Is Justified Belief Responsible Belief?

Justified Belief as Responsible Belief

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The concepts of justified, warranted, and epistemically rational belief, along with the notion of knowledge, form the core subject matter of epistemology. Despite their centrality, these concepts are used in the literature in strikingly different ways and often with little regard for how they interrelate.

In what follows, I will be making recommendations for how to understand and distinguish these three concepts. The account I will be developing situates the concept of epistemically rational belief into a well integrated and philosophically respectable general theory of rationality; it links the concept of warranted belief with the theory of knowledge; and it insists that the concept of justified belief should be relevant to the assessments of each other's beliefs that we are most interested in making in our everyday lives, namely, assessments where the focus is not so much on whether one has fulfilled all the prerequisites of knowledge but rather on whether one has been a responsible believer.

These are the conclusions I will be moving towards, but the place to begin is with a quick history of recent epistemology. In his influential 1963 article, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?," Edmund Gettier (1963, pp. 121–3) designed a pair of counter-examples to show that knowledge cannot be defined as justified true belief. Gettier pointed out that one can be justified in believing a falsehood from which one deduces a truth, in which case one has a justified true belief but does not have knowledge. His article started a search for a fourth condition of knowledge, which could be added to justification, truth, and belief to produce an adequate analysis of knowledge.

Various fourth conditions were proposed, many of which were variants of the idea that knowledge requires one's justification to be either non-defective or indefeasible. However, a different kind of response to Gettier's counter-examples was to wonder whether something less intellectual than justification, traditionally understood, is better suited for understanding knowledge. Justification had been traditionally associated with having or at least being able to produce an argument in defense of one's

beliefs, but critics pointed out that we are often inclined to say that someone knows something even when the person is not in a position to defend what he or she believes. This observation prompted these epistemologists, in their attempts to understand knowledge, to shift their focus away from questions of one's being able to justify one's beliefs intellectually and towards questions of one's being in an appropriate causal or causal-like relation with one's external environment. The philosophical task, according to this way of thinking about knowledge, is to identify the precise character of this relation.

This shift in focus led to reliability theories of knowledge. According to reliabilists, the processes, faculties, and methods that produce or sustain a belief must be highly reliable for the belief to count as an instance of knowledge. In turn, reliability theories of knowledge led to externalist accounts of epistemic justification. Initially, reliabilism was part of a reaction against justification-driven accounts of knowledge, but an assumption drawn from the old epistemology tempted reliabilists to reconceive justification as well. The assumption is that by definition justification is that which has to be added to true belief to generate knowledge, with some fourth condition added to handle Gettier-style counter-examples. If knowledge is reliably produced true belief and if justification is by definition that which has to be added to true belief to get knowledge, then epistemic justification must also be a matter of one's beliefs having been produced and sustained by reliable cognitive processes.

There is now an enormous literature arguing the pro's and con's of externalism and internalism in epistemology (for example, see BonJour, 1980; Audi, 1988; Fumerton, 1988; Goldman, 1988; Alston, 1989, esp. chapters 8 and 9; Sosa 1991). For the most part, the literature assumes that the two approaches are rivals, but an alternative and more charitable interpretation is that externalists and internalists have different interests. Externalists are principally interested in understanding what knowledge is, but in the process of developing an account of knowledge, many externalists feel compelled also to propose an account of justified belief, because they assume that by definition knowledge is justified true belief (again, with some fourth condition added to handle Gettier cases). Internalists, by contrast, are principally interested in explicating a sense of justification that captures what is involved in having beliefs that are defensible from one's own perspective, but along the way they see themselves as also providing the materials for an adequate account of knowledge, because they too assume that justification is by definition that which has to be added to true belief to get knowledge, with some fillip to handle Gettier problems. For internalists, the primary desideratum for an account of epistemic justification is that it provide an explication of internally defensible believing, and it is a secondary benefit that it also capture what has to be added to true belief in order to get a good candidate for knowledge, whereas for externalists that primary desideratum and secondary benefit are reversed.

This confusing state of affairs is the direct result of both sides accepting as the methodological assumption that the properties which make a belief justified are by definition such that when a true belief has those properties, it is a good candidate to be an instance of knowledge. This assumption has the effect of placing the theory of justified belief in service to the theory of knowledge; a proposed account of justified belief is adequate only if it contributes to a successful theory of knowledge. The theory

of justified belief is thereby divorced from our everyday assessment of each other's opinions, which tend to emphasize whether we have been responsible in forming our beliefs rather than whether we have satisfied the prerequisites of knowledge.

The assumption has equally unhappy consequences for the theory of knowledge. To give due recognition to the fact that most people cannot provide adequate intellectual defenses for much of what they know, the assumption forces the theory of knowledge into awkward attempts to read back into the account of knowledge some duly externalized notion of justified belief.

And to make matters worse, the assumption also does damage to the theory of rational belief. The concepts of rational belief and justified belief ought to be closely linked, but if justified belief is closely linked with knowledge, then so too will be rational belief. But the more closely the concept of rational belief is connected with the prerequisites of knowledge, the more the concept will be cordoned off from our ways of understanding the rationality of actions, decisions, strategies, plans, and other phenomena whose rationality we regularly assess. The regrettable implication is that the conditions that make a belief rational have little to do with the conditions that make an action, decision, strategy, plan, etc. rational. I say "regrettable" because it ought to be possible to understand the rationality in a way that closely parallels our understanding of the rationality of actions, decisions, strategies, and plans.

The remedy is to jettison the idea that knowledge can be adequately understood in terms of rational or justified true belief plus some condition to handle Gettier problems, and, correspondingly, to jettison also the idea that there is a simple, necessary tie between either the theory of justified belief or the theory of rational belief and the theory of knowledge. Discarding these assumptions constitutes a first step towards an epistemology that is both theoretically respectable and relevant to the assessments of each other's beliefs that we actually make in our everyday lives.

A second important step is to recognize that rationality is a goal-oriented notion. Whether the question is one about the rationality of beliefs, decisions, intentions, plans, or strategies, what is at issue is the effective pursuit of goals. Questions about the rationality of a decision, for example, are in the first instance questions about how effectively the decision seems to satisfy some presupposed set of goals. I say "seems" because it is too stringent to insist that a decision is rational only if it in fact satisfies the goals. Rational decisions can turn out badly. Likewise, it is too stringent to insist that a decision is rational only if it is probable that the plan will satisfy one's goals, because it may be that no one could be reasonably expected to believe that the decision was likely to have unwelcome consequences. Considerations such as these suggest a general schema of rationality: a decision (plan, action, strategy, belief, etc.) is rational for an individual if it is rational to believe that it will satisfy his or her goals.

An obvious drawback of this schema, however, is that it makes reference to the notion of rational belief, thus leaving us within the circle of notions we wish to understand and, hence, without an adequate general account of rationality. I will return to this problem shortly, but I want first to look at some other issues about the schema.

One such issue is whether for a decision, plan, strategy, etc. to be rational, it must be rational to believe that it does a better job of achieving one's goals than any of

the alternatives, or whether something less than the very best will do. As I will be using the terms, "reasonability" admits of degrees whereas "rationality" does not. In particular, reasonability varies with the strengths of one's reasons, and the rational is that which is sufficiently reasonable. This usage leaves open the possibility that several options might be rational for an individual even though there are reasons to prefer some of these options over the others. A decision, plan, strategy, etc. is rational if it is rational to believe that it will do an acceptably good job of achieving one's goals.

To say that a decision, plan, strategy, etc. will do "an acceptably good job of achieving one's goals" is to say its estimated desirability is sufficiently high, where estimated desirability is a matter of what it is rational to believe about its probable effectiveness in promoting one's goals and the relative value of these goals. More precisely, a decision, plan, strategy, etc. is rational if its estimated desirability is acceptably high given the context, where the context is determined by the relative desirability of the alternatives and their relative accessibility. The fewer alternatives there are with greater estimated desirabilities, the more likely it is that the decision in question is rational. Moreover, if these alternatives are only marginally superior or are not easy to implement, then it is all the more likely that the decision, plan, or strategy is rational. It will be rational because it is good enough, given the context.

Another important issue is that the set of goals we take into account when evaluating a decision, plan, strategy, etc. can vary with the context. We are sometimes interested in assessing what it is rational for an individual to do, all things considered, and we thus take into consideration all of the individual's goals. In other contexts, however, we take into consideration only a subset of his goals, because we are interested in a specific type of rationality. For example, we may want to evaluate someone's actions with respect to goals that concern his or her economic well-being. If we judge that doing A would be an effective means of promoting this subset of goals, we can say that A is rational, in an economic sense, for the individual. We can say this even if, with respect to all the person's goals, both economic and non-economic, it is not rational to do A.

Thus, the above general schema of rationality can be refined: a decision (plan, strategy, etc.) is rational in sense X for an individual if it is rational for him or her to believe that the decision (plan, strategy, etc.) will do an acceptably good job of satisfying his or her goals of type X.

This distinction among different types of rationality is especially important for epistemology. When assessing each other's beliefs, we are typically not interested in the total constellation of our goals. Rather, our interest typically in only those goals that are distinctly intellectual. For example, as a rule, in assessing what it is rational for you to believe, we would regard as irrelevant the fact (if it is one) that were you to believe P, it would make you feel more secure. 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 possibility that you might increase your chances of salvation by being a theist.

But why is it that in our discussions and deliberations about what it is rational to believe, the working assumption seems to be that the practical benefits of belief are

not even relevant to the issue of what it is rational for us to believe? On the face of the matter, this working assumption seems puzzling. After all, beliefs have consequences for the quality of our lives and the lives of those around us. Why shouldn't such consequences be taken into account in deliberations about what it is rational to believe? Yet our intellectual practice is to regard these consequences as irrelevant to the rationality of our beliefs.

In what follows, I will be proposing a general theory of rationality, and within the context of this theory providing a resolution to this puzzle. But, first, I need to distinguish among various kinds of intellectual goals. In evaluating the rationality of beliefs, epistemologists have traditionally been concerned with not just any intellectual goal, but rather a very specific goal, that of now having beliefs that are both accurate and comprehensive. Notice that the goal is not to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs at some future time but rather to have such beliefs now. To understand the significance of characterizing the goal in this way, imagine that one's prospects for having accurate and comprehensive beliefs in a year's time would be enhanced by believing something for which one now lacks adequate evidence. For example, suppose a proposition P involves a more favorable assessment of my intellectual talents than the evidence warrants, but suppose also that believing P would make me more intellectually confident than I would be otherwise, which would make me a more dedicated inquirer, which in turn would enhance my long-term prospects of having an accurate and comprehensive belief system. Despite these long-term benefits, there is an important sense of rational belief, indeed the very sense that traditionally has been of the most interest to epistemologists, in which it is not rational for me to believe P. Moreover, the point of this example is not affected by shortening the time period in which the benefits are forthcoming. It would not be rational, in this sense, for me to believe P if we were instead to imagine that believing P would somehow improve my prospects for having accurate and comprehensive beliefs in the next few weeks, or in the next few hours, or even in the next few minutes. The precise way of making this point is to say that in such a situation, it is not rational in a purely epistemic sense for me to believe P, where this purely epistemic sense is to be understood in terms of the present tense goal of now having accurate and comprehensive beliefs.

Foundationalists, coherentists, reliabilists, and others have different views about what properties a belief must have in order to be epistemically rational. I am not going to try to adjudicate among these various views, because what matters for my purposes here is not so much their differences but rather something that they have in common. In particular, each of these accounts explicates the concept of epistemically rational belief without reference to any other concept of rationality. For example, foundationalists understand epistemic rationality in terms of a notion of basic belief and a set of deductive and probabilistic support relations by which other beliefs are supported by the basic ones, and they would view it a defect if they had to make use of some other notion of rationality (or a related notion, such as reasonability) in characterizing basicality or the support relations. Coherentists try to provide an explication of epistemic rationality in terms of a set of deductive and probabilistic relations among beliefs and properties such as simplicity, conservativeness, and explanatory power, but they too would view it a defect if their explication smuggled in any

reference to a concept of rationality or a related concept. And the same is true of other accounts of epistemically rational belief.

This point is of relevance for the above general schema of rationality, because it provides the schema with an escape route from circularity. In particular, if we substitute the concept of epistemic rationality into the schema, the schema becomes: a plan, decision, action, strategy, etc. is rational in sense X for an individual just in case it is *epistemically rational* for the individual to believe that the plan, decision, action, strategy, etc. will do an acceptably good job of satisfying goals of kind X. Because accounts of epistemically rationally belief do not make use of any other notion of rationality or any of its close cognates, the schema is now theoretically respectable. It makes no non-eliminable reference to a concept of rationality or any of its close cognates.

The revised schema thus allows the concept of epistemically rational belief to serve as a theoretical anchor for other concepts of rationality. Moreover, the schema is perfectly general. The rationality of plans, decisions, strategies, etc. can all be understood in accordance with the schema, and in addition different kinds of rationality (economic rationality, rationality all things considered, and so on) can all be understood in accordance with the schema. Most relevant for my present purposes, the rationality of belief is itself an instance of the schema. Let me explain.

According to schema, a decision, plan, strategy, etc. is rational in sense X if it is epistemically rational for one to believe it will do an acceptably good job of satisfying goals of kind X. Recall, however, that "X" can refer to all of one's goals or only a subset of them. This creates a risk of confusion. If we take into consideration only economic goals, for instance, we may judge that it is rational (in an economic sense) for one to do X, but if we take into consideration all of one's goals, both economic and non-economic, we may well conclude that it is not rational (all things considered) for one to do X.

These same possibilities for confusion arise when it is the rationality of beliefs at issue. Beliefs can be assessed in terms of how well they promote the epistemic goal, but there is nothing in principle wrong with assessing them in terms of how well they promote the total constellation of one's goals. If it is epistemically rational for an individual to believe that believing a proposition P would effectively promote her overall constellation of goals, then it is rational for her to believe P, all things considered. There are two notions of rational belief at work here. The first is the notion of epistemic rationality, which is defined in terms of the purely epistemic goal. The second is a derivative notion, which is defined in terms of the concept of epistemically rational belief and one's total constellation of goals.

The puzzle that I raised above is why we so rarely evaluate beliefs in terms of this second notion if there is really nothing improper about doing so. In thinking about this puzzle, it is important to keep in mind that many of our discussions and debates concerning what it is rational to believe take place in a context of trying to convince some person, perhaps even ourselves, to believe some proposition. In an effort to persuade, we point out the reasons there are to believe the proposition in question. But notice that, insofar as our aim is to get someone to believe a proposition, the citing of practical reasons is ordinarily ineffective. Suppose that you are skeptical of the claim that there is intelligent life elsewhere in the universe, and I am trying to get

you to believe it. Even if I succeed in convincing you that you have strong pragmatic reasons to believe the claim (perhaps someone will give you a million dollars if you come to believe it), this will ordinarily not be enough to make you to believe it. The prospects of the million dollars may get you to behave as if you believed that there is intelligent life elsewhere, but it will not be enough to prompt genuine belief. By contrast, if I marshal evidence and information in such a way that you become convinced that you have strong epistemic reasons in support of the claim – that is, reasons that indicate that the claim is likely to be true – this usually is sufficient to generate belief.

Thus, insofar as our concern is to persuade someone to believe a proposition, there is a straightforward explanation as to why we are normally not interested in the pragmatic reasons she may have to believe it, namely, it is normally pointless to cite them, because that 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 pragmatic reasons we might have for believing something, and the explanation is similar to the third-person case. Deliberations concerning our pragmatic reasons for belief are ordinarily inefficacious and hence pointless. Hence, our practice is to ignore them in deliberations about what to believe.

There is a second, complementary explanation for why in general we do not deliberate about the pragmatic reasons we have for believing something, namely, such deliberations are ordinarily redundant. Although we can have pragmatic reasons as well as epistemic reasons for believing propositions, ordinarily our overriding pragmatic reason with respect to our beliefs is to have and maintain a comprehensive and accurate stock. All of us are continually faced with a huge variety of decisions, but we do not know in advance in any detailed way the kinds of decisions that we will need to make, and we likewise do not know in advance the kinds of information we will need in order to make these decisions well. This might not be terribly important if, when faced with decisions, we had the opportunity to gather information and deliberate about which alternative is best, or at least the time to seek out the opinions of those who are better informed. But ordinarily, we do not. Most of the decisions we make have to be made without the luxury of extensive information gathering, consultations, or deliberations. We are instead forced to draw upon our existing resources and in particular upon our existing stock of beliefs. If that stock is either small or inaccurate, we increase the likelihood that our decisions will not be good ones.

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

To be sure, there are conceivable examples in which our epistemic reasons and our overall reasons for belief are pulled apart. Pascal famously argued that belief in God

is such an example, but it is also not hard to concoct non-theistic examples as well. Suppose you are aware that a madman will kill your children unless you come to believe, and not merely act as if you believe, some proposition P which is clearly epistemically irrational for you; that is, irrational insofar as your goal is to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs. Nonetheless, in such a situation, it is presumably rational for you to find some way of getting yourself to believe P. The importance of saving your children overrides all your other concerns.

In the vast majority of cases, however, the pragmatic benefits of belief are not so powerful. So, although it is in principle possible for what it is rational for one to believe, when all one's goals are taken into account, to be at odds with what it is epistemically rational for one to believe, in practice this tends not to happen.

However, this is not to say that pragmatic considerations do not deeply influence what it is rational for us to believe. It is only to say that they do not very often do so in the direct way that Pascal's wager envisions. They instead do so indirectly. In particular, pragmatic considerations are critical for determining the extent of evidence gathering and deliberating it is rational for us to engage in with respect to a particular issue, and in doing so, they shape what we are justified in believing, but in an indirect rather than direct way. They do so by imposing constraints on inquiry, but subject to these constraints, our goal is to determine which beliefs would be true, not which beliefs would be useful. We rarely engage in Pascalian deliberations which weigh the pragmatic costs and benefits of believing as opposed to not believing some proposition. On the other hand, it is anything but rare for us to weigh the costs and benefits of spending additional time and resources investigating a topic.

In buying a used car, for example, I will want to investigate whether the car is in good condition, but I need to make a decision about how thoroughly to do so. Should I merely drive the car? Should I look up the frequency of repair record for the model? Should I go over the car with a mechanic, or perhaps even more than one mechanic? Similarly, if I am interested in how serious a threat global warming is, I need to decide how much time to spend investigating the issue. Should I be content with looking at the accounts given in newspapers, or should I take the time to read the piece in *Scientific American*, or should I even go to the trouble of looking up articles in the relevant technical journals? And if it turns out that in order to understand these articles, I need to brush up on my statistics, should I do that? The reasonable answer to such questions is a function of how important the issue is and how likely it is that additional effort on my part will improve my reliability with respect to it. As the stakes of my being right go up and as the chances for improving my epistemic situation with respect to the issue go up, it is reasonable for me to increase my efforts.

So, it is not at all unusual for pragmatic considerations to influence the rationality of our beliefs, but it is rare for them to do so in the crass, direct way that Pascal's wager envisions. Instead, they determine the direction and shape of our investigative and deliberative projects and practices. When engaged in these intellectual projects and practices, we in general regard it as irrelevant whether or not believing the claim in question would be useful. The internal practice encourages us to be concerned only with the truth or likely truth of the hypothesis, but the practices themselves are thor-

oughly shaped by our overall needs, interests, and abilities and by the situations in which we find ourselves. They are thoroughly shaped, in other words, by pragmatic considerations.

Keeping this observation in mind, consider again the concept of epistemic rationality. To say that it is epistemically rational for an individual to believe a proposition P is to say it is rational for her to believe P insofar as her goal is to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs. But, of course, no human being is a purely intellectual being. All of us have many goals. Epistemic rationality is in this sense an idealized concept and as such is not particularly well suited for our everyday evaluations of each other's beliefs. Our everyday evaluations tend to be concerned with whether one has been responsible in arriving at one's beliefs, where being responsible is in turn a function of responding appropriately to the full complexity of one's situation, including the complexity that one has to balance the costs and benefits of trying to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs about an issue against the costs and benefits of trying to satisfy one's other goals, interests, and needs. On the other hand, the idealized character of the concept of epistemic rational belief also has its advantages, one of the most important of which is that the concept is suitable to serve as a theoretical anchor for other concepts that are less idealized and, hence, potentially more relevant to our everyday intellectual concerns.

The complication, as I have been pointing out, is that the most straightforward way of introducing a derivative concept of rational belief is too crude to be of much relevance to these everyday intellectual concerns. According to the general schema, it is rational, all things considered (that is, when all of the individual's goals are taken into account), for an individual to believe P if it is epistemically rational for her to believe that the overall effects of believing P are sufficiently beneficial. But it is rare for epistemically rational belief and rational belief, all things considered, to come apart in a crass Pascalian manner. There are powerful pressures that keep the two from being in conflict with one another in all but the most unusual circumstances. So, if the concept of epistemic rationality is to be used to explicate a concept that is relevant for our everyday intellectual assessments of each other's beliefs, it will have to be employed in a more subtle way.

A first step is to note that our everyday evaluations of each other's beliefs tend to be reason-saturated. We are interested, for example, in whether someone in forming her beliefs about a topic has been *reasonably* thorough in gathering evidence and then *reasonably* thorough in deliberating over this evidence. The standards of reasonability at work in these assessments are realistic ones. They reflect the fact that all of us have non-intellectual interests, goals, and needs, which place constraints on how much time and effort it is appropriate to devote to investigating and deliberating about an issue. Only a concept that is sensitive to questions of resource allocation is capable of capturing the spirit of these everyday evaluations.

I will be arguing that the concept of justified belief is just such a concept, but as I understand it, the concept is more closely associated with the everyday notion of responsible believing than it is with the notion of what is required to turn true belief, absent Gettier problems, into knowledge. Following the usage of Alvin Plantinga, I will reserve the term "warranted belief" for what turns true belief into a serious candidate for knowledge (see Plantinga, 1993).

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Justifiably believing a proposition is a matter of its being rational, all things considered, for one to have acquired (and subsequently retained) the belief. More precisely, one justifiably believes a proposition P if one has an epistemically rational belief that one's procedures with respect to P have been acceptable; that is, acceptable given the limitations on one's time and capacities and given all of one's goals. Thus, if an individual has an epistemically rational belief that, all things considered, she has spent an acceptable amount of time and energy in gathering evidence about P and evaluating this evidence and has used acceptable procedures in gathering and processing this evidence, it is justifiable for her to have this belief.

This explication of the concept of justified belief makes reference to a concept of rationality, but because the concept it makes reference to is that of an epistemically rational belief, which itself can be explicated without reference to any other concept of rationality or any of its cognates, the result is a theoretically respectable account of justified belief, that is, an account that make no non-eliminable use of another notion of rationality.

An important related concept is that of non-negligently believing a proposition. Whereas justifiably believing a proposition P is a matter of its being rational to have acquired (and subsequently retained) the belief, non-negligently believing P is a matter of its not being irrational to have acquired (and subsequently retained) the belief. Having this second concept in addition to the concept of justified belief is important, because we often do not have a very good idea of how it is that we came to believe what we do. We may not remember or perhaps we never knew. Consequently, with respect to many of our beliefs, we may not think that the processes which led to them were acceptable, but by the same token we may not think, and need not have evidence for thinking, that these processes were unacceptable either. The beliefs in question are thus not justified, but there nonetheless is something to recommend them, namely, they are non-negligent.

In particular, I shall say that one non-negligently believes a proposition P if (a) one believes P and (b) one does not believe, and it is not epistemically rational for one to believe, that one's procedures with respect to P have been unacceptable, that is, unacceptable given the limitations on time and capacities and given all of one's goals. For example, if an individual does not believe, and if it is not epistemically rational for her to believe, that all things being considered she has spent an unacceptably small amount of time in gathering evidence or evaluating this evidence, or that she has used unacceptable procedures in gathering and processing this evidence, then her belief P is non-negligent.

These concepts of justified belief and non-negligent belief are far less idealized than the concept of epistemically rational belief. They recognize that given the relative unimportance of many claims, the scarcity of time, and the pressing nature of many of our non-intellectual ends, it would be inappropriate to spend significant time and effort gathering information and thinking about these claims. A large proportion of our beliefs are acquired without much thought, and there is nothing untoward about this. I believe that there is a chair in front of me because I see it. I do not deliberate about whether or not to trust my senses. I simply believe.

Of course, some topics are important enough and complex enough that it is appropriate to devote considerable time and effort in investigating and thinking about them,

but even in these investigations and deliberations we make use of an enormous number of opinions, skills, and habits, most of which we have to rely on without much thought. Even when we are being our most vigilant, as, for example, in scientific inquiry, the bulk of our intellectual proceedings has to be conducted in a largely automatic fashion. We have no realistic choice in this matter. Only a fraction of the various intellectual methods, practices, and faculties that we make use of in any significant intellectual project, and only a fraction of the wide range of pre-existing opinions that we bring to bear in reaching our conclusions, can be subject to scrutiny.

Similarly, every new situation that we confront in our everyday lives presents us with new intellectual challenges, if only because we will want to know the best way to react to the situation. The everyday flow of our lives thus potentially swamps us with intellectual projects and questions. Fortunately, not all are equally important. Given the total constellation of our goals, some of these projects are more significant than others, and likewise, given the scarcity of time, some are more pressing than others. These are the ones on which it is reasonable to devote time and attention.

Because of the relative unimportance of many topics and the pressing nature of many of our non-intellectual ends, we can have justified beliefs about these topics even when we have spent little or no time gathering evidence about them or deliberating about them. Indeed, we can have justified beliefs about them even if we are in the possession of information which, had we reflected upon it, would have convinced us that what we believe is incorrect. This is one of the ways in which justified belief and epistemically rational belief can come apart. Even if an individual has evidence that makes it epistemically irrational to believe P, she might nonetheless justifiably believe P, because given the unimportance of the topic, it would have been inappropriate for her to have taken the time and effort to sift through this evidence. What we believe about an unimportant topic may not meet the standards of epistemically rational belief, which are concerned with what it is rational to believe insofar as one has the goal of having accurate and comprehensive beliefs, but it nonetheless can meet the standards of justified belief, which are concerned with the level of effort it is appropriate to devote, given the full panoply of one's goals, to gathering evidence and thinking about a topic.

Having justified beliefs requires one to be a responsible believer, but being a responsible believer does not require one to go to extraordinary lengths in trying to discover the truth about an issue. More exactly, it does not require this unless the issue is itself extraordinarily important. The standards that one must meet if one's beliefs are to be justified slide up or down with the significance of the issue. If nothing much hangs on an issue, there is no point in going to great lengths to discover the truth about it. Accordingly, the standards one must meet are low. These are the kinds of cases I have been discussing until now. On the other hand, when weighty issues are at stake, it takes more to be a responsible believer and, hence, the standards of justified belief become correspondingly higher. Indeed, they can even become more stringent than those of epistemically rational belief. The more important the issue, the more important it is to reduce the risk of error. For example, if having inaccurate opinions about a given topic would put people's lives at risk, one should conduct

especially thorough investigations before settling on an opinion. If one fails to do so, the resulting beliefs will not be justified even if they are epistemically rational.

This is possible because epistemically rational belief does not require certainty, not even moral certainty, whereas moral certainty sometimes is required for one to be a responsible believer. To be epistemic rational, one needs to have evidence that reduces the risks of error to an acceptable level insofar as one's goal is to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs. But the risks might be acceptable in this theoretical sense even if one's procedures have been unacceptably sloppy, given that people's lives are hanging in the balance. If so, the beliefs in question will not be justified despite the fact that they are epistemically rational.

The concept of justified belief is also able to give expression to the way in which in our everyday assessments of each other's beliefs, the intellectual standards we expect one to meet vary not only with the importance of the topic at issue but also with one's social role. If it is your job but not mine to keep safety equipment in good working order, the intellectual demands upon you to have accurate beliefs about the equipment are more stringent than those upon me. My belief that the equipment is in good working order might be justified even if I have done little, if any, investigation of the matter. I need not have tested the equipment, for example. A cursory look might suffice for me, but this won't do for you. It would be unreasonable for you not to conduct tests of the equipment. The standards of justified belief are higher for you. You need to do more, and know more, than I in order to have a justified belief about this matter.

One's social role can be relevant even when the issue at hand is primarily of theoretical interest. For example, my justifiably believing that the principle of conservation of energy is not violated in the beta decay of atomic nuclei is a very different matter from a theoretical physicist justifiably believing this. My familiarity with the issue derives exclusively from popular discussions of it in *Scientific American* and *The New York Times* science section. This kind of information is presumably enough for me to be a responsible believer; no more can be reasonably expected of me. On the other hand, much more is reasonably expected of the authorities themselves. They are part of a community of inquirers with special knowledge and special responsibilities, and as a result they should be able to explain away the apparent violations in a relatively detailed way.

In these and other ways, non-epistemic ends help to determine what one can justifiably believe, but they do not do so in the way that Pascal envisioned. The idea is not that they give one good reasons to believe a proposition for which one lacks good evidence. Rather, they define the extent of evidence gathering and processing that it is reasonable to engage in with respect to a particular issue. They thus shape what it is justified for one to believe in an indirect way rather than a direct, Pascalian way. They do so by imposing constraints on inquiry, but subject to these constraints one's aim will be to determine which beliefs are true, not which beliefs are useful.

One of the significant advantages of the distinctions I have been making among epistemically rational belief, justified belief, and non-negligent belief is that they are all parts of a philosophically respectable theory of rationality. At the heart of the theory is the following schema: a decision, plan, strategy, or whatever is rational in sense X for an individual S if it is epistemically rational for S to believe that the deci-

sion, plan, strategy, etc. will do an acceptably good job of satisfying her goals of type X. This schema is perfectly general. It can be used to distinguish different kinds of rationality and reasons; for example, economic rationality and reasons can be distinguished from rationality and reasons, all things considered. And it can be used to understand the rationality of different kinds of phenomena; for example, the rationality of decisions and the rationality of strategies and plans.[1]

Because the concept of epistemically rational belief is explicated without reference to another concept of rationality or any of its close cognates, it serves as a theoretical anchor for introducing other, derivative concepts, including the concepts of justified and non-negligent belief. The result is a cluster of concepts that is both theoretically respectable and relevant to our actual intellectual lives. The cluster is theoretically respectable in that it is based on a perfectly general schema of rationality that can be explicated without recourse to any further notion of rationality or any of its cognates. The cluster is a relevant to our actual intellectual lives, because it is capable of giving expression to the everyday concerns we have in evaluating our own and each other's beliefs. These concerns tend not to focus on whether we have met all the prerequisites of knowledge but rather on whether we are reasonably careful, reasonably cautious, and reasonably thorough in our opinions, where the standards of reasonability can vary from one situation to another and from one belief to another.[2]

Notes

1 Even epistemically rational belief is an instance of the schema. The concept of epistemically rational belief is concerned with what it is rational to believe insofar as one's goal is now to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs. Inserting this epistemic goal into the general schema for "goals of type X" results in the following: believing P is rational in an epistemic sense if it is epistemically rational for one to believe that believing P would acceptably contribute to the epistemic goal of one's now having accurate and comprehensive beliefs. This instantiation of the schema is uninformative, but for the sake of the generality of schema, this uninformativeness is just what is called for. It ensures that every belief that satisfies the requirements of a proposed account of epistemically rational belief will also be an instance of the general schema, where the relevant goal is that of now having accurate and comprehensive. The schema is thus compatible with all the major theories of epistemically rational belief. For example, according to coherentism, it is epistemically rational for one to believe that believing P would acceptably contribute to the epistemic goal of one's now having accurate and comprehensive beliefs only when the proposed coherentist conditions are met with respect to the proposition P, that is, only when P coheres appropriately with one's other beliefs and hence it is epistemically rational to believe that P is true; similarly for other accounts of epistemically rational belief.
2 For a closely related discussion of these matters, see Foley (2002).

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Obligation, Entitlement, and Rationality

Nicholas Wolterstorff

I

My reflections begin from a feature of our life in the everyday. We say to each other such things as, "You should have known better than to think that Borges was an English writer," "You should be more trusting of what our State Department says," and "You should never have believed him when he told you that the auditors had approved that way of keeping books." Not only do we *regret* the knowledge and ignorance of our fellow human beings, their beliefs, disbeliefs, and non-beliefs; we *reproach* them, *blame* them, *chastise* them, using the deontological concepts of ought and ought not, should and should not. Of course we also praise them for believing and not believing, knowing and not knowing, as they do.

The English twentieth-century philosopher H. H. Price remarks in one of his writings (1954) that "we are all far too much addicted to blaming people as it is. If we are to be allowed, or even encouraged, to blame them for the way they direct their thoughts, as well as for their actions, there will be a perfect orgy of moral indignation and condemnation, and charity will almost disappear from the world." Price was opposing those philosophers who speak of an "ethic of belief." His objection was that if we were allowed, not to mention *encouraged*, to blame each other for how we direct our thoughts, social life would become intolerably judgmental. But contrary to what Price suggests, our situation is not that certain philosophers propose that we blame each other for "how we direct our thoughts," whereas at present we do not do that. Our situation is that we all engage in this practice in our everyday lives. The challenge facing the philosopher is not whether or not to recommend to his fellow human

beings the introduction of this practice. The challenge is to understand this ongoing practice, and perhaps to make some proposals for improvement.

Our everyday practice of blaming or reproaching people for their belief, disbelief, and non-belief is not confined to reproaching them for the mere fact of their having taken up one of those attitudes toward a particular proposition. Sometimes we reproach a person for *how she came* to her belief (disbelief, non-belief). "Yes, she's right in thinking that Borges was an Argentinian writer; but rather than just asking the person next to her in the library, she should have looked it up." Sometimes we reproach a person for the degree of firmness with which she holds the belief or disbelief. "Yes, she's right that this unremarkable plant is a member of the orchid family; but she should not have been so cocksure about it." Sometimes we reproach a person for the imprecision of her belief. "Yes, she's right that it is around four o'clock; but if she is going to be a responsible member of the faculty, she had better get herself a watch and be far more precise about the time of day than that." And let us not overlook the fact that sometimes we reproach them for their knowledge; people know things they should not know, or should not know in the way in which they came to know them. Governmental employees know things about citizens that they should not know, politicians, about their opponents, parents, about their children.

Let me introduce a term that will make discussing these matters a bit less cumbersome. If a person ought not to have the knowledge or ignorance that she does in fact have, let me say that she is not *entitled to* that knowledge or ignorance; let me likewise speak of a person not being *entitled* to her belief, disbelief, or non-belief. And if it is something about the *mode* of knowledge or ignorance, belief, disbelief, or non-belief, that is wrong, let me likewise say that the person is not *entitled to* that mode.

II

In his essay "The Foundational Role of Epistemology in a General Theory of Rationality," Richard Foley (2001, p. 214) remarks about the concept of a rational belief that "An unfortunate methodological assumption of much recent epistemology is that the properties that make a belief rational are by definition such that when a true belief has these properties, it is a good candidate for knowledge." The preoccupation of philosophers in the twentieth-century analytic tradition with knowledge has worked itself out in such a way that accounts of rationality (and of justification) have been in thrall to attempts to render an account of knowledge. The accounts offered of rationality have been framed with an eye on that use, and often thereby distorted. Foley's plea is that we set our discussion of rationality of belief within the context of a discussion of rationality in general – the rationality of plans, decisions, actions, strategies, and so forth – and then at the end of the day ask how rational belief, thus understood, is related to knowledge.

I make the same plea for the concept of entitlement. Probably discussions of entitlement have been less in thrall to attempts to render an account of knowledge than discussions of rationality and justification have been, mostly because a good number

of philosophers have thought that entitlement doesn't really have anything directly to do with knowledge. The effect on the concept of entitlement of the hegemony of knowledge has not so much been distorted analyses of that concept as very few analyses.

Beliefs have many distinct merits and demerits – many distinct *truth-relevant* merits and demerits: true, reliably formed, rational, entitled, and so forth. Often it is important for us to determine whether a belief has the merit of being a case of knowledge; the preoccupation of analytic epistemologists with knowledge is by no means preoccupation with the trivial. But it is also true that often it is important for us to determine whether a case of knowledge or ignorance, of belief, disbelief, or non-belief, is an instance of entitlement. Indeed, I am myself inclined to think that in our lives in the everyday, entitlement and its lack are overall more important to us than whether or not some belief is a case of knowledge. In fact, to a considerable extent our interest in entitlement and its lack absorbs into itself our interest in knowledge and ignorance. We do not merely praise the presence of knowledge as a good thing and disparaise ignorance as a non-good thing; we *reproach* people for their ignorance, sometimes even for their knowledge.

The importance for our lives in the everyday of the practice of reproaching people for lack of entitlement in their doxastic and cognitive lives, and of praising them for its presence, is not the only reason for reflecting on that practice philosophically. What makes such reflection doubly important is that a fundamental feature of the modern world has been philosophers and other intellectuals offering to all of us, not just to each other, highly general rules to be followed in the practice. "It is wrong, everywhere, always, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence," W. K. Clifford (1986) famously remarked. Those who have offered such general injunctions have felt that there was something unsatisfactory about our everyday practice of reproaching each other for our beliefs; the practice itself must be reformed, shaped up. The philosopher launches a reproach against the practice itself as it is currently employed and offers suggestions for improvement. These suggestions have not only attracted adherents but evoked counter-suggestions from other philosophers, and those counter-suggestions, yet other counter-suggestions, and so forth. Thus it is that entitlement is on the agenda of the philosopher.

III

There is a well known challenge that immediately confronts anyone who wishes to develop an account of entitlement. When we reproach people for their actions – not their beliefs now but their actions – it is always intentionally undertaken actions that we reproach them for. It is true that we blame a person for crashing into another car even if, instead of intentionally undertaking to do so, he did so because he fell asleep when driving while drunk; but a full analysis of the situation makes clear that what we are really blaming him for is the intentionally undertaken actions of drinking as much as he did and then driving while drunk, the not-at-all-surprising consequence of the last being that he fell asleep and crashed. Had he crashed because of a completely unanticipated epileptic seizure, we would not blame him.

But beliefs are not intentionally undertaken actions. Truth is, they are not actions at all; they are *states.* So let me put the point properly. Believings seldom come about as the result of undertaking to believe the thing believed – far too seldom for this to be what accounts for entitlement and non-entitlement.

The first point to be made is that there is no such *basic* action as believing P just by deciding to believe P. It never happens that somebody comes to believe some proposition just by deciding to do so.

All by itself, that point is not very important. Though turning on the light is an intentionally undertaken action on my part, it too is not and could not be a *basic* action; I can turn on the light only by initiating a causal chain of events that eventuates in the light coming on. So the relevant question is whether people do sometimes enact the intention to bring it about that they believe or disbelieve something and succeed in that attempt, initiating a causal chain which eventuates in that belief or disbelief.

Let's be clear, before we proceed, what such an intention actually comes to. One may have some proposition in mind and then act on the intention to acquire some doxastic stance or other toward that proposition. For example, after wondering whether the population of China is over a billion, I may want to acquire some doxastic attitude or other toward that proposition, it makes no difference which. So I look up China in a reliable atlas and emerge with a definite doxastic stance toward that proposition. I have achieved my goal. This sort of thing happens all the time. Conversely, I may want to *believe* some proposition or other on some topic. For example, I may want to believe some proposition or other about the population of China, it makes no difference which. So again I go to a reliable atlas and emerge believing some specific proposition on the matter. I have achieved my goal. This sort of thing happens all the time.

It is neither of those sorts of projects that we are talking about here. We are talking about someone acting on the intention to bring it about that she has a specific doxastic attitude toward a specific proposition – believing that China has more than a billion people – when at the time of setting that goal for herself she does not have that attitude toward that proposition. Perhaps she firmly believes that China's population is considerably less than a billion.

Though there is something profoundly odd about such an intention, let me on this occasion refrain from developing that point and concede that probably such intentions are sometimes enacted and are sometimes successful. Pascal's suggestion about how to become a believing Catholic is regularly cited. Some people who are not presently believing Catholics may become that if they regularly attend an attractive mass, steep themselves in appealing Catholic literature, read around in truly offensive atheist and Protestant tracts, and so forth. I think the agent has to be rather gifted at self-deception for such a project to work; but perhaps there are some people so gifted. What strikes me as happening far more often and naturally is a person successfully enacting the intention of *maintaining* some belief that he has.

But be all that as it may – the issue has been discussed voluminously over the past twenty-five years – it is irrelevant to our purposes here. When I say you should have known that Borges is not an English writer, I am not implying that you should have formed the intentional undertaking of knowing that Borges is not an English writer.

IV

One possibility to consider at this point is that, contrary to what I have been assuming, the "ought" of entitlement is not really the deontological "ought." Definitive of the *deontological* "*ought*" is that failure to act, believe, and so forth in accord with the "ought" implies culpability and blameworthiness on one's part. What is to be noted, then, is that there is a standard use of the word "ought" (and its corollary, "should") such that being or doing as one ought *not* to be or do does not imply culpability and blameworthiness on one's part. This is the "ought" that is being used when the surgeon says to his patient, "You should be back at work in three weeks," and when the botanist says about the trillium, "It ought to have three petals." What is in the background of this use of "ought" is the notion of a *properly formed* or *properly functioning* entity. If the healing progresses properly, you will be back at work in three weeks; if the trillium were properly formed, it would have three petals. Given the background reference to proper formation or functioning, one might call this the *propriety "ought"* (I have on occasion called it the *paradigm "ought"* on the ground that in the background there is the notion of paradigmatic formation and functioning).

It is clear that the "ought" of entitlement is not the propriety "ought." When I say of someone that she should have known that Borges was not an English writer, I am not suggesting, implying, or presupposing that there was something about her belief-forming dispositions that was not working properly; instead I imply that she did not *employ* those dispositions as she should have employed them. I hold her *responsible* for her ignorance, as I do not hold the color-blind person responsible for not being able to discriminate certain colors, or the trillium before me for not having three petals. And more than holding her responsible, I regard her as culpable and hence blameworthy. I do not chastise the color-blind person for his failure to make certain color discriminations; neither do I chastise the malformed trillium.

V

In the course of arguing just now that the "ought" of entitlement is the deontological "ought," I tipped my hand on what in the self, as I see it, that "ought" attaches to. It attaches to the way in which one directs or fails to direct those dispositions of the self that form and maintain beliefs. Underlying my chastising someone for her ignorance in thinking that Borges was an English writer is my conviction or assumption that there is something she did not do, or did not do well enough or in the right way, with respect to her belief-forming or belief-maintaining dispositions. Our challenge will be to move beyond this vague talk about entitlement and the lack thereof having "something to do" with how one directs or fails to direct one's belief-forming and belief-maintaining dispositions – to move beyond the vagueness toward clarity.

But first I must say something about those dispositions themselves, and more generally, about belief-forming and belief-maintaining processes – meaning by

"processes" both dispositions and practices. Let me start with dispositions. And for the sake of economy, let me pretty much ignore belief-maintaining processes and focus on belief-forming processes; the reader can easily draw out the analogues.

I think of belief-forming dispositions along Reidian lines. Each of us has a panoply of dispositions such that, when a disposition is activated by some event, a belief is produced. Reid believed that a great deal of learning lies behind the belief-dispositions that a person actually has at any time after infancy. Though a good deal of this learning happens more or less automatically, some is the result of quite deliberate undertakings. As the consequence of lots of hard work, the logic student eventually is able to discern the structure of arguments which, at the beginning of her studies, were completely opaque to her. Belief-forming dispositions also deteriorate, as the result of aging, disuse, and so forth; and one acquires some dispositions just by virtue of maturation, not by way of learning. In all these ways, we as belief-forming selves are never static; we are always undergoing formation.

What Reid himself emphasized rather more than any of the above points is that there have to be some innate belief-forming (and concept-forming) dispositions in us for the learning even to get going. Consider one example of the point. Reid called that disposition which we all have, to believe what we discern others to be telling us, the "credulity disposition." The credulity disposition, as we find it in any adult, is highly complex: we believe what certain sorts of people tell us on certain sorts of topics, we have no disposition whatsoever to believe what those same people tell us on other topics, and so forth. Reid argued that the formation of the highly complex and sophisticated credulity disposition of an adult presupposes the existence of a rather crude innate credulity disposition that gets refined in the course of one's experience of people saying true and false things to one.

Belief-forming and belief-maintaining processes come not only in the form of dispositions but also in the form of practices. All of us, in the course of our lives, learn from others and discover for ourselves a wide variety of *practices of discovery*, as I shall call them – that is, strategies for finding out what is the case on some matter. We acquire and employ practices for finding out the true color of objects, the time of day, the population of China, the number of the earth's moons, and so forth. The acquisition and employment of such practices characteristically presupposes the acquisition and employment of certain *practices of attention*. We learn how to listen, how to look, how to taste. In addition to practices of discovery we also acquire and employ certain *practices of retention*; that is, strategies for not forgetting what we know. Such strategies are far fewer in number than practices of discovery, and not especially reliable. (Or so, as least, it seems to me!) Nonetheless, there are strategies one can employ that make it somewhat more likely that one will remember something.

It goes without saying that the self which employs practices of discovery and retention is that same self of which we spoke earlier, namely, the self which, at any moment in its life, possesses a distinct panoply of belief-forming and belief-maintaining dispositions. More specifically, in the employment of those practices, those capacities are activated. To employ the practices is to *direct* the activation of those dispositions, to *steer* their activation in one direction rather than another.

VI

One more matter must be considered before we can discuss the grounds of entitlement and non-entitlement. Entitlement to believe so-and-so is very much a situated phenomenon, varying from person to person, from stage to stage of a person's life, from situation to situation. To the question, "Is one entitled to believe so-and-so?" the answer is always "It all depends."

In the second edition of his *Theory of Knowledge*, Roderick Chisholm (1977, p. 14) wrote that "We may assume that every person is subject to a purely intellectual requirement – that of trying his best to bring it about that, for every proposition *h* that he considers, he accepts *h* if and only if *h* is true." This seems to me much too expansive in one respect and too constricted in another. Too expansive in this respect: can it really be the case that for *every* proposition I *consider*, I am under obligation to try my best to bring it about that I believe it if and only if it is true? I don't have the time or energy for that; often I have more important things to do. The principle is too constricted in the following respect: our obligations with respect to our believings do not pertain just to propositions that we happen to consider; sometimes it is our obligation to get new propositions in mind.

It would be possible for Chisholm to respond by saying that he and I are just missing each other. He is talking about a "purely intellectual requirement," as he calls it; I am talking about moral requirements. But if that were his response, then he must tell us why we may assume, as he says we may, that every person is subject to a purely intellectual requirement. What reason is there to suppose that there is any such requirement? Apparently Chisholm thinks of the requirement as bringing with it accountability, culpability, blameworthiness, and the like. But is there really any such pattern of culpability and meritoriousness pertaining to our believings as Chisholm says we may assume there is – a pattern entirely divorced from our lives as practical beings with moral obligations? I see no reason to suppose there is.

Which deficiencies in a person's system of beliefs that person is under obligation to remove or try to remove is very much a matter of where that person is situated in the space of moral obligation. This, in turn, is one reason why it is also true that which practices of discovery and retention a person is under obligation to employ or try to employ is a matter of where that person is situated in the space of moral obligation – the other reason being that it also very much depends on which practices are concretely available and morally acceptable to that person.

VII

All the issues thus far considered deserve a great deal more discussion than I have given them; but we must move on. In an essay to which I have already referred, "The Foundational Role of Epistemology in a General Theory of Rationality," Richard Foley first rehearses and refines the account of *rationality in belief* that he had developed in earlier writings, and then employs that account to offer an account of what I call *entitled* belief. It will prove instructive to look at Foley's account of entitlement. Let me reverse the order of his own discussion, beginning with entitlement and then

backing up to get hold of as much of his account of rational belief as is necessary to understand his account of entitlement.

Foley does not use the term "entitled." Instead he divides what I call "entitled" beliefs into two groups, and then gives an account of each. One group he calls "responsible" beliefs. Here is his analysis:

> One responsibly believes a proposition P if one believes P and one also has an epistemically rational belief that the processes by which one has acquired and sustained the belief P have been acceptable, that is, acceptable given the limitations on one's time and capacities and given all of one's goals, pragmatic as well as intellectual and long term as well as short term. (Foley, 2001, p. 223)

Foley observes that often one does not have the meta-belief that responsible belief, thus understood, requires – that is, one does not have a belief about the identity or acceptability of the processes whereby one's belief that P was acquired and sustained. One acquires the belief without reflecting on the identity or acceptability of those processes; or one reflects on those matters but arrives at no conclusion. It is for those circumstances that Foley articulates his concept of non-negligent belief:

> One non-negligently believes a proposition P if (a) one believes P, and (b) one does not believe, and it is not epistemically rational for one to believe, that the processes by which one has acquired and sustained the belief P have been unacceptable, that is, unacceptable given the limitations on one's time and capacities and given all of one's goals. (Foley, 2001, p. 223)

The pivotal concept in these accounts of rational and non-negligent belief is, of course, that of *epistemic rationality*. So let us back up to see what Foley has in mind by that. Rationality in general, so Foley suggests, is concerned with the "effective pursuit of valuable ends" (ibid., p. 215). Eventually it becomes clear that, in spite of the diachronic connotations of these words, Foley means to include the situation of something in the present contributing effectively to one of one's present desiderata. But until we reach the point in the discussion where it will be important to take note of the synchronic situation, let me go along with Foley and speak of means and ends.

A plan, strategy, or whatever may be rational for one to undertake even though it will in fact make no contribution to any of one's goals; the best-laid plans go sometimes amiss. This leads Foley to explain the rationality of plans and the like in terms of beliefs *about* those plans; specifically, in terms of one's belief, about the plan in question, that it is *sufficiently likely* to be successful.

The notion of *being likely* to be successful refers to the fact that, within the total population of plans of this sort, there is a certain frequency of successful ones. The frequency that is *sufficient* in a given case is then determined by one's goals and desiderata overall. How important is it that one achieve this goal? How important is the negative factor of the likely costs of implementing this plan for achieving that goal? Are there other plans for achieving this goal whose likelihood of success is greater or whose likely costs are lower? It may be that achieving the goal is so important, and alternative plans so unattractive in one way or another, that one sets the

bar for *sufficient likelihood* very low. The ambulance attendant may think it very unlikely that, with the techniques available to him, he will succeed in saving the patient's life; but he tries anyway. Alternatively, the goal may be so unimportant that one sets the bar for sufficient likelihood very high; it's just not worth bothering unless one is very likely to succeed.

On Foley's view it is not only the *content* of certain beliefs that determines the rationality of plans but the *quality* as well. For example, some beliefs to the effect that the plan in question is sufficiently likely to be successful will be too whimsical to make it rational for the person to accept the plan. Foley unfolds his strategy for dealing with this issue of quality in stages; until we get to the final stage, all the formulae that he offers must be regarded as provisional.

Begin with this: it must be *rational* for the person to hold the belief. The rationality of plans and the like is determined by the *rationality* of the beliefs, about those plans, that they are sufficiently likely to be successful. Here is what Foley says: "A plan (decision, action, strategy, belief, etc.) is rational for an individual if it is rational for the individual to believe that it would acceptably contribute to his or her goals" (ibid., p. 216).

Before I proceed, I should make it clear that it is not Foley's view that a condition of its being rational for some person to adopt some plan for achieving some goal is that the person *actually have* the belief that that plan is sufficiently likely to be successful. Though I do not find him entirely clear on the matter, the idea seems to be that the rationality of the plan is determined by whether or not, *if* the person *did* believe that, he or she *would be* doing so rationally.

Rational belief comes in various sorts; the rationality of a plan is determined only by a certain sort of rational belief about the sufficient likelihood of the plan, not by any sort of rational belief whatsoever. Let me bypass Foley's account of rational belief in general and head straight for the relevant sort.

Foley observes that "when assessing the rationality of a decision, strategy, etc., we can take into consideration all of the individual's goals or only a subset of them" (ibid., p. 216). If we do the latter, then we can speak of a plan's being rational *in an economic sense*, meaning thereby that it is rational with respect to one's economic goals, of its being rational *in a professional sense*, meaning thereby that it is rational with respect to one's professional goals, and so forth.

This brings Foley to the point where he can introduce the concept of what he calls "the epistemic goal." It is here especially that the diachronic suggestions of "plan" and "goal" are misleading; what Foley has in mind is a certain *desideratum* with respect to *beliefs*. The *epistemic desideratum*, he says, is now having a set of beliefs that are individually accurate and collectively comprehensive – or in other words, now believing as much as possible of what is true and as little as possible of what is false. A belief will be epistemically rational if it is sufficiently likely to be successful in advancing this epistemic desideratum.

And what must a belief be like so as to be sufficiently likely to be successful in advancing the purely epistemic desideratum? In the article under discussion, Foley does no more than hint at how he would answer this question. His answer appears to be that the propositional content of the belief must be more probable than not on the evidence available to the person. *How much* more probable? Foley does not say.

The answer will presumably be determined by how one thinks the competing values of not having false beliefs and of having true beliefs should be weighted relative to each other.

With the concept of epistemic rationality in hand, we can now present Foley's full and final analysis of the rationality of plans, strategies, and the like: "A plan (decision, action, strategy, belief, etc.) is rational in sense X for an individual if it is epistemically rational for the individual to believe that it would acceptably contribute to his or her goals of type X" (ibid., p. 218). An ingenious feature of this general account of rationality is that we can now use it to give an account of when it is epistemically rational for a person to believe something. Believing P is epistemically rational in case a certain *meta-belief about believing P* is epistemically rational. It goes like this: "Believing P is rational in an epistemic sense if it is epistemically rational for one to believe that believing P would acceptably contribute to the epistemic goal of one's now having accurate and comprehensive beliefs" (ibid., p. 218).

The explanation, as it stands, is obviously circular. Foley says that such epistemological theories as foundationalism, coherentism, reliabilism, and the like provide an exit from the circle by virtue of offering "competing views about how this purely epistemic sense of rational belief is best explicated" (ibid., p. 217). It appears to me that the exit is instead provided by the fact, noted above, that a belief acceptably contributes to the epistemic desideratum just in case its propositional content is, to some degree, more probable than not on the evidence available to one.

VIII

With this conceptuality in hand, let us now return to Foley's account of entitlement. Recall that after dividing entitled beliefs into two groups, responsible beliefs and non-negligent beliefs, he then offered a separate account of each; in both cases, the concept of epistemic rationality occupied central position.

The first comment I wish to make about Foley's proposal is that its scope is too narrow. Though it offers an account of entitled and non-entitled *beliefs*, and by rather natural extension, of at least some kinds of entitled and non-entitled *modes* of belief, it offers none of non-entitled non-belief and ignorance – nor indeed of non-entitled knowledge. I submit that a satisfactory theory of entitlement must give us a unified account of all these different applications of the concept of entitlement.

But let's move on to consider whether Foley's analyses yield the right results for the cases that fall within their scope. One responsibly believes a proposition P, Foley suggests, in case one has the epistemically rational meta-belief that the processes whereby one acquired and sustained the belief that P were sufficiently likely to be successful. Now suppose that in a given case one has just such a meta-belief. One believes the requisite thing about the processes that led to the formation of one's belief that P, and it is epistemically rational for one to hold that meta-belief – which is to say, on the evidence available to one the propositional content of that meta-belief is considerably more probable than not. Does it follow that one is entitled to believe P? It seems to me that it does not.

Here is one reason: perhaps you were irresponsibly sloppy in your acquisition of evidence concerning the identity and/or acceptability of the processes that led to your belief that *P*; then, no matter how probable on your evidence is the propositional content of your meta-belief, you should not hold that meta-belief. And if you do not believe that the processes which led to your believing *P* were sufficiently likely to be successful, then in some cases at least you should not believe *P*.

Here is another reason: perhaps you are not to be faulted in any way for the evidence you have available to you concerning the identity and acceptability of the processes that brought about your believing *P*. And perhaps it is probable on that evidence that your belief about that identity and acceptability is true; your meta-belief is thus epistemically rational. Nonetheless, you may have been irresponsibly sloppy in coming to that meta-belief. If so, you are not entitled to that meta-belief. And then in turn, in at least some cases you will not be entitled to believe *P*.

Combine the two points: only if your meta-belief about the formation of your belief that *P* is itself entitled will it be relevant to the determination of the entitlement of your belief that *P*. But that meta-belief may be epistemically rational without being entitled.

The point has its counterpart for Foley's non-negligent beliefs. Suppose I believe *P*; and suppose I do not believe, nor would it be epistemically rational for me to believe, that the processes which led to my believing *P* were unacceptable. On the evidence available to me, it is unlikely that they were unacceptable. It may nonetheless be the case that I *ought* to believe they are unacceptable. Here is one way that could happen: I should have collected or attended to good evidence concerning the acceptability of those processes; had I done what I ought to have done on that score, I would believe that it is unlikely that they are unacceptable. But if I ought to believe that the processes generating my belief that *P* were unacceptable, then I ought not to believe *P*.

IX

My own view, which here I can only state and not develop, is that what brings it about that a person is not entitled to some feature of his belief- or knowledge-system is that either: (i) there is some practice of discovery or retention that he failed to employ but ought to have employed with a seriousness and competence such that, had he done so, the presence of that feature would have been forestalled or eliminated; or (ii) there is some practice of discovery or retention that he employed with a certain seriousness and competence but ought not to have (thus) employed, and which is such that, had he not employed it thus, the presence of that feature would have been forestalled or eliminated.

The formula is not intended as an *explanation* of the concept of entitlement. Neither are Foley's formulae thus intended. The intent, in both cases, is to identify some phenomenon on which entitlement supervenes – and another on which non-entitlement supervenes. My own attempt at such identification forthrightly makes use of that very same concept of the deontological "ought" which the concept of entitlement incorporates; there is no attempt to move outside the circle of the deontological "ought."

Foley, by contrast, does not employ the deontological "ought" in his identification of the phenomena on which, so he suggests, entitlement and non-entitlement supervene.

Though I have no way of showing it, I very much doubt that any such attempt as Foley's will prove successful. As far as I can see, entitlement is radically deontological, in the sense that no attempt to identify the phenomenon on which it supervenes without making use of the deontological "ought" will be successful. The point at which Foley's attempt fails is instructive. One is entitled to a certain belief, says Foley, if one has a belief of a certain sort about that belief; but that proves to be true only if one is *entitled* to that meta-belief. Or one is entitled to the belief if one does not hold a belief of a certain sort about that belief; but that proves to be true only if one is *entitled to that non-belief*. And so forth.

X

In conclusion, I want to return to Foley's account of epistemic rationality. Suppose that I believe *P*, and that the meta-belief about that belief, to the effect that it acceptably contributes to the epistemic desideratum, is epistemically rational; then, so Foley claims, the belief that *P* is itself epistemically rational.

A number of challenging questions come to mind. How are we to understand the implicit counterfactuals? And is Foley's epistemic desideratum *really* a desideratum; I am dubious. But here I will confine myself to an issue suggested by our discussion in the preceding section.

Suppose I believe *P*. Suppose I also believe, *about* that first belief, that it contributes acceptably to the epistemic desideratum – assuming there to be such and that it is what Foley says it is. Suppose further that that meta-belief on my part is epistemically rational, as Foley explains that. Does it follow that my belief that *P* is rational, specifically, *epistemically* rational?

I think not. That meta-belief is epistemically rational for me if, on the evidence available to me, its propositional content is more probable than not. Now suppose that it is highly probable on that evidence, but that the evidence has been very sloppily acquired, so that, moving now to entitlement, I am not entitled to the meta-belief. Is my belief that *P* nonetheless epistemically rational? Though I judge my grasp of the concept of rationality to be rather infirm, I would say that it is not rational in any sense, hence not in the epistemic sense.

The conclusion I draw is that if Foley is correct in his fundamental thesis, that the rationality of plans, beliefs, and the like is to be explained in terms of the rationality of a certain sort of belief *about* those plans, beliefs, etc., then rationality is an implicitly deontological concept. An implication is that the order of explanation has to be first entitlement, then rationality, rather than the reverse.

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Response to Wolterstorff

Richard Foley

Although Nicholas Wolterstorff and I have our differences, we are in agreement that a notion such as entitlement (his preferred notion) or responsible belief (my preferred notion) is much more important for our everyday evaluations of each other's beliefs than whether or not a belief is an instance of knowledge. On this fundamental point, which stands in opposition to most of the recent tradition in epistemology, Wolterstorff and I are in deep agreement. But there are significant differences as well.

One complaint that Wolterstorff makes against my account is that it says nothing about irresponsible ignorance. I agree that this is an omission which a full blown account would need to rectify, but the general approach I take to issues of irresponsible belief can be readily extended to provide an account of irresponsible ignorance as well. A first step is to recognize that irresponsible ignorance is often simply the flip side of irresponsible belief. If it is your job to keep the safety equipment in working order but you have not conducted tests of the equipment and hence have not discovered the loose valve, then your belief that the safety equipment is in working order is irresponsible, and so is your ignorance of the loose valve. On the other hand, irresponsible ignorance is not always associated with a corresponding irresponsible belief. I may have no opinions one way or the other about an issue that is so pressing that I should have opinions about it. My account, however, can be easily enough adapted to cover such cases. In particular, if I do not have beliefs one way or the other about P, but it is epistemically rational for me to believe that I have not expended enough time and effort in arriving at an opinion about P, given its importance, then my igno-

rance is irresponsible. Of course, sometimes ignorance is irresponsible and sometimes it is not, and my account is also readily able to explain the difference. I have no beliefs one way or the other about whether the number of grains of salt in the shaker in front of me is odd or even. I could have taken the time to count them but have not done so. Nevertheless, my ignorance is not irresponsible. Why not? Because it is not epistemically rational for me to believe that in light of all my goals and the limitations on my time and capacities, it is worth the effort to have an accurate belief about this issue.

My position on justified belief, expressed loosely, is that S justifiably believes P if S responsibly believes P, where S responsibly believes P if S believes P and also has an epistemically rational belief – call it belief P* – that her treatment of P has been acceptable in light of the relative importance of having accurate beliefs about P, that is, given the relative importance of P, she has been acceptably thorough in gathering evidence, acceptably careful in evaluating the evidence, and so on. But Wolterstorff raises an intriguing question about the belief P*. Suppose S was irresponsibly sloppy in arriving at belief P*. Wouldn't this also contaminate her belief P, making it irresponsible as well?

The answer is not necessarily. To see why, consider a pair of cases. In each case it is the month of April and S believes P. In each case S began investigating P in January; and in each case she had evidence in January that she was inappropriately dealing with P, but she ignored this evidence. As a result, in each case she in January irresponsibly acquired the belief P* (the belief that she used acceptable procedures with respect to P), and in each case she still has this belief P* in April.

Let's now stipulate that the two cases differ in the following respect: in Case 1 she in April still has evidence that her data gathering and processing in January was inappropriate, whereas in Case 2 she in April no longer has any evidence that anything she did in January was inappropriate. In Case 1 her April belief P is irresponsible, and it is irresponsible for precisely the reason implied by my account. Although she believes P and also believes P*, this latter belief is not epistemically rational, because she still has evidence that her past methods with respect to P were unacceptable. By contrast, in case 2 her April belief P is not irresponsible, and again my account explains why. She no longer has evidence to the effect that there were any improprieties in January. To be sure, she had such evidence in January and thus it may well be that she should have taken corrective actions in January. It also may be true that had she done so, she would not believe P in April. But this mistake is in the past. At the current moment in April, there is (by hypothesis) nothing in her current situation that provides her with any reason to be suspicious of the way she acquired her belief P. Hence, it is no longer irresponsible of her to believe P.

One of the lessons to be learned from such cases is that responsibly believing a proposition is not equivalent to having responsibly acquired the belief. If at the time I acquired a belief I had evidence that my procedures with respect to it were unacceptably sloppy but I ignored or in some way downplayed the significance of this evidence, then I acquired the belief in an irresponsible manner. Still, my current situation may be such that I can no longer be reasonably expected to be aware or remember that these procedures were unreasonably sloppy. If so, it can be responsible for me to go on believing the proposition even though my belief was originally acquired

irresponsibly. This can be the case because the evidence of the original sloppiness has been lost with time, but it can also be the case – and this is an interesting and often overlooked point – that my overall treatment of the issue has begun to look less inadequate with time. Even if I was sloppy in acquiring a belief, if the belief leads to no significant practical difficulties or theoretical anomalies, the relevance of the original sloppy treatment may be diluted over time, not because I have done anything concrete to correct the original sloppiness but simply because the original sloppiness seems less and less problematic when viewed in the context of my overall history with the belief. Like people, irresponsible beliefs tend to become respectable with age as long as they don't cause serious problems.

Often enough there is even a self-fulfilling mechanism at work in these cases. The belief that was originally irresponsible may itself help to generate other opinions that help to undermine the suspicions about it. This isn't an especially unusual phenomenon, however. Whenever issues of rationality and related notions are at stake, phenomena of this kind tend to occur. Even if you have irrationally chosen some course of action over others that would have been better alternatives, this course of action can become rational for you at a later time just by virtue of your having stuck with it. It originally may have been rational for you to drive to New York rather than California, but if the irrational decision has already been made and you are now two-thirds of the way to California, it may very well be rational for you to continue on your way to California rather than turn around. Actions can have snowballing effects; they can engender subsequent actions that create momentum which make it increasingly unreasonable to reconsider the original ill-chosen course of action. So too beliefs can have snowballing effects; they can engender other beliefs, the collective weight of which may make it increasingly unreasonable to reconsider your original belief, even if it was sloppily acquired.

Snowballing is by no means inevitable. Often the shortcomings of the original decision or original belief continue to dominate over the costs of reconsideration. When this is so, it is irresponsible not to reconsider. The point here is simply that this is not always and everywhere the case; sometimes beliefs as well as actions can produce such snowballing effects. And the more general point is that irresponsible actions do not necessarily contaminate everything that follows from those actions, and neither do irresponsible beliefs. Sloppy evidence gathering decades earlier in your life does not necessarily imply that all of your subsequent beliefs are also irresponsible, even if it is true that these subsequent beliefs would have been different had you been a more responsible believer decades ago. There is a statute of limitations on irresponsibility.

An even more fundamental difference between Wolterstorff and me concerns whether it is even possible to provide a philosophically respectable account of responsible believing, "philosophically respectable" in the sense that the account makes no use of notions that are as much in need of explication as the notion being explicated. Wolterstorff maintains that any attempt to explicate the notion of responsible (or entitled) belief without making use of the notion of what the person ought to have done or believed (what he calls the "deontological ought") is doomed to failure. Responsible believing is, he says, radically deontological; it is deontological all the way down.

This position starkly contrasts with my own. I have not tried here to defend a specific theory of epistemically rational belief, although I have done so elsewhere.[1] Rather, I have pointed out that despite their many differences, foundationalists, coherentists, reliabilists, and others are all engaged in the project of trying to explicate the concept of epistemically rational belief without reference to any other concept of rationality or any of its cognates. I further point out that this is a feasible project only because the concept of epistemically rational belief is so narrowly defined; it is concerned only with the goal of having accurate and comprehensive beliefs, whereas all of us have many other goals and needs as well. Because it is so narrowly defined, the concept of epistemically rational belief is not directly relevant to our everyday evaluations of each other's beliefs. On the other hand, because it is explicated without reference to another concept of rationality or any of its close cognates, the concept of epistemically rational belief can potentially serve as a theoretical anchor for introducing other, derivative concepts, including the concepts of justified and non-negligent belief, which are relevant to our everyday intellectual lives. The result is a cluster of concepts that are both theoretically respectable and relevant to the assessments of each other's opinions that we need to make in our everyday lives. Or at least so I argue.

Who is correct on this point? Wolterstorff or me? The jury is still out. A negative claim such as Wolterstorff's can be decisively refuted only by actually generating an account of responsible believing that is both philosophically respectable and stands the test of the time, and it is far too early to make any such claim for my account. On the other hand, I am comfortable in stating that the working hypothesis for epistemologists ought to be, *contra* Wolterstorff, that it is indeed possible to develop an account of responsible believing that is both relevant to our everyday assessments of each other's beliefs and philosophically respectable. If in the end this project turns out to be impossible, as Wolterstorff suggests, then so be it. But whether in science or philosophy or any other intellectual endeavor, progress is often the result of adopting a working hypothesis and seeing how far one can progress in defending that hypothesis.

Note

1   Most recently, in Foley (2001, esp. chapters 1 and 2).

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Response to Foley

Nicholas Wolterstorff

In my discussion of Richard Foley's theory of responsible belief, I observed that whereas a full blown theory of responsibility in believing would include an account of irresponsible ignorance, Foley's theory did not include such an account. Foley concedes both points, but goes on to offer an account of irresponsible ignorance which is a straightforward extension of his way of accounting for irresponsible belief. His account goes like this: "if I do not have beliefs one way or the other about P, but it is epistemically rational for me to believe that I have not expended enough time and effort in arriving at an opinion about P, given its importance, then my ignorance is irresponsible." It is not clear to me whether Foley intends that one's being irresponsibly ignorant concerning P entails that one has entertained P. If so, it seems to me that this formula will not do. It may be that the particular nature of my ignorance of P is not that I do not have beliefs one way or the other about P, but that P never so much crossed my mind. It should have; but it didn't.

Perhaps the account Foley gives here of irresponsible ignorance can be repaired to circumvent this particular objection. If so, then we return to my basic objection to the general pattern of his theory – the objection to which Foley devotes the bulk of his time in his response.

The basic strategy of Foley's theory is to account for what I call a person's *entitled* and *non-entitled* beliefs in terms of the presence or absence in the person of certain meta-beliefs. It will be satisfactory here to concentrate on those that he classifies as *responsible* beliefs. S responsibly believes P, Foley suggests, if S believes P and also has the epistemically rational meta-belief P* that, given the relative importance of P, she has been acceptably thorough in gathering evidence, acceptably careful in evaluating the evidence, and so on. My objection was that S might have been irresponsibly sloppy in arriving at the meta-belief P*; if so, then that irresponsibility infects P, so that P too is irresponsible.

Foley's response is: not necessarily. He is right about that; his cases establish his summary conclusion that "irresponsible actions do not necessarily contaminate everything that follows from those actions, and neither do irresponsible beliefs." His cases all trade on changes that take place over time: the belief remains, but one's memory of the evidence changes, or one's assessment of its evidential force changes, with the result that whereas originally the belief was irresponsible, now it is no longer that. But this still leaves us with those cases in which no such changes occur; Foley does not even attempt to answer my criticism for such cases. And even for those cases in which such changes do occur, whether later it becomes responsible for one to believe P, when earlier it was not, depends in part on whether or not at that later date one is responsible for having allowed one's memory of the poor evidence to recede into forgetfulness. For these reasons my suspicion, that responsible believing is deontological all the way down, has not been alleviated.

In his conclusion Foley says that an account of responsible believing is "philosophically respectable" just in case the account makes no use of "notions that are as much in need of explication as the notion being explicated." Thus an account of responsible believing that makes use of the concept of *obligation* is not, by his lights, a philosophically respectable account. He indicates that it was a philosophically respectable account that he was after in his theory. And he concedes that my objections to his account leave it an open question whether such an account of responsible belief is possible.

On this understanding of a philosophically respectable account of some concept, thinking of possibility and necessity in terms of possible worlds proves not to be a philosophically acceptable account of those concepts – since in possible worlds thought one uses those very concepts. Yet thinking about possibility and necessity in terms of possible worlds has proved undeniably illuminating. Accordingly, though one way of achieving philosophical illumination concerning some concept and its application is by offering what Foley calls "a philosophically acceptable account," it has to be conceded that sometimes such philosophical illumination is achieved instead by showing how one sort of application of the concept fits into a larger pattern of applications. My hunch is that such illumination, and only such illumination, is available to us with respect to the concept of responsible belief. But as Foley says, the jury is still out.