Mind Association

Epistemic Indolence

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Suppose that a person S believes p on the basis of evidence e and that e is all the evidence S has which is relevant to p. Given these conditions, it might seem plausible to claim that S rationally believes p if (1) he rationally believes e and (2) he rationally believes that e confirms p.[1] Of course, conditions (1) and (2) are not necessary for S's believing p rationally. S, for example, might believe p rationally even if somewhere in his total body of evidence e there is a claim which he does not believe rationally. But are (1) and (2) even sufficient to insure that S's belief is rational? After all, S's evidence e may be radically incomplete. Indeed, S may know that his evidence is incomplete and yet do nothing to correct the situation. And if so, might not S's belief satisfy conditions (1) and (2) and yet still be irrational because S has been indolent or negligent with regards to gathering evidence?

Consider some cases which might seem to support this view. Consider, for example, an employer who decides not to hire a job applicant because he believes the applicant has been involved in recent lootings. The employer, let us suppose, knows that the applicant lives in a neighbourhood in which almost everyone has taken part in the lootings, but he knows nothing else which is relevant to the question of whether the applicant is a looter. Even if we grant that the employer both rationally believes the propositions from which he infers that the applicant is a looter and reasonably thinks that such evidence confirms that the applicant is a looter (i.e. even if we grant that conditions (1) and (2) are met), might not the employer's belief be irrational? In particular, might not the belief be irrational if the employer makes no effort to gather other evidence which he knows is both relevant and readily available? The employer's willful ignorance of relevant evidence, it

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[1]   Our 'rational belief' can be thought of as roughly equivalent to Chisholm's 'beyond reasonable doubt' (accepting is more reasonable than withholding). See R. M. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1977), p. 7.

might be claimed, is enough to show that his belief is irrational even though it satisfies conditions (1) and (2).

Consider, second, a case of a scientist who accepts a certain pet theory of his on the basis of a single experiment. Let us assume that this experiment does make it likely that the theory is true, but that there are many other experiments standardly employed by scientists which clearly would be relevant to the question of whether his theory is true, experiments which our scientist doesn't bother to perform. Isn't it tempting to conclude that the scientist's belief is irrational, even though he (1) justifiably accepts his experimental evidence and (2) justifiably concludes that this evidence makes probable that his theory is true?

Finally, as an extreme case, consider a person who, epistemically, is 'perfectly indolent'. He never does anything to gain additional evidence. To be sure, he sometimes acquires evidence in spite of himself, and when he does, he always draws the appropriate conclusions. He is, in other words, somewhat like a computing machine: If fed data, he generates the proper conclusions, but he does nothing to gain additional data for himself. As a result, all the beliefs he has are confirmed by his evidence but his evidence is very narrow. It may even be so narrow that he not only lacks many, if not most, of the common beliefs the rest of us rationally have but also has certain idiosyncratic beliefs that most of us lack. Once more, isn't it plausible to think that although all his beliefs meet conditions (1) and (2), at least some of these beliefs are irrational?

If we feel strongly enough that the three individuals in the situations described here are irrational, we might be tempted to conclude that there is some condition necessary for a person's belief to be rational which is not captured by (1) and (2). But what would such a condition be?

Perhaps the simplest suggestion is that a person S's belief that p is rational only if:

(A) S's body of evidence e includes all truths which are relevant to the truth of p.

If condition (A) were accepted, it is easy enough to see that the beliefs of the employer, the scientist and the perfectly indolent person would not be rational even if these beliefs do satisfy (1) and (2). For the evidence of each of these persons lacks truths which are relevant to what they believe.

Unfortunately, (A) is obviously too strong. Consider, for example, another employer. Suppose that this second employer believes that one of his employees is honest and suppose that his belief satisfies (1) and (2). Suppose, in fact, that the employer has a huge body of evidence supporting his belief and no evidence disconfirming it. Further suppose that the evidence is incomplete in that the employer has not used a lie detector to test the employee's honesty. The employer's failure to gain this one additional piece of evidence is surely not enough to show that his belief is irrational. Similarly, if a scientist's acceptance of a theory satisfies (1) and (2), but the scientist fails to perform one and only one relatively trivial experiment we should not for that reason conclude that his belief is irrational. Indeed, if we accepted (A) as a necessary condition for the rationality of a belief, there would be little *if anything* that anyone rationally believes.

For similar sorts of reasons, a slightly weaker requirement can also be shown to be inadequate. Suppose that it were claimed that S's belief that p, even if it satisfies (1) and (2), is rational only if:

(B) It is rational for S to believe that his evidence for p includes all relevant truths.

This condition, like condition (A), would be enough to show that in our original cases the beliefs of the employer, the scientist, and the perfectly indolent person are irrational. But also like (A), it is clearly too strong. Consider again our second employer who fails to administer a lie detector test and our scientist who fails to perform just one experiment. Such people might rationally believe that their evidence is incomplete (in the sense that they may rationally believe that there are truths of which they are ignorant which bear on the likelihood of their beliefs being true), and yet it is clear that such a rational belief would not preclude the possibility of their rationally believing p.

Other suggestions seem to fare no better. Suppose it were claimed that S's belief that p is rational only if:

(C) S makes an effort to include within his body of evidence as many relevant truths as is practically possible.

Condition (C) is vague in that it is hard to interpret precisely such phrases as 'effort' and 'practically possible', but it is hard to see how any interpretation of (C) would make it very plausible. The problem is that if we interpret these phrases in a way which

requires believers to try as hard as they can to include all truths in their evidence, it will turn out that there is little if anything which anyone rationally believes. But on the other hand, even if we interpret (C) as requiring only a very weak effort to gain additional evidence, (C) still will be too strong. It would, for example, almost always be practically possible for a scientist with just a little effort to gather more inductive evidence in support of a generalization. But if the scientist already has a huge amount of supporting evidence, his failure to make even a weak additional effort to gather this other inductive evidence would hardly make his acceptance of the generalization irrational. The basic problem with (C) is that even on its weakest interpretation it requires that persons exert at least some effort to gain additional evidence until their evidence includes *all* accessible relevant truths. But pretty clearly, there is some point short of this at which a person can rest content with his evidence for a particular belief. Again, if this were not the case, most of our ordinary beliefs would have to be deemed irrational.

It might be thought that (A), (B) and (C) all fail because they emphasize the individual believer and neglect what might be called 'the social aspect of justification'. According to a social notion of justification, whether or not a person rationally believes something depends on what other persons rationally believe or even on what other persons would do by way of acquiring evidence. So, for example, one way to spell out this social aspect would be to claim that S's belief that p is rational only if:

(D) S has taken the steps which most people (or most people in S's community or in his profession or in yet some other group) would take in order to establish whether or not p is true.

Given (D) then, our original employer and scientist and our perfectly indolent person all have irrational beliefs. The scientist, for example, irrationally believes his theory because his evidence does not include evidence which it is standard for people in his profession to seek.

However, (D), like our previously discussed conditions, is too strong. As a simple illustration of its inadequacy, imagine that a person is able to predict accurately when it will rain on the basis of his rheumatism. Indeed, suppose that the person's rheumatism has never misled him concerning when it will rain. If so, his belief that it will rain tomorrow might very well satisfy conditions (1) and (2). But suppose also that this man is a bit of a hermit; he does not own a

television or a radio and he does not subscribe to any newspaper. As a result, he does not take the kind of steps that most people would take in order to determine whether it will rain tomorrow. He does not, in other words, seek out a weather forecast in the newspaper, or on television or radio. But surely this failure does not affect the rationality of his belief, given that (1) and (2) are satisfied. In fact, it may even be that his rheumatism constitutes better evidence for the claim that it will rain tomorrow than do the forecasts found in newspapers and in various other media.

Of course, condition (D) is but one attempt to spell out a social aspect of justification, but the problem which (D) encounters is perfectly general. The problem is that an individual's evidence for his belief that p may be quite different from the evidence used by most people when evaluating p and may be quite different from the evidence used by most scientists or most good scientists and even quite different from that used by any social group. But the fact that a person ignores or lacks evidence used by others doesn't by itself prove that his belief is irrational. Indeed, as we pointed out with our rheumatic, the person's evidence may be better than that used by others.

However, suppose that the rheumatic here rationally believes that official weather reports provide *better* evidence than his rheumatism. Would this make his belief based on his idiosyncratic evidence irrational? More generally, suppose it is claimed that S's belief that p is rational only if:

(E) S acquires any available evidence which he rationally believes to be more conclusive evidence concerning p than the evidence e upon which he relies.

But once more this suggestion is too strong, since it is often the case that the evidence we use to confirm a belief is not the evidence we rationally believe to be the best available evidence. If, for example, a person believes p on the basis of the authority of someone else, his belief might very well satisfy (1) and (2) and yet it often will be true that the person recognizes that he could have had better evidence—namely, the evidence which the authority has. His recognition that he lacks this evidence, however, does not seem sufficient to preclude his rationally believing p on the basis of what a recognized authority tells him.

The failure of conditions (A) through (E) may suggest that we should take a different approach in trying to formulate a condition

of rational belief (1) and (2) fail to capture. Conditions (A) through (E), it might be claimed, correctly focus upon evidence that the person lacks, but they overlook a crucial factor. Namely, what is crucial is that among the evidence which the person lacks there not be defeating evidence. In other words, S's belief that p is rational only if:

(F) There is no truth such that if it were added to S's present evidence, it would no longer be rational for S to believe that p.

But again, this condition is far too strong. In fact, condition (F) precludes the possibility of a person ever rationally believing something which is not true. To see why, assume for purposes of a *reductio*—that p is true and that S rationally believes that not-p. But then, there will be a truth such that if it were added to S's evidence it would no longer be rational for S to believe that not-p— namely, the truth p. So, if (F) is accepted, there can never be a case in which something p is true and someone rationally believes not-p. This, of course, is strongly counterintuitive.

Nevertheless, perhaps there is something right about this general approach. Specifically, perhaps what is crucial is not that there actually be no defeating evidence but that it be rational for the person to believe that there is no defeating evidence. That is, it might be argued that S rationally believes that p only if:

(G) It is rational for S to believe that there is no truth such that if it were added to his present evidence it would no longer be rational for him to believe that p.[1]

Condition (G), unlike condition (F), does not seem to preclude the possibility of a person rationally believing a falsehood. In addition, if (G) is accepted, one might be tempted to claim that our original employer, our original scientist and our perfectly indolent person all have irrational beliefs. For even if there were no defeating evidence for their beliefs, their evidence may be so narrow that it is not reasonable for them to believe this.

Although (G) is more plausible than (F), it also suffers from a serious defect. Consider, for example, a case of simple enumerative induction. Suppose that someone S has seen a number of crows and that most of them have been black, but suppose also that he has seen a very few albino crows. Despite his observation of these non-

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1   For a defence of a principle which is similar to our (G), see Carl Ginet, *Knowledge, Perception and Reality* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1975), pp. 77–80.

black crows, he may reasonably believe that most crows are black.
But he may also reasonably believe that there are enough white
crows in existence such that he could unluckily run across these
white crows (and no black crows) in such a way that it would defeat
his present justification. In other words, he may know that there are
samples of crows which are unrepresentative but which he could
discover in a way which would not show to him that they are
unrepresentative. But of course, his rationally believing that there
are defeating truths of this sort does not demonstrate that his
present belief is not reasonable.

The intuitive point of this example here is just this: A person can
get additional evidence which is misleading. Additional evidence,
in other words, can sometimes place a person in a worse position to
determine the truth of a claim. Moreover, a person may recognize
that this can be the case. A person may reasonably believe that the
total evidence which he now lacks overwhelmingly would confirm
the truth of what he now believes, and yet he may also reasonably
believe that in this total body of evidence there are isolated pockets
of disconfirming evidence. But the fact that he could run across
these disconfirming pockets in a way which would produce
reasonable but false beliefs, indeed the fact that he reasonably
believes that this could happen, does not indicate that his present
belief is irrational.

The above discussion, however, may suggest something else. It
may suggest that although a person can rationally believe
something even when he knows that there are isolated truths which
would disconfirm his belief, he cannot rationally believe something
without rationally believing that the total evidence would support
the truth of his belief. In other words, it might be claimed that S
rationally believes that p only if:

(H) It is rational for S to believe that if his evidence were to include
      all relevant truths it would still be rational for him to believe
      that p.

Is condition (H) the condition we have been looking for?

Let us approach this question somewhat indirectly. Notice, first,
that one might try to defend (H) by citing general considerations
about the relationship between truth and what the total (complete,
ideal) evidence would confirm. Some philosophers, for example,
would be prepared to argue that something is true if and only if it

would be confirmed by the ideal evidence. This view would be particularly plausible, albeit somewhat trivial, if the ideal evidence for p had to include the truth or falsity of p itself. But even if we do not understand the notion of ideal evidence in this way one might adopt the more difficult strategy of arguing for this connection along Peircean lines. Other philosophers might be reluctant to claim such a strong connection but still maintain that there is a very intimate relationship between what is true and what would be confirmed by ideal evidence. They might maintain, for example, that ideal evidence would support most truths and very few falsehoods. Now, any of these views concerning the relationship between what is true and what would be supported by the total evidence might be used by one trying to defend (H). One could point out after all, that rationally believing p just is rationally believing that p *is true*. But if it is rational for persons to believe that there is a very intimate relationship between truth and what would be supported by the total evidence, it becomes very tempting to accept (H). For on these views, any evidence which makes it rational to believe that p is true *ipso facto* will also be evidence which makes it rational to believe that p would be supported by the total evidence.

Suppose, then, we do accept (H) for any of these reasons. Does this help answer our original question? Our original question, remember, was whether there is some condition necessary for a person's belief to be rational which is not captured by our conditions (1) and (2)? In other words, the question was: Are (1) and (2) sufficient for a person's belief to be rational? Condition (H), however, even if it is accepted, gives us no reason to think that (1) and (2) are not sufficient. For if (1) and (2) are satisfied, the evidence that S has confirms that p, i.e. confirms *that p is true*. But if it is reasonable to think that there is an intimate connection between truth and what the total evidence would confirm, then if S has evidence which confirms for him that p is true, he also has evidence which confirms for him that the total evidence would support p. The satisfaction of conditions (1) and (2) guarantees the satisfaction of (H) and so it cannot be the condition we have been looking for. That is, (H) cannot be a condition which is necessary for a person's belief to be rational which is not captured by our conditions (1) and (2). By hypothesis, our original employer, our original scientist and our perfectly indolent person all had evidence which confirmed for them that their respective beliefs were true and hence had evidence which confirmed

for them that the total evidence would continue to support their beliefs.

The problem with condition (H) can be summarized quickly as follows: The reasons for thinking that (H) is a necessary condition of rational belief are also reasons for thinking that (1) and (2) are sufficient for (H). Thus, the necessity of (H) cannot be used to argue against the sufficiency of (1) and (2).

If we agree that there is an intimate connection between what is true and what would be supported by the total evidence, we can begin to see that (1) and (2) have more ramifications than might be initially supposed. Specifically, if a person has evidence that p is true, he also has evidence which confirms for him that the total evidence would continue to support p. Once this point is recognized, perhaps the failure of conditions (A) through (F) is easier to accept. For example, if (1) and (2) guarantee that a person is justified in believing that the total evidence would continue to support his belief, it becomes easier to accept the conclusion that a person's belief might be rational even though he ignores evidence which he knows to be superior to his own evidence. For if (1) and (2) are satisfied, he is justified in believing that when this superior evidence is conjoined with all other relevant evidence the total body of evidence would support his belief. Thus, his lack of superior evidence should not prevent him from rationally believing that p.

It might be thought that by using a similar argument we can conclude that whenever it is rational for a person to believe that p, it is rational for him to believe that any disconfirming evidence he might acquire in the future is misleading and thus also rational for him to ignore any such evidence. After all, if it is rational for a person to believe something, it is also rational (we are now assuming) for him to believe that the total evidence would support the truth of his belief. So why not just ignore any future disconfirming evidence? This problem is sometimes referred to as the Harman-Kripke paradox.[1] There is, of course, but the illusion of a paradox here. It is never permissible for a person to ignore or dismiss relevant evidence which comes into his possession. What one is justified in believing with respect to what the total evidence would support is always relative to the evidence one has. From the fact that relative to e one is

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1   See Gilbert Harman, *Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 147–149. See also Harman, 'Reasoning and Evidence One Does Not Possess', in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. v, eds. French, Uehling and Wettstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), pp. 163–182.

justified in believing that the total evidence would support p, it does not follow that relative to e and anything else one is justified in believing that the total evidence would support p.[1]

But the major problem with which we have been concerned here is not the problem of a person ignoring or dismissing evidence which he already has. Rather, it is the problem of refusing to gather relevant evidence. And so far at least, we have been hard-pressed to find what is wrong with such refusals. Conditions (1) and (2) can be satisfied by persons who deliberately refuse to acquire relevant evidence, and thus if we can find no reason to think that (1) and (2) are not sufficient for rational belief, we seem forced to conclude that persons who are epistemically indolent—even persons who are perfectly indolent—might have rational beliefs.

Gilbert Harman, although never directly addressing problem of epistemic indolence, does endorse a condition of rational belief which might be thought to be of help in identifying what is wrong with (1) and (2) as sufficient conditions for rational belief and, hence, what is wrong with epistemic indolence. Harman suggests that a person rationally believes that p only if:

(I)   It is rational for S to believe that there are no truths which would undermine his belief that p.[2]

At first glance condition (I) looks to be no different from condition (G), which we have already rejected as being too strong. But this is not how Harman wishes his condition to be interpreted. In particular, he insists that not just any truth which when added to S's evidence would result in it no longer being rational for S to believe p is an undermining truth. Only defeating truths of certain sorts are undermining truths. Specifically, a defeating truth is an undermining truth if (a) one can obtain the defeating truth or (b) the defeating truth is possessed by others in a relevant social group to which one belongs.[3] So, according to Harman, if it is rational for S to believe that p, it is rational for him to believe that there are no defeating

1   For a good discussion of why one might think there is a genuine paradox here, see Carl Ginet, 'Knowing Less by Knowing More', in *Midwest Studies in Philsophy*, vol. v, pp. 151–162.

2   The principle Harman is most concerned to defend is somewhat different: 'One may rationally believe a conclusion only if one infers that there is no undermining evidence one does not possess' (*Thought*, p. 151). But in numerous places Harman endorses a principle such as (I) as well; see, e.g., 'Reasoning and Evidence One Does Not Possess', especially p. 164 and p. 170.

3   Harman, 'Reasoning and Evidence One Does Not Possess', p. 165.

truths of sort (a) and also rational for him to believe that there are no defeating truths of sort (b).

One advantage of accepting a condition such as (I), Harman says, is that it suggests a strategy for handling problematic cases of knowledge. To illustrate the strategy, Harman constructs a pair of cases. In the first case, Harman assumes that Mary comes to know that Norman is in Italy by calling his office. In the second case, Mary again has this evidence but now Harman supposes that Norman tries to mislead Mary by writing her a letter saying he is in San Francisco and by having a friend mail the letter from San Francisco. This letter, Harman assumes, is in a pile of unopened mail on Mary's desk when she calls Norman's office. Harman claims that in the first case Mary knows Norman is in Italy but in the second case she does not. He further claims that her lack of knowledge in case two can be explained by the fact that her reasoning 'depends essentially on the acceptance of a false proposition'. Condition (I) suggests what this false proposition is; in order for Mary to believe rationally that Norman is in Italy, it must be rational for her to believe that there is no defeating evidence satisfying (a) and no defeating evidence satisfying (b). In both case one and two, it may very well be rational for Mary to believe that there is no such evidence, but only in case one is such a belief true. In case two there is undermining evidence of the sort referred to in (a). Since the claim that there is no such evidence is essential to Mary's reasoning, says Harman, she does not have knowledge in the second case.[1] Harman constructs another example to illustrate how the sort of undermining evidence referred to in (b) can be used in a similar way. This example again consists of two cases. In the first case Jane comes to know that Kirby has been assassinated when she reads about it in the paper. In the second case Jane again reads about the assassination in the paper, but now Harman assumes that Jane is unaware of credible but false denials of the story by responsible officials (who wish to defuse the political situation). In both cases Harman assumes it is rational for Jane to believe both that Kirby has been killed and that there is no evidence which would undermine her belief. But in case two it is false that there is no undermining evidence; there is undermining evidence of sort (b). So, according to Harman, in the second case Jane does not know that Kirby has been killed; her reasoning depends essentially upon a falsehood.[2]

Is condition (I), then, the condition which solves our problem?

1   Harman, ibid. p. 164.   2   Harman, ibid. p. 165.

Unlike (H), for example, it is not clear that (1) and (2) are sufficient for (I). Accordingly, one might try to argue that our employer, scientist and perfectly indolent person are irrational because they fail to satisfy (I). We suspect that the employer, the scientist and the indolent person do not fail to satisfy (I), but since we are going to argue that on any plausible. interpretation (I) is not a necessary condition for rational belief, we shall not press the point here.

What are the difficulties with (I)? Consider, first, the requirement which refers to undermining evidence of sort (b), a requirement which in effect is a kind of synthesis of our conditions (D) and (G): S rationally believes that p only if it is rational for S to believe that there are no defeating truths which are possessed by a relevant social group. The most obvious difficulty with this requirement is that it is hard to know what a 'relevant social group' is supposed to be. But let us suppose that this difficulty *somehow* can be overcome. Even supposing this, the inadequacy of the resulting requirement, whatever it precisely turns out to be, can be illustrated by using one of our previous examples.

We argued, you will recall, that a person can rationally believe that most crows are black and also rationally believe that there are misleading pockets of defeating evidence which he could be unlucky enough to acquire. But why can't it be rational for a person to believe that (or at least rational for him to withhold judgement on the question whether) the people in any given social group in fact have been unlucky enough to run across such evidence? Suppose, for example, that 'relevant social group' is defined so that group g is a relevant social group for S. There wouldn't seem to be anything to prevent S from having direct inductive evidence for believing that the people in g are unlucky in this way. Or we can even suppose that S has a premonition (or has the testimony of some authority) that these people are unlucky in this way when he has inductive evidence for the general reliability of his premonitions (or the testimonies of this authority). Such examples illustrate that S can rationally believe that p even if it is also rational for him to believe that there are defeating pockets of evidence which the people in one of his relevant social groups have been unlucky enough to acquire. But this is exactly what condition (I) denies. Thus, the condition must be rejected.

This same sort of case also can be used to show the inadequacy of the other requirement imposed by (I)—that referring to undermining evidence of sort (a). According to this requirement, S rationally

believes that p only if it is rational for S to believe that there are no defeating truths which he can obtain. Again, the most obvious difficulty with this requirement is one of vagueness. It is notorious that there are a variety of ways of understanding claims about what a person can do. But at least this much is clear about the way in which Harman wants us to understand the expression 'can obtain': It is too strong to say that a person can obtain a defeating truth only if he knows (or rationally believes or is aware) with respect to some particular action on his part that it would result in his obtaining the evidence. This much is clear because Harman wants to say that Mary in the previously described case can obtain evidence which would defeat her belief that Norman is in Italy, but Mary doesn't know which particular action on her part would result in her obtaining the evidence. Indeed, by hypothesis Mary doesn't even believe that there is such evidence. Thus, if Mary can obtain the defeating evidence in this case, 'can obtain' must be understood in some less strict sense. In particular, it is hard to see how it can be true that Mary can obtain the defeating evidence here unless we assume that this is true just because Mary could perform some action (or series of actions) which would result in her acquiring the defeating evidence (without requiring that she know or even be aware that these actions would have this result). But if 'can obtain' is understood in this sort of way, there is nothing to preclude it from being true that S in the black crow case can obtain defeating evidence and even nothing to preclude it from being true that it is rational for S to believe that he can obtain such evidence. Of course, S isn't aware here of which actions would lead him to the misleading pockets of information, but as we saw this is not a prerequisite of it being true that he 'can obtain' the evidence. What this illustrates is a point we have already argued for in some length in discussing condition (G): S can rationally believe that most crows are black even if it is also rational for him to believe that there are defeating pockets of evidence which some action (or actions) on his part would result in his obtaining. But this is what condition (I) denies. We have, then, another reason for rejecting (I).

Conditions (A) through (I) have all failed to capture a necessary condition for rational belief not captured by (1) and (2). Of course, it is somewhat risky to conclude from these failures that (1) and (2) are sufficient to insure that a belief is rational. Arguments by elimination, by their very nature, are somewhat inconclusive. It may be that we just haven't hit upon the right condition. Nonetheless, the

failure of the most obvious candidates should make us suspicious as to whether there *is* anything epistemically wrong with, for example, the employer's belief, the scientist's belief and the beliefs of our perfectly indolent person. Moreover, we have also pointed out that if condition (H) is accepted, it becomes less surprising to conclude that the beliefs of the epistemically indolent can be rational. After all, if someone has enough evidence to believe rationally that the total body of additional evidence would not alter the fact that it is rational for him to believe that *p*, why should his failure to acquire this evidence in any way defeat the justification he now has for believing that *p*?

We are satisfied, therefore, despite our initial reservations, that (1) and (2) are sufficient for a belief to be rational. But it also must be admitted, we think, that in the cases of our original employer, our original scientist and our perfectly indolent person, there is at least the appearance of irrationality. The failure of these people to gather additional evidence does strike us as involving some kind of irrationality, and unless we can pinpoint the source of this feeling, our defence of (1) and (2) might seem somewhat less than satisfying. So, let us ask why it is so tempting to think that cases of epistemic indolence involve some kind of irrationality and accordingly why also it is so tempting to think that (1) and (2) fail to capture a crucial element of rationality.

We can begin answering this question by noting that in assessing the rationality of the persons in the above cases, it is easy to confuse the rationality of the person's beliefs and the rationality of the person's actions. It has usually been conceded by philosophers that there are these two kinds of rationality (and irrationality); the one kind of rationality has sometimes been called 'epistemic rationality' and the other kind 'practical rationality'. Of course, attempts have been made to explicate one kind of rationality in terms of the other, but such attempts, even if successful, would not show that there is no legitimate distinction to be made here. Moreover, it may not be possible to delineate distinct 'subject matters' for each kind of rationality, especially if at least some beliefs are under our control and thus are sufficiently like actions that they too can be evaluated in terms of practical rationality. If some beliefs are in this way like actions, we could wonder with Pascal if it might not be rational from a practical viewpoint to believe in God given the disastrous consequences of not believing and being wrong. Similarly, we could ask whether it might not be irrational from a practical viewpoint to

believe that most people are dishonest, since such a belief is likely to promote distrust and unhappiness. But again, showing that the 'content' of these kinds of rationality overlap is not to show that there is no legitimate distinction to be made. Even if such overlapping occurs, we can still evaluate the rationality of a belief from two viewpoints. From an epistemic viewpoint, the beliefs that there is no God and that most people are dishonest *might* be rational, while from a practical viewpoint the beliefs might be irrational.

With this distinction in mind, the case of the employer, the scientist and the perfectly indolent person can be seen in a new light. For, it seems not implausible to think that the suggestion of irrationality in these cases can be accounted for by the canons of practical rationality and not by the canons of epistemic rationality.

While the correct analysis of rationality of action is obviously a matter of some controversy, most philosophers would agree that a person's action is *prima facie* irrational if the person's available evidence would make it reasonable to conclude that there is some practical end which is frustrated by his action.[1] But in each of the above cases, there is a commonly accepted practical end which the person should realize is frustrated by his actions and which therefore may account for the person's apparent irrationality. The employer's refusal to gather additional evidence, for example, is likely to frustrate the practical end of assuming that people are innocent until they have been given every opportunity to establish their innocence, and in so far as it does it is *prima facie* irrational. Thus the employer's epistemic indolence might make him irrational even if it does not make him epistemically irrational. His epistemic indolence, in other words, does not indicate that it is epistemically irrational of him to believe that the job applicant is a looter. Rather, his indolence is indicative of a certain kind of practical irrationality.

Likewise the scientist's refusal to run more than one experiment to test his theory may frustrate one or more practical goals usually accepted by scientists. For example, it may be that scientists usually have the practical end of being at least close to *certain* that their hypotheses are true. That is, the scientific community

[1] Our argument here is not dependent upon this particular conception of practical irrationality. On any adequate analysis a strong case can be made for saying that the persons in our hypothetical situations are irrational practically. For more on the notion of practical rationality, see R. Fumerton, 'Reasons and Value Judgement', *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 13 (1979), pp. 259–73.

generally does seem to require a higher degree of confirmation for scientific claims than is required (even by scientists) for everyday, ordinary claims. Moreover, the scientific community also requires different and more extensive methods of confirmation for scientific claims than for everyday claims. It is not hard to see the practical advantage of such methods. Given, for instance, the authoritative role that scientists play in our society, it is important practically for the claims of scientists to be confirmed to a degree that we do not require of other claims. And, given the cumulative nature of much of science, it is important for scientists to be able to trust the results reported by other scientists. They need assurances, for example, that the personal biases of the experimenter have not influenced the results. Accordingly, the practice of extensive and standard experiments has obvious practical advantages as far as promoting communication among scientists.

These points have a special interest here, for they illustrate that scientists, as well as others, can have a practical goal with an epistemic content. Thus, a scientist may have a legitimate goal of being almost certain that his hypotheses are true and a legitimate goal of using standard methods to confirm his hypotheses. It is important to notice, however, that a scientist who fails to gather enough evidence or the right kind of evidence in order to satisfy such goals need not be epistemically irrational. His failure would only ensure that he is being practically irrational. It would only ensure, in other words, that he has frustrated a practical goal. In yet other words, it would only show that he has violated good scientific practice, where good scientific practice is defined in terms of both epistemic ideals and practical ideals. Accordingly, although our scientist's refusal to gather additional evidence may result in a goal with an epistemic content being frustrated, the scientist is not thereby epistemically irrational. Since the goal is a practical goal (albeit with an epistemic content) his irrationality is practical.

Finally, the case of the perfectly indolent person can be handled in a similar way. It is fairly obvious that such a person will be irrational, but not because he is epistemically irrational for believing or failing to believe something. On the contrary, we have assumed that he unerringly uses the evidence he has to generate appropriate beliefs. Rather, he is irrational because it is almost impossible to imagine there not being a practical goal which is likely to be frustrated by his epistemic indolence. His laziness inevitably will cause him to lack many beliefs which would aid him

in promoting his various practical ends. And thus, to act in this indolent way is almost certainly to act irrationally from a practical point of view.[1]

So, in all of the above cases, the person's belief, because it satisfies (1) and (2), is epistemically rational. And in all of the above cases, the person's indolent behaviour, although not affecting the epistemic rationality of his beliefs, can be plausibly interpreted as irrational behaviour. Thus the hint of irrationality in such cases can be accounted for in terms of practical irrationality rather than epistemic irrationality. Moreover, this conclusion is reinforced by the case in which the employer believes his employee is honest and the case in which the scientist fails to run just one experiment. In both cases, there does not seem to be a hint of irrationality. And this apparent lack of irrationality is due, we suggest, not only to the epistemic rationality of the persons' beliefs, but also to the practical rationality of the persons' actions. Unlike the earlier cases, it is difficult to see what commonly accepted practical goals would be frustrated by the employer's refusal to administer a lie detector test and the scientist's refusal to run one remaining experiment.

Nevertheless, a doubt may still remain: Isn't it implausible to think that a person's belief system can be judged epistemically rational (or irrational) without regard to its comprehensiveness? Surely, it might be claimed, a person can be epistemically irrational for what he fails to believe as well as for what he believes (just as persons can be practically irrational for what they fail to do as well as for what they do). The case of the perfectly indolent person might be thought to illustrate this point clearly. The indolent person would lack many of the beliefs which the rest of us rationally have, and in so far as he lacks such beliefs, his belief system will be irrational by way of omission.

The point here can be further bolstered by noting that a number of epistemologists would subscribe to the position that in doing epistemology we should be trying to devise canons of rationality which, in the words of Nicholas Rescher, help us satisfy 'the purely cognitive stake of being right (rather than wrong) *over as wide a range as possible* [emphasis ours]'.[2] Similarly, Keith Lehrer says the

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1   As noted earlier, it may be that beliefs as well as actions can be irrational practi-
     cally. If so, the beliefs as well as the actions of the employer, the scientist and
     the perfectly indolent person may be irrational practically.
2   Nicholas Rescher, *The Coherence Theory of Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press,
     1973), p. 21.

goal of epistemology is to devise canons of rationality which will help us 'at both believing only what is true and at *believing all that is true* [emphasis ours]'.[1] But, certainly, any canons of epistemic rationality which satisfied these criteria would imply that a perfectly indolent person could not be epistemically rational, since such a person's belief system would not represent an attempt to believe all that is true.

But should the canons of epistemic rationality really imply that our indolent person is irrational? It has to be admitted that the canons of epistemic rationality must allow for 'sins of omission' as well as 'sins of commission'. A person, that is, can be deemed epistemically irrational for what he fails to believe as well as for what he believes. But with our perfectly indolent person, it is far from obvious that he is guilty of any such sins of omission. By assumption, he unerringly draws the proper conclusions from what evidence he has. His beliefs, in other words, are only those and all those which are supported by his evidence.[2] And so, although it is true that acceptable canons of epistemic rationality must allow for the possibility that persons can be irrational for what they fail to believe as well as for what they believe, it is false that the epistemically indolent person must be in this way irrational.

It is no doubt true that most people would be inclined to agree with Lehrer's and Rescher's suggestion that we should try to believe rationally as many truths as possible. They would be inclined to agree, that is, that we ought to be curious about the world; we ought to find out as much about it as we can. But it is also no doubt true that one of the reasons people have to be curious about the world is that such curiosity is likely to serve them well in meeting their practical goals. So, the ideal of being epistemically curious is an ideal that most of us have a practical reason to accept. But of course, given that we grant that there is a distinction between epistemic rationality and practical rationality (and also a distinction between epistemic rationality and the kind of practical irrationality which results from frustrating a practical goal with an epistemic content), the fact that most people have a practical reason not to be epistemically indolent will not show that indolent people are epistemically irrational. Indeed, the suggestion that epistemically indolent persons must have irrational beliefs seems to be a

1   Keith Lehrer, *Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 202.
2   He must then have an infinite number of beliefs, but for the present purposes we may assume that this presents no special problem.

suggestion which in effect smuggles a practical goal that most of us accept into the canons of epistemic rationality. Roughly, what such a suggestion does is to inject the practical maxim that a person ought to be curious about his world into the canons of epistemic rationality. The suggestion, in other words, is that a person who rejects our practical ideals and who is not curious about the world must therefore be epistemically irrational.

Such a suggestion, we are claiming, ought to be rejected, and what ought to be rejected with it is the notion that part of the task of the epistemologist is, as Rescher and Lehrer claim, to describe principles which would help us to believe as many truths as possible. This understanding of the epistemologist's task encourages the idea that a person who refuses to gather additional evidence must be epistemically irrational as well as practically irrational. Rather we suggest that the epistemologist's task is the more circumspect one of describing principles which help us to believe all and only those truths which are probable relative to our evidence (and in addition the task of describing principles which tell us what in fact our evidence is). In particular, we suggest, the canons of epistemic rationality should not include the requirement that persons not be indolent with regard to gathering evidence. Such an inclusion would mistakenly regard the practical irrationality of not being curious as epistemic irrationality.

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