If the simplest explanation is by definition the one that is most likely to be true relative to that which we know or rationally believe, then the above rule will be uncontroversial but also uninteresting. So, 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. 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 non-trivial, which is what is needed for purposes here. For the point at issue is that if an account emphasizing non-trivial 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 that there is no such rationale, or at least no non-question-begging one. Does this then mean that accounts of rational belief that emphasize considerations of simplicity are inadequate? Not necessarily. It only means that it is best not to think of them as evidential accounts, as ones that are concerned with evaluations of our beliefs in terms of how effectively they satisfy a purely epistemic goal; rather, it is best to think of them as being concerned with a wider range of goals, including both long-term intellectual and non-intellectual goals. Considerations of simplicity would seem to find a more natural home in this kind of account. Indeed, it would seem easy
to provide a plausible rationale for them – viz., simple hypotheses are
easier for us to manipulate and test than complex ones. Thus, a policy
of believing the simplest adequate explanation is a policy that over the
long run will help promote our long-term intellectual goals as well as
our non-intellectual ones. But if so, there are good objective reasons,
all else being equal, to believe the simpler of two hypotheses, only
these reasons are not evidential reasons. They are reasons that are
based on considerations of theoretical convenience, not on consider-
ations that purport to show that the truth is apt to be simple.

This brings us back to the main issue, the issue concerning our
evidential and non-evidential reasons for belief. For if we were to grant
that there really are good objective reasons to believe the simplest of
otherwise equal hypotheses but that these reasons are not evidential
ones, then this is yet another way in which evidential and non-evidential
reasons for belief can come apart. All things considered, you may have
an adequate reason to believe the simplest hypothesis that is empirically
adequate even though you do not have an adequate evidential reason
for thinking that it is true. Moreover, cases of this sort may not be
particularly unusual. But, if not, the reassuring idea that your non-
evidential reasons for belief ordinarily reinforce your evidential reasons
begins to unravel, and it begins to look once again as if your epistemic
self is frequently at odds with your non-epistemic self.

But, in fact, we are not forced to this conclusion. We are not forced
to it even if we grant that the simplicity of a hypothesis does not give
you an evidential reason to believe it. For despite the appearances to
the contrary, we need not grant that you have adequate non-evidential
reasons to believe the simplest of otherwise equal hypotheses, either.
This is so because you need not believe the simplest hypothesis in order
to win the benefits of simplicity. Ordinarily, any intellectual or practical
benefits that can be won by 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 use it in the design of
experiments, in the formulation of other hypotheses, and so on.¹³

A policy of commitment may not always be effective. There may be
an occasional situation 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 opti-
mism necessary to win the benefits. But, ordinarily, a sufficiently robust attitude of commitment toward the hypothesis will be as effective as genuine belief.

So, your evidential and non-evidential reasons for belief in these cases 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. This is so even when believing a simple hypothesis for which you lack adequate evidence would produce significant benefits. 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 – i.e., without sacrificing your epistemic goal.\(^\text{14}\)

Problems of this sort arise for simplicity because it isn’t a mark of truth or, at least, so I have been assuming. This suggests that similar problems will arise for any criteria of rational belief that purport to be objective but that cannot be plausibly construed as evidential criteria. It suggests, in other words, that only those criteria that can be plausibly construed as marks of truth can be plausibly construed as criteria for an objective notion of rational belief. Otherwise, they will be subject to the same dilemma that plagues simplicity. On the one hand, it will not be possible to provide a plausible rationale for them in terms of a purely epistemic goal, since they are not marks of truth. On the other, with respect to our other important goals, a policy of committing ourselves to the truth of the propositions (hypotheses, theories, etc.) that satisfy the criteria 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 – i.e., 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 our 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.\(^\text{15}\) 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. So, the challenge for the proponents of such criteria is to find some way of illustrating that their criteria really can be so construed.
The important point here is not so much whether or not this challenge can be met; maybe it can. The point is, rather, that accounts that emphasize considerations of simplicity, fertility, problem-solving effectiveness, and the like, will have no chance at all of fulfilling the aspirations of their proponents unless they can supply some rationale for regarding these considerations as marks of truth. For they want these considerations to have a general applicability to questions of rational belief. There is, they think, something that objectively recommends such considerations to us all as reasons for belief. But if this is to be so, these considerations must be evidential ones.

This is not merely a terminological remark about the term ‘evidence’, it is a point about reasons for belief. If such considerations are going to give you objective reasons for belief, they must be marks of truth. It must be the case that by believing simple theories or fertile theories or theories that increase your problem-solving capacity, you increase the likelihood of your now 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 you have a reason to commit yourself rather than hypotheses that you have a reason actually to believe.

The corollary, and this returns us to the thesis with which we began, is that ordinarily you have objective reasons to believe only hypotheses for which you have objective evidence. At first glance, it might seem otherwise. It might seem as if considerations of simplicity, fertility, problem-solving capacity, and the like, provide you with good 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, they are evidential reasons and there is a no conflict. If the latter, then these considerations are best addressed by a policy of commitment rather than belief and, thus, once again there is no conflict.

There is a potential cost to this resolution, however. The cost is irrationality. If, as I have been assuming, simplicity is not a mark of truth but we nonetheless have a tendency to believe simple hypotheses, then 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.

Of course, in itself this is not an objection. What we hope for and
what is true are two different things. Still, it is enough to warrant a closer look at the resolution. A good place to begin is with the notion of commitment.

4. Belief and 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 is an attitude 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, a 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 do have much in common, especially in the ways that they contrast with belief. For example, they are both context dependent in a way in which 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 an hypothesis within the confines of your professional life, but if in a social setting you were asked about it, 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, by contrast, 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 might commit yourself to hypotheses that you do not really believe, so, too, you might not commit yourself to a hypothesis that you do believe, since commitment might have unwelcome consequences. Perhaps it would be politically unwise, even intellectually unwise. You might be convinced, for instance, that although the hypothesis is likely to be true, committing yourself to its truth at this time would somehow impede rather than promote scientific 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 reason 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 reason to act as if the fish that has been specially prepared for you really isn’t overcooked, despite its dryness. You may have reason to act as if your colleague’s presentation really wasn’t overly repetitive, despite the obvious restlessness of the audience. Fear of giving offence 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 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 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 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 more fine-grained 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.16

Even more strongly, it is sometimes argued 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.\textsuperscript{17} 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;\textsuperscript{18} but, no matter. It is clear
that considerations of simplicity do play some significant role in shaping
our beliefs. They play this role 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 may not be worth worrying about. It may be no
more worth worrying about than your 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 detri-
mental effects. Of course, it might have such effects. It might somehow
affect you adversely, perhaps by prompting you to make a bad decision
about some other important matter. But this need not be the case and,
presumably, it often is not.

The same goes for belief in simple hypotheses. You may lack ade-
quate objective evidence for such hypotheses and, perhaps whatever
benefits accrue to you because of your beliefs in them could have been
secured by committing yourself to them instead. Nevertheless, as long
as these beliefs do not adversely affect the rest of your life, as they
ordinarily will not, there is no need for great concern.

I shall return to this point in a moment, but for now it needs only
to be noted that this will not be enough to satisfy those proponents of
simplicity 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 does not seem to be any such rationale.
Or, at least, this is so 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 committing
ourselves to the truth of simple hypotheses rather than genuinely believing them.

Might we “go subjective” in our defense of simplicity? Perhaps, but even here there are problems. The simplicity of a hypothesis, we have been 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, taken in this sense, is a mark of truth. But if not, there will be no interesting — i.e., no general — egocentric defense of these accounts either. There is no defense, in other words, that implies that we all have an egocentric 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 egocentric reasons to have such beliefs, because they mistakenly think that the simplicity is a mark of truth.

This is neither very surprising nor very interesting. And, of course, it is not a position that would satisfy the proponents of simplicity. They do not want merely to claim that from some egocentric (or sociocentric) perspectives there appears to be something to recommend simple explanations. They want to claim that a policy of believing simple explanations really is a satisfactory means to some important goal.19

5. SIMPLICITY DEFENDED

If simplicity is not a mark of truth, then there is nothing to recommend belief in simple hypotheses — nothing epistemic (since simplicity is not a mark of truth) but nothing non-epistemic either (since commitment will do equally well as belief but at no epistemic cost). Even so, there is a strategy that holds out hope for a defense of simplicity. It is to admit that it is irrational to believe the simplest of otherwise equal hypotheses but, nonetheless, to insist that it is rational to be irrational in this way. Let me explain.

I have already conceded that considerations of simplicity inevitably do play a role in our theorizing. They do so because we have only limited cognitive abilities and only a limited amount of time to exercise these abilities. Indeed, if a hypothesis is complex enough, it may not
be possible for us even to understand it. So, it will not even be a
candidate for belief; it will be filtered out automatically. And even
among those hypotheses that we are able to understand, some will be
so complex that it would be impractical for us to take them seriously.
It would take far too much of our time even to deliberate about them,
much less to test them or to use them in making predictions or in
constructing other hypotheses. They are so complex that they would
be of little use to us even if they are true; they, too, will be filtered
out. We won’t take them seriously; we shall simply ignore them.

This need not be a conscious policy on our part. It is not as if we
made a decision to follow such a procedure. It is more a matter of our
dispositions and practices, ones to which we may have given little
thought. But the result of these dispositions and practices is that simple
hypotheses as a group tend to get a preferential treatment over complex
hypotheses as a group. As a group, we are disposed to take them more
seriously than complex ones, and the result often enough is that we are
more disposed to believe them as well.

We are disposed to believe them even though, I am assuming, the
simplicity of a hypothesis gives us neither an objective nor an egocentric
reason to believe them. Thus, to the degree that considerations of
simplicity have played a role in our coming to believe various hypoth-
eses, these beliefs may be both objectively and egocentrically irrational.
Nor need we have objective or egocentric reasons to believe these
hypotheses, all things considered – i.e., when all of our goals are taken
into account. It may be rational, all things considered, for us to commit
ourselves to their truth rather than believe them. Even so, it may be
rational for us to put up with this kind of irrationality.

This may appear paradoxical, but the appearance disappears once
we notice that there is a distinction between what beliefs it is rational
for us to acquire and what beliefs it is rational for us to retain. So, for
example, 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 often be the case for belief
in simple hypotheses. If no significant harm is done by your believing
rather than merely committing yourself to a hypothesis, you may be
justified in continuing to believe it. You may be justified in doing so
even though you do not have adequate evidence for it and even though
you do not have any other adequate reason to believe it. Going to the
trouble of ridding yourself of the belief may not be worth the effort.
After all, the irrationality you are guilty of here may not affect your life in any major way and, thus, it may not be that big of a deal. It may be analogous to believing that the tie that has just been given to you really is your favorite color rather than merely acting as if this were the case. You believe this because you are touched by the gift, and this causes you, at least temporarily, to ignore the fact you never buy ties of this color for yourself. This belief may be irrational, but you probably don’t have reasons to rid yourself of it. It’s not worth the effort.

Moreover, the analogy can be extended. Suppose it is not out of character for you to be moved by gifts, nor is it out of character for this to make you forget, at least for the moment, that you never buy ties of this color for yourself. The result, often enough, is an irrational belief. Still, you may not have an adequate reason to try to change this part of your character. It may not be worth the effort.

So, too, you may not have adequate reasons to alter those parts of your intellectual practices and character that are responsible for your believing simple hypotheses; after all, doing so may not be easy. Your disposition to believe rather than merely commit yourself to simple hypotheses may be a deep-seated one. If so, then given that simplicity is not a mark of truth, you have a deep-seated disposition to be irrational – i.e., a disposition to believe hypotheses that you do not have an adequate reason to believe. Nevertheless, it might not be rational for you to try to rid yourself of this disposition. Doing so might be too costly. It may not be worth the trouble.

A stronger and more interesting result may also be possible. It may be positively rational for you to have a disposition to believe rather than commit yourself to simple hypotheses. It may be rational for you to have this disposition even though the beliefs that this disposition produces tend to be irrational, and not just epistemically irrational but also irrational, all things considered – i.e., when all your goals are taken into account.

This again may have the sound of paradox, but consider an analogy. The love you have for your family may sometimes cause you to act wrongly. It may cause you to go too far in your efforts to do what is best for them. The result may be that sometimes your actions cause undue hardships for others. You excessively favor your family’s interests over theirs. Still, it might be worse if you did not have this strong love for your family. If you loved them less, you perhaps wouldn’t be
disposed to favor them excessively. So, it would correct this problem but, on the other hand, it might be far worse for your family. If you loved them any less, you might carry out your responsibilities toward them less well, and this might lead to results that overall are much worse than those that are produced by your being too zealous in favoring them. Thus, it might be best for you to have this strong love for your family. This might be best even though, given the kind of person you are, it sometimes inclines you to act wrongly.20

Similarly, given the kind of cognitive creature you are, it might be positively desirable for you to have a disposition to believe simple hypotheses. It might be part of the best set of cognitive dispositions for you to have. Any other set, or at least any other set that you are capable of, might leave you worse off. If you didn’t have this disposition, you wouldn’t be as inclined to believe simple hypotheses and, thus, you would avoid one kind of irrational belief. But as in the case where your love for your family inclines you to act wrongly, it might have other drawbacks. Were you to lack this disposition, perhaps you would find yourself spending more time deliberating over whether to believe or merely commit yourself to hypotheses, and this might divert your attention from other, more important intellectual matters, causing you to make errors of judgment about them. If so, it is objectively rational for you to have this disposition, despite the fact that it inclines you toward objectively irrational beliefs.21

This, then, is at least the beginnings of a defense for simplicity, and similar defenses may be available for many of the other theoretical virtues – fertility and problem-solving effectiveness, for example. It is not a defense that tries to argue that simplicity really is a mark of truth or that all of us at least implicitly treat it as such. Nor is it a defense that ignores the difference between belief and commitment. On the contrary, it acknowledges that it may very well be irrational for you to believe as opposed to commit yourself to a hypothesis if simplicity has played a significant role in selecting it. This may be objectively irrational and egocentrically irrational as well. The defense instead consists of arguing that the irrationality here is of the very weakest sort. A mark of its weakness is that ordinarily you won’t have adequate reasons, objective or egocentric, to rid yourself of the belief in the hypothesis, and likewise you ordinarily won’t have adequate reasons to rid yourself of the disposition to acquire such beliefs. On the contrary, it may even be positively rational for you to have such a disposition, despite the
fact that it often inclines you to have irrational beliefs. You might be worse off without it. It might be rational for you to be irrational in this way.

6. CONCLUSION

Real believers have real constraints upon them. They don’t have unlimited time and resources to devote to intellectual pursuits. Thus, if a hypothesis is complex enough, it won’t be of much use to real believers even if it is true. Their intellectual practices reflect this. Real believers tend to ignore impractically-complex hypotheses and, moreover, it is rational for them to have this disposition. Even so, the beliefs produced by this disposition need not be rational. They need not be rational even if they are the products of a rational disposition.

In this way, we can account for the important role that considerations of simplicity and the like play in the intellectual lives of rational human beings, and we can do so without making simplicity into a mark of truth and without jeopardizing the thesis that in general our evidential and non-evidential reasons do not come apart.

These are welcome results, and ones that conform with the thesis that neither a crass evidentialism nor a crass Pascalianism will do with respect to our reasons for belief. 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 Pascalian is right in refusing to dismiss such benefits as altogether irrelevant to questions of rational belief. The correct position is one between the two: 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.

NOTES


For he governs his Assent 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, transgresses 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.

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

4 Compare with Thomas Reid who says, "... nor is it in a man's power to believe anything longer than he thinks he has evidence". See Reid: 1895, 'Essays on the Intellectual Powers', in The Philosophical Works of Thomas Reid, James Thin, London, Chapter X, Section 1.


7 Compare this with reasons to intend something, reasons to try something, reasons to choose something, and the like. 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 your 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 you 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: 1983, 'The Toxin Puzzle', Analysis 43, 33–36.) Something analogous, albeit less dramatic, may be true of everyday intentions – viz., 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 with you about the rationality of your intentions. Part of the solution is similar to the above one for belief. Becoming convinced that you have these kind of reasons is ordinarily not enough to generate a genuine intention to do X. So, insofar as we are trying to persuade you to have this intention, it will normally be pointless for us to cite such considerations. By contrast, if we convince you that doing X is worthwhile, you normally will acquire the intention.

8 Once again there is a parallel with reasons for intending, trying, choosing, and the like. You can have reasons to intend to do X that are not reasons for regarding X as worthwhile, but ordinarily these kinds of considerations won't be enough to generate a genuine intention. Ordinarily, you need to be convinced that doing X is worthwhile. Still, these kinds of considerations might give you a reason to engage in Pascalian manipulations, in hopes that this would lead to your believing that X is worthwhile, which in turn would lead to the intention. On the other hand, such a project is itself 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: 1987, Intentions, Plans, and Practical Reasons, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, especially Section 6.6.

9 Verisimilitude, for example, is a purely epistemic goal. It is the goal of now having
beliefs that are approximately true. See Karl Popper: 1972, *Objective Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, London. Likewise, the Cartesian goal of now having as comprehensive a belief system as one can without encountering the risk of error is a purely epistemic goal, as is the goal of now having degrees of belief that are calibrated with the objective probabilities.

Still, it is not worth quibbling over the terminological point. If someone insists that, strictly speaking, something cannot be a goal unless there can be causally effective means to it, I shall introduce new terms to capture what I have in mind. I shall say, for example, that now believing those propositions that are true and not believing those that are false is a value or a desideratum, and I shall talk about what appears, from various perspectives, to satisfy this value or desideratum.


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, to contradict half of Wilde’s aphorism, is that the truth is rarely pure but usually simple. This is a familiar enough argument. The simplest explanation of the increasing predictive power of the physical sciences, it is sometimes said, is in terms of the increasing verisimilitude (i.e., approximate truth) of physical theory. The simplest explanation of this, in turn, is that the criteria of theory choice that scientists actually use, among which (it is claimed) is simplicity, are marks of verisimilitude. The problem is the obvious one – the explanations being invoked themselves presuppose that simplicity is a mark of verisimilitude.

Compare with Bas van Fraassen: 1985, *The Scientific Image*, University of Chicago, Chicago.

Of course, it is easy enough to imagine benefits that could be won by belief but not by mere commitment. Suppose, for example, that you derive aesthetic pleasure from believing simple, elegant theories but not from merely committing yourself to them. This gives you a reason to believe such theories as opposed merely to commit 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 or even merely to contemplate simple theories, there are not very many of us for whom this aesthetic satisfaction is dependent upon our actually believing that these theories are true.


Just because of this, many philosophers have anti-realist 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 or not such anti-realist theses are defensible hinges in part on the question of how extensively the data has 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 feels comfortable in regarding the latter kinds of considerations as marks of truth.


18 Nelson Goodman has said that “it is almost a commonplace” that it was considerations of simplicity that led to the rejection of the Ptolemaic system. See Goodman: 1972, ‘The Test of Simplicity’, in Problems and Projects, Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, p. 279. What is 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 by no means obvious that if clever enough changes had been made in the background theory, the resulting overall theory – i.e., the Ptolemaic theory plus the revised 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 non-objective, 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.


21 Similarly, if your preference for simple hypotheses were a matter of deliberate policy, this policy might be a rational one for you to follow even though beliefs in accordance with it are often irrational. This is so because it might nonetheless be part of your best set of policies. Any other set of policies, or at least any other that you are capable of following, might leave you worse off.

Dept of Philosophy
Rutgers University
Douglass Campus, Davison Hall
New Brunswick, NJ 08903
U.S.A.