

Phil. 3340

Notes #22: The Ethic of Rationality

Two problems of irrationality to discuss today:

1. Forming beliefs for no reason.
2. Failure to consider objections/counter-evidence.

I. Evidentialism (Clifford)

This is the view that it is morally wrong to hold unjustified beliefs.

- Justified belief: a belief that it is rational to hold; a belief that is (very) likely to be true, given your evidence.

Argument for this:

1. It is wrong to hold an unjustified belief which causes harm to others.
 - The shipowner in the 1st example is morally blameworthy.
 - Best explanation of this: he is blameworthy for his unjustified belief. (Discuss alternatives.)
2. If so, it is also wrong when the belief does not but could have caused harm.
 - Wrongness must depend on what was true at the time of the action.
 - Related point: moral blame cannot depend on whether the agent got lucky.
3. All unjustified beliefs carry a risk of harm to others.
 - Everyone (not just public figures) influences the beliefs and actions of others. (Examples)
 - [Beliefs interact in unpredictable ways. (My point)]
 - Unjustified beliefs weaken our powers of reasoning, develop bad habits.
 - Your irrationality causes other people to be dishonest with you.
4. Therefore, it is always wrong to have unjustified beliefs.
 - “To sum up: it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” (101)

Why people are often irrational:

- We feel happier when we think we know things.
- But this is no justification for adopting unjustified beliefs.
- Exercise: think about what unjustified beliefs you or others around you have.

Objection:

What if we are irrational only about certain things with little practical consequences?

Problem:

- The irrational person is in a poor position to identify these issues.
- Beliefs have many connections with other beliefs, some unanticipated.

II. Rationality & the Scientific Ethic (Feynman)

- Feynman distinguishes two things:
 - a) Not being dishonest: This is merely not lying.
 - b) “Scientific integrity, which is another level” (341): This requires giving all relevant information that you know.
 - Scientist should state all the facts that might cast doubt on their theory / experimental results.

“For example, if you’re doing an experiment, you should report everything that you think might make it invalid—not only what you think is right about it: other causes that could possibly explain your results; and things you thought of that you’ve eliminated by some other experiment, and how they worked ... Details that could throw doubt on your interpretation must be given, if you know them. You must do the best you can—if you know anything at all wrong, or possibly wrong—to explain it.”

- This applies to non-scientists too (my points):
 - Confirmation Bias: This is a common psychological phenomenon. People are biased towards confirmatory evidence. E.g., when considering a theory,
 - ☞ They look for positive instances, not counter-examples.
 - ☞ They think about arguments for, but not objections.
 - ☞ They remember evidence supporting their beliefs more than evidence against their beliefs.
 - Psychology experiments support this.
 - ☞ Capital punishment experiment
 - ☞ The introversion/extraversion experiment

- The scientific ethic is often disregarded in politics.

“On the one hand, as scientists we are ethically bound to the scientific method, in effect promising to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but—which means that we must include all the doubts, the caveats, the ifs, ands, and buts. On the other hand, we are not just scientists but human beings as well. And like most people we’d like to see the world a better place, which in this context translates into our working to reduce the risk of potentially disastrous climatic change. To do that we need to get some broadbased support, to capture the public’s imagination. That, of course, entails getting loads of media coverage. So we have to offer up scary scenarios, make simplified, dramatic statements, and make little mention of any doubts we might have. This ‘double ethical bind’ we frequently find ourselves in cannot be solved by any formula. Each of us has to decide what the right balance is between being effective and being honest. I hope that means being both.”

— Stephen Schneider, Prof. of Environmental Biology & Global Change,
Stanford University (Discover, Oct. 1989, pp. 45-48)

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Notes #23: Second-Hand Knowledge

I. Preliminary Points

- Testimony: Any case in which a person asserts something, and another person hears, reads, etc., the assertion.
- Testimony beliefs: Beliefs directly based on testimony; taking another person's word for something.
- Importance of Testimony. Most beliefs rely on testimony.
- Epistemological questions: Are we (ever) justified in believing testimony? When? Why?

II. Locke's View: Testimony Is Unjustified

- Testimony does not yield knowledge, even if the belief is true.
- Why? Some beliefs of others are false, unjustified, etc.
 - Every false belief has been held by someone.
 - Locke may mean only philosophical & scientific beliefs.
- The motto of the Royal Society: Nullius in verba.
- Why did Locke say this?
 - May be reaction to Scholasticism. Note reference to Aristotle.
"Aristotle was certainly a knowing Man, but no body ever thought him so, because he blindly embraced, and confidently vented the Opinions of another. And if the taking up of another's Principles, without examining them, made not him a Philosopher, I suppose it will hardly make any body else so."

III. Hume's View: Testimony Depends on Induction

- Inductive theory of testimony: Testimony beliefs depend on an inference, e.g.,
 1. John says that P.
 2. People generally tell the truth.
 3. Therefore (probably), P.This is the only justification for testimony beliefs.
- (2) is based on induction: we observe that people usually tell the truth.
- The nature of induction:
 - Observe a correlation between A's and B's. Generalize that all A's are accompanied by B's.
 - Inductive beliefs are probable.
 - Degree of probability determined by:
 - Number of observed instances.
 - Whether there were any exceptions; how many.
 - (Variety of the evidence.)

IV. Reid's View: The Innate Tendency to Believe Testimony

Analogy between testimony & observation:

- Perception, two kinds:
 - Original perception: perception of shapes, colors, various other sensible qualities. We have an innate ability to perceive these things.
 - Acquired perception: We acquire the ability to perceive some things, by experience. Examples: hearing a noise outside as a passing car; perceiving that something is a real diamond or a fake.
- Testimony:
 - 'Natural language': facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice. We have an innate ability to interpret these things.
 - 'Artificial language': languages like English.
[- Note: do not confuse this with the modern use of these terms!]
- Two innate 'principles' in human nature:
 - The principle of veracity: the tendency to speak the truth (as we see it)
 - The principle of credulity: the tendency to believe others' statements.
 - These enable us to transmit/gain knowledge by testimony.
- Against the inductive theory:
 - "[M]ost men would be unable to find reasons for believing the thousandth part of what is told them." (237)
 - Belief in testimony should be acquired with age. Children should not believe it; adults should be more inclined to believe it.

V. Coady's View: Against the Inductive Theory

- RT (Reductionist Thesis): We believe testimony because of an inductive argument.
 - RT1: Each individual has observed that people usually tell the truth; this goes into the inductive argument.
 - RT2: People in general have observed that people usually tell the truth, etc.
- Problem with RT2: We can't know what other people have observed w/o relying on testimony.
- Problem with RT1:
 - It is "plainly false". Examples of things I have not checked on:
 - The circulation of the blood
 - Geography of the world
 - Babies are born of women
 - The lights in the sky are distant, other suns
- A more fundamental problem:
 - RT assumes that "we understand what testimony is independently of knowing that it is, in general, a reliable form of evidence..." (244)

- Implies that we could have discovered that testimony is unreliable.
- But, testimony could not be unreliable:
 - ⇒ No one would rely on others' "reports".
 - ⇒ So utterances wouldn't count as reports.
 - ⇒ Actually, words wouldn't even have meanings.

“Although making true reports with words is not the same thing as using the words correctly, nonetheless the ability to make true reports with words is connected with using the words correctly and this ability is something that can only be exhibited ... in the consistent making of true reports.” (246)

⇒ And, even if they did, children could never learn them.

• Here is a bad argument for RT:

1. Testimony can be undermined by experience (& evidence of unreliability).
2. So, testimony beliefs depend upon experience for their justification.

- This is invalid. Testimony may be defeasible (by experience, induction, and so on), though not supported by experience/induction.

- Compare:

1. Observation can be undermined by testimonial evidence.
2. So, observation depends upon testimony for its justification.

This is invalid.

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Notes #24: Disagreement

I. The Problem of Disagreement

Assume:

- A and B are “epistemic peers”: equally intelligent, informed, etc.
- A and B disagree about P.

How should A react to the knowledge of B’s disagreement? Three views:

1. The Equal Weight view: Give equal weight to A’s and B’s initial opinions. Take an average of the two.
2. Egocentric Bias: A is permitted to privilege his own initial opinion.
3. The Right Reasons view: Whoever *in fact* has the correct reasoning should keep his view. The other party should change his view to conform to the other.

II. In Defense of Equal Weight

1. A and B are equally good sources of information.
2. If two equally good sources of information give conflicting reports, you should give equal weight to both reports.
 - Note: It doesn’t matter if one of the “information sources” is you. It doesn’t matter if part of the information source is your own reasoning process.
3. Therefore, A and B should each give equal weight to both A’s and B’s initial opinions.

III. In Defense of Right Reasons

A. *RR seems to be analytically true.*

“The rational person believes what the rational person believes ... who could disagree with that?” (Weatherson, 4)

B. *Accepting EW is hypocritical*

- According to EW, if an epistemic peer disagrees with EW, then you should assign equal weight to that view.
- Epistemic peers in fact disagree with EW.
- If you assign equal weight to their view, then you must assign a low probability to EW (about .5 or lower).
- Therefore, if EW is true, then you should believe EW with at most about .5 confidence.
- Having about .5 confidence in EW is not believing EW.
- Thus, if EW is true, you should not believe EW.

C. *An Infinite Regress of Revisions*

- A endorses EW. B endorses the Right Reasons View (RR). Suppose

$$P_{A0}(EW) = 1$$

$$P_{B0}(EW) = 0$$

where $P_{A0}(EW)$ is A’s degree of confidence in EW at time 0.

- A goes through a series of belief revisions:

Stage 1: A revises his opinion about EW, in accordance with EW itself, resulting in:

$$P_{A1}(EW) = .5$$

$$P_{B1}(EW) = 0$$

Stage 2: A revises his revision of his belief about EW. EW now says the credence to assign to EW is .5; but RR says the credence to assign to EW is 0. Thus,

$$P_{A2}(EW) = (.5)P_{A1}(EW) + (0)P_A(RR) = (.5)(.5) + (0)(.5) = .25$$

Stage 3: EW now says the credence to assign to EW is .25. But RR says you should assign .125. So A revises again:

$$P_{A3}(EW) = (.25)P_{A2}(EW) + (0)P_A(RR) = (.25)(.25) + (0)(.75) = .0625$$

Etc. The series converges to $P_A(EW) = 0$.

- More precisely, we are looking for a value of $P_A(EW)$, call it x , that is stable, i.e., such that

$$x = x(x + 0)/2 + (1 - x)(0).$$

This equation has two solutions: $x = 0$ and $x = 2$.

IV. Against Right Reasons

- One can be ignorant of who has the right reasons.
 - In such a case, “believe what the right reasons dictate” is unhelpful advice.
 - Theories of epistemic justification should give us belief-forming advice that we could follow.
- One can even have evidence that someone has right reasons when in fact they do not.
 - RR seems to imply that (a) such cases are impossible, or (b) in such cases, one should ignore such evidence.
 - In fact, it could be rational to defer to an expert who *in fact* made a mistake in reasoning.

III. The Egocentric Bias View

- Egocentric bias is supported by Phenomenal Conservatism.
- Intuitive idea: EW’s analogy between “self and others” and “two equally good sources of information” is flawed:
 - I am not just another source of information among others. *For me*, I am the one foundational source.
 - All other “sources of information” acquire credibility for me, only through *my* judgements about their reliability.
- An analogy:
 - To be rational, I must be consistent with myself. If I believe P, and P entails Q, then I have reason to accept Q (or give up P).
 - To be rational, I need not be consistent with someone else. If *you* believe P, and P entails Q, then I do not thereby have a reason to accept Q (nor do you have reason to give up P if I don’t accept Q).
- Why might EW seem correct?
 - Egocentric view is correct fundamentally.
 - But most of us *in fact* judge others to be mostly reliable.

- Thus, we rightly take others' opinions as relevant evidence.
- Then how is the Egocentric view different from EW?
 - Your impression of others' reliability can be weighed against your impression about the first-order facts.
 - Your first-order opinion can be used as a reason to deny others' reliability.
 - ☛ Note: This is clearly true in extreme cases.

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Notes #25: Reasons for Distrusting Reason

I. Psychological Facts about Bias and Rationalization

- *Confirmation Bias*: A widespread bias towards confirmation rather than falsification of theories.
Manifestations:
 - People look for positive instances, not negative instances.
 - Given a lot of *mixed* evidence, most people will conclude that a theory is true. Most people will further strengthen their belief as evidence accumulates.
 - We *remember* arguments for a belief more than arguments against.
 - We spend more time *thinking about* arguments for a belief than arguments against.
 - We accept evidence for an existing belief at face value. We scrutinize evidence against an existing belief for flaws.
 - We *interpret* evidence in terms of our existing beliefs. We use existing beliefs, in part, to decide whether E is evidence for those very beliefs.
 - We find arguments against our own beliefs harder to understand.
 - Given arguments (/opponents) of mixed quality, we focus on the *weakest*.
 - We find the premises of arguments for our existing beliefs more “plausible”.
 - We adjust other, less important beliefs to fit with our existing, central beliefs.
- *Anecdotal Evidence*: When judging generalizations, we tend to rely on anecdotes that come to mind easily, rather than statistics.
- *Selection of Information*: We tend to collect information from sources that agree with us.

II. Skeptical Inferences

- We should distrust our own reasoning.
- We should distrust the reasoning of others.
- Intelligence & knowledge:
 - Perhaps we should trust highly intelligent people *less*.
 - Perhaps we should trust knowledgeable people *less*.
- The issue between the Reasons-Skeptic and the Reasons-Truster:
How common is rationalization? How easily are plausibility judgments distorted?

III. Objection: Is the Skeptical Position Self-Refuting?

- The skeptic gives us *reasons* for distrusting reason-giving. Is this self-defeating?
- Response #1: The skeptic is giving a *reductio ad absurdum*, showing an internal tension in the Reason-Truster’s position.
- Response #2:
 - The skeptic is not a *total* skeptic. Sometimes, bias & rationalization can be removed.
 - The skeptic merely shifts the presumption: “Reason-giving is not automatically irrelevant ... it should simply be regarded as irrelevant until proven otherwise.” (Kornblith, 281)
- Response #3 [my suggestion]:
 - Rationalization & distorted judgment occur mostly with certain kinds of issues. (Esp. political, religious, and emotionally charged issues.)

- The skeptic's position isn't one of those issues.
- Counter-reply:
 - (a) Rationalization common for self-serving beliefs.
 - (b) The skeptic's argument may itself be rationalizing a bias in favor of ignoring arguments.
 - This could be because the skeptic wants to be able to indulge his emotional prejudices.
- Response #4 [my suggestion]:
 - The skeptic's argument is not an *absolute* defeater. Some evidence can withstand it. Rationalization is not all-powerful. Some evidence, some arguments couldn't be rationalized away.
 - Perhaps the skeptic's argument is sufficiently strong to withstand doubts about rationalization.

IV. Solutions

- A. Skeptic's solution: We should focus on people's motivations, not take their arguments at face value.
 - Makes sense if there are a few, widespread sources of bias.
- B. The reason-truster's solution: We should focus on the arguments anyway.
 - We don't know enough to determine other people's motivations.
 - Discussing people's motivations causes even more bias and rationalization to arise.
 - If people have various, idiosyncratic biases, they will cancel out.
 - Kornblith bets on this solution.

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Notes #26: Irrationality

To Discuss today:

Theories to explain political disagreement.

Why people are irrational.

How to avoid irrationality.

I. The problem of political disagreement

- Features of political disagreements:
 - widespread
 - strong
 - persistent
- Harms:
 - Waste of resources
 - Bad policies
 - Conflict, violence
- Theories of political disagreements:
 - a. Miscalculation + inherent difficulty of issues
 - b. Ignorance, we haven't collected enough information to resolve issues
 - c. People disagree because of divergent values
 - d. Irrationality

II. Ignorance & miscalculation theories do not explain:

- Persistence of political disagreements.
- Strength of political beliefs.
- Clustering of logically unrelated beliefs.
- Correlations of political beliefs with race, sex, personality traits, etc.

III. Divergent values theory does not explain:

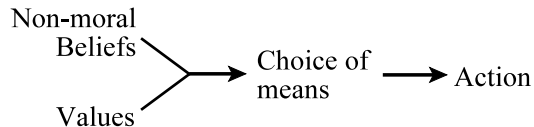
- Why people disagree about values in the first place.
- Clustering of logically unrelated beliefs.
- Factual disputes in politics. Examples:

<u>Issue</u>	<u>Disputes:</u>
Gun Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Do guns cause crime?▪ Are they effective means of self-defense?▪ Is there a risk of developing a tyrannical government?▪ Does private gun ownership reduce this risk?
Capital Punishment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Does capital punishment deter crime?▪ How often are innocent people executed?

- Capitalism vs. Socialism
- What determines prices in a market economy?
 - What are the effects of socialism?
 - Where do capitalists get their money?

IV. Rational ignorance & rational irrationality

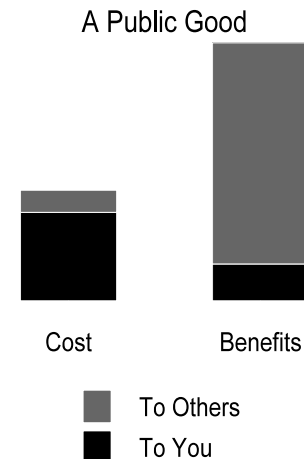
- Two kinds of “rationality”:
 - Instrumental rationality: consists in choosing the correct means for pursuing your existing goals, whatever they are. The explanation of action:



- Epistemic rationality: consists in using correct (logical) reasoning, basing beliefs on evidence, avoiding fallacies, not contradicting oneself, and so on.

- The Theory of Rational Ignorance:

- It is rational to remain ignorant when costs of collecting information exceed expected benefits.
- Example: information about political candidates & issues. Political information is a public good: a good for which the producer bears most of the cost, while others receive most of the benefits.
- People in fact choose to remain ignorant in these cases.



- ☞ 60% think foreign aid is one of the 2 largest items in the federal budget. In fact, it is <1% of the budget.¹

- ☞ “During the 1992 presidential campaign 89 percent of the public knew that Vice President Quayle was feuding with the television character Murphy Brown, but only 19 percent could characterize Bill Clinton’s record on the environment... 86 percent of the public knew that the Bushes’ dog was named Millie, yet only 15 percent knew that both presidential candidates supported the death penalty. Judge Wapner (host of the television series ‘People’s Court’) was identified by more people than were Chief Justices Burger or Rehnquist.”²

- The Theory of Rational Irrationality:

- Assumes:
 - a. People have non-epistemic belief preferences: prefer to believe certain things, for reasons independent of the truth or epistemic rationality of those beliefs.

¹ <www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/BFW/finding1.html>. Respondents were asked to pick the two largest items from the following list: foreign aid, defense, Social Security, food stamps, and Medicare. On average, foreign aid was estimated as 23% of the budget.

² Delli Carpini & Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*, 101.

- b. People have some control over what they believe.
- c. People are generally instrumentally rational.
- Therefore:
 - ☞ People choose to adopt epistemically irrational beliefs, when the “costs” of being rational are greater than the expected benefits.
 - ☞ This includes most political beliefs.

V. Sources of belief preferences

- People are biased by self-interest + interests of the group they prefer to identify with
- People adopt beliefs to accord with the self-image they want to project
- Political beliefs can serve as tools of social bonding.
- People are biased towards other beliefs that cohere with their existing beliefs.

VI. Mechanisms of belief fixation

- a. Biased weighting of evidence: we attribute slightly more weight to each piece of evidence that supports our belief, and slightly less weight to each piece of evidence that undermines our belief, than it merits.
- b. Selective attention and energy: we spend more time/energy thinking about arguments supporting or beliefs than arguments criticizing them. But we spend more time looking for flaws in arguments opposing our beliefs than in arguments supporting them. This leads to:
 - ☞ Prospects for attaining the truth, with different intellectual traits:

	<u>Intelligence</u>	<u>Bias</u>	
1.	+	-	(best)
2.	-	-	
3.	-	+	
4.	+	+	(worst)

- c. Selection of evidence sources: we get political information from sources we already know we agree with.
 - ☞ Contrast this with scientific approach.
- d. We base beliefs on subjective, speculative, and anecdotal claims. These are more subject to bias.

VII. What should we do?

- Avoid using mechanisms in (VI).
- Collect information from variety of sources.
- Look for flaws in your own arguments.
- Be aware of cases where we are likely to be biased.
 - Moral-political issues
 - Emotional issues
 - Clustering of logically independent beliefs
 - Factual beliefs that occur prior to gathering evidence / are unaffected by evidence
- Remember:
 - Irrationality is not fully conscious.

- Don't assume you are immune.
 - Conscious efforts may reduce it.
- Regard others' political claims with skepticism.
- Identify what sort of evidence is required to scientifically resolve a factual question, or test a factual claim. Ask whether one has such evidence.

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Notes #27: Review of Unit 4

Know what these theories are:

Evidentialism
Equal Weight view (on disagreement)
Right Reasons view
Egocentric Bias view
Skepticism about reasons
Rational irrationality
Rational ignorance

Know these concepts:

Confirmation bias
Testimony
Anecdotal evidence
Epistemic & instrumental rationality
Public goods
Non-epistemic belief preferences

Know these people's basic views:

Locke on testimony
Hume on testimony
Reid on testimony
Coady on testimony
Weatherson on disagreement
Kornblith on reasons
Huemer on irrationality

Be familiar with these arguments:

Clifford's argument for evidentialism
Reid's argument against Hume
Coady's argument for necessary reliability of testimony
Weatherson's argument against Equal Weight
Argument for skepticism about reasons
Problem for ignorance & miscalculation theories of disagreement
Problem with divergent values theory of disagreement