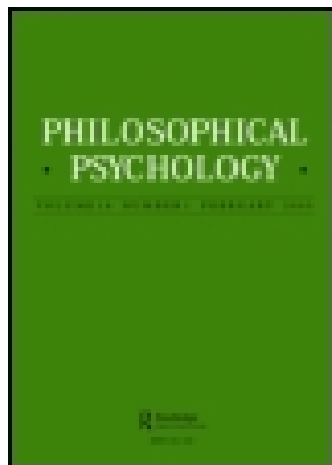


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Rationalization as performative pretense

Jason D'Cruz

Rationalization in the sense of biased self-justification is very familiar. It's not cheating because everyone else is doing it too. I didn't report the abuse because it wasn't my place. I understated my income this year because I paid too much in tax last year. I'm only a social smoker, so I won't get cancer. The mental mechanisms subserving rationalization have been studied closely by psychologists. However, when viewed against the backdrop of philosophical accounts of the regulative role of truth in doxastic deliberation (deliberation about what to believe), rationalization can look very puzzling. Almost all contemporary philosophers endorse a version of the thesis of deliberative exclusivity—a thinker cannot in full consciousness decide whether to believe that p in a way that issues directly in forming a belief by adducing anything other than considerations that he or she regards as relevant to the truth of p . But, as I argue, rationalization involves the weighing of considerations that the thinker knows very well are truth-irrelevant or inconclusive. This paper reconciles rationalization with deliberative exclusivity by modeling rationalization as a kind of performative pretense.

Keywords: Deliberation; Pretense; Rationalization; Shah; Transparency; Velleman

1. Introduction

To some, the question, “How is rationalization (in the sense of biased self-justification) possible?” may sound otiose considering how familiar and pervasive the phenomenon is. To have an intuitive sense of the susceptibility of deliberation to the influence of non-truth-relevant considerations, one need not be acquainted with the voluminous psychology literature on the cognitive mechanisms underlying motivated reasoning. *It's not cheating because everyone else is doing it too. I didn't report the abuse because it wasn't my place. I understated my income this year because I paid too much in tax last year. I'm only a social smoker, so I won't get cancer.* This kind of self-serving “logic” is so commonplace that it quickly becomes banal.

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However, when viewed against the backdrop of philosophical accounts of the regulative role of truth in doxastic deliberation (deliberation about what to believe), this kind of reasoning demands analysis and explanation. In the debate about the “aim of belief,” a rare point of agreement between normativists (who hold that it is a conceptually constitutive normative feature of beliefs that they ought to be true; e.g., Boghossian, 2003; Engel, 2013; Fassio, 2011; Gibbard, 2005; Shah, 2003; Shah & Velleman, 2005; and Wedgwood, 2002), teleogists (who hold that belief aims at truth in the psychological sense that beliefs are intended by agents or regulated by subpersonal mechanisms to be true; e.g., McHugh, 2011; Steglich-Petersen, 2006, 2009, 2011; and Velleman, 2000), and skeptics (who hold that various formulations of the thesis that belief aims at truth are false or platitudinous; e.g., Glüer & Wikforss, 2009; and Owens, 2003) is that from the perspective of first-person doxastic deliberation, only considerations that appear relevant to the truth of the proposition being considered can have any influence on the deliberative outcome. Indeed, many of participants in the contemporary debate take it as an important desideratum that their theories account for this related aspect of the phenomenology of doxastic deliberation. When I deliberate about whether to believe that p , they maintain, it makes no difference what I feel I morally ought to believe, nor what practical aims I might have, nor what it would be most pleasant to believe. From this perspective, whether to believe a proposition is just a matter of whether the proposition is true. I will call this feature of doxastic deliberation “exclusivity.”¹

In light of the near-consensus² regarding the exclusive relevance of truth in deliberation over belief, it might seem as if doxastic deliberation promises to inoculate us from the influence of wishful thinking so common in non-ratiocinative formation of belief. If it is the case that only considerations that appear relevant to the truth of a proposition can play a role in our deliberation about whether to believe it, then considerations formulated with an eye to expediency ought to be excluded. Nevertheless, it is manifest that this is not the case. Far from providing inoculation to the influence of wishful thinking, protracted deliberation provides occasion for highly elaborate and strategic forms of it.

Of course, no one explicitly denies that deliberative belief-formation can be influenced by non-epistemic factors. To do so would fly in the face of common sense. But exclusivity implies that this kind of causal influence will not have its effect via the content of the considerations adduced in deliberation when those considerations are known to be irrelevant to the truth. The truth-irrelevant deliberative considerations will not move the thinker in the guise of reasons. But, as I shall argue, rationalization involves responding directly to considerations that thinkers know very well are irrelevant to the truth of the proposition under consideration.

In this paper, I propose a model of rationalization. The model is designed to reconcile and explain the following three characteristic features of rationalization:

- (1) *Deliberative exclusivity.* A thinker cannot in full consciousness decide whether to believe that p in a way that issues directly in forming a belief by adducing anything other than considerations that he or she regards as relevant to the truth of p .

- (2) *Non-naïveté*. Rationalizers know that the considerations they adduce are not sufficient to establish the conclusions they reach.
- (3) *Deliberative weighing*. The considerations adduced in the process of rationalization play an essential role in the deliberative formation of the conclusion.

My proposal models the rationalizer as engaging in a pretense (in the sense of “making as if”). I give reasons to think that only if we understand rationalizers in this way can we make sense of the characteristic features of rationalization.

The argument proceeds as follows. First, I review Nishi Shah and J. David Velleman’s influential account of “transparency.” In section 3, I present four misleading ways of understanding what the phenomenon of transparency amounts to, and I distill transparency into the core notion of “exclusivity.” In section 4, I present a paradigm of rationalization and identify its essential characteristics. In section 5, I present of model of rationalization as pretense that is consistent with a commitment to the exclusivity of doxastic deliberation. In the final section, I contend that the difference between rationalization and honest inquiry is often one of degree rather than one of kind.

2. Transparency and the Exclusivity of Doxastic Deliberation

Shah characterizes the special role that truth has in doxastic deliberation in terms of *transparency*, which he describes thus:

Why, when asking oneself whether to believe that p , must one immediately recognize that this question is settled by, and only by, answering the question whether p is true? . . . Within the perspective of first-personal doxastic deliberation, that is, deliberation about what to believe, one cannot separate the two questions. (2003, p. 447)

Shah reiterates this view slightly differently in a later paper:

To be clear, the feature that I call ‘transparency’ is this: the deliberative question whether to believe that p inevitably gives way to the factual question whether p , since the answer to the latter question will determine the answer to the former. (2006, p. 481)

For Shah, transparency is an essential feature of “the phenomenology of deliberation” (2003, p. 462). Shah claims that from the perspective of the deliberating subject, the question whether to believe p is answered by, and only by, the answer to the question whether p is true. Moreover, a deliberating subject need not marshal any special effort to ignore non-truth-directed considerations, because upon asking the question whether to believe that p , the subject’s attention immediately focuses exclusively on the evidence. There is no “inferential step” from “Should I believe that p ?” to “Is p true?” The question *whether to believe that p* “seems to collapse” into the question *whether p is true* (Shah, 2003, p. 427). There is something “special about cases of deliberative belief” that the transparency thesis is supposed to capture but that is not present in cases of non-deliberative belief (Shah, 2003, p. 473).

Both Shah and his later coauthor Velleman acknowledge that belief is sometimes influenced by non-alethic factors such as wishful thinking (2005, p. 501). In fact, they take it as a virtue of their account that it “leaves room for the possibility that beliefs

can be influenced by non-evidential considerations, because the view entails that one is forced to apply the standard of correctness *only in situations in which one exercises the concept of belief* [emphasis added]" (2005, p. 501). The situations they have in mind are of course deliberative (ratiocinative) contexts.

Shah and Velleman contend that when one deliberates about whether to believe that *p*, this question "not only gives way to the question *whether p* but does so to the exclusion of any other, competing questions, such as whether *p* would be in one's interest" (2005, p. 501). The truth or falsity of *p* has "absolute priority" over all other considerations; it "crowds out" all competing non-epistemic questions. They contend that any satisfactory account of belief must explain "the fact that truth occupies the sole focus of attention in doxastic deliberation" (2005, p. 500). Shah and Velleman insist that in order to explain transparency, "the degree of evidence-responsiveness required by the concept of belief would have to be such as to rule out other influences" (2005, p. 501).

"Transparency" in the above sense is a descriptive rather than a normative claim about doxastic deliberation. Shah and Velleman do not maintain that in order to deliberate *well* or *rationally* or *effectively* one's deliberation must exhibit transparency (that would be to make the normative or prescriptive claim). Rather, they think that doxastic deliberation always in fact manifests transparency. This putative descriptive fact that "only truth regarding considerations move an agent in such deliberation" is meant to be a deep, manifest, and inescapable feature of the phenomenology of deliberating about whether to believe that *p* (Shah, 2003, p. 468).

Appealing to an inference to the best explanation, Shah and Velleman argue that transparency can be accounted for by positing that the *concept* of belief includes a standard of correctness.³ When a subject deliberates about whether to believe that *p*, he or she exercises the concept of belief. And when he or she exercises the concept of belief, it is a "closed question" whether to believe that *p*, once it is ascertained that *p* is true. Shah and Velleman contend that the dispositions constitutive of possessing the concept of belief (and of seeking to answer a question framed with that concept) are responsible for the consciously felt authority of truth for belief in any deliberation that aims to settle belief.

It is not my aim in this paper to assess Shah and Velleman's normative account of the aim of belief. This task has been taken on competently and exhaustively by others, and my quarry lies elsewhere. My aim is to refine the core notion of the phenomenon of transparency—which I refer to as exclusivity—and to construct a model of rationalization that is consistent with it.

3. Precising Transparency: Exclusivity

In this section, I identify four misleading ways of understanding transparency. This process of winnowing away inessential and misleading features will allow me to identify the core phenomenon, which, following Steglich-Petersen, I call "exclusivity."

First, the considerations adduced in deliberation need not *in fact* be truth-relevant. A person could mistakenly think that a consideration is truth-relevant, and that consideration may still play a role in the deliberative formation of belief. For instance, in

deliberating about whether a rock would fall noticeably faster in a vacuum than a feather, a person may think that the mass of each of these objects is relevant to the deliberation and accordingly take this into consideration. Of course, he or she would be mistaken. But the mere fact that this consideration is not relevant does not preclude it from playing a role in the deliberative formation of belief. What is important for transparency is whether the thinker *regards* the consideration as relevant, not whether it is *in fact* relevant.

Second, we can and do explicitly consider truth-irrelevant considerations that we know to be truth-irrelevant in deliberation about what to believe. The transition between “Should I believe that *p*?” and “Is *p* true?” need not be frictionless or immediate. The phenomenology of doxastic deliberation does not bear out Shah and Velleman’s contention that “truth occupies the sole focus of attention” (2005, p. 500). Nor does it accord with Shah’s later remark that “the question whether *p* is true *hegemonically* impose[s] itself on our doxastic deliberations” (2006, p. 488). Indeed, the fact that one frames the deliberative question as “Should I *believe* that *p*?” rather than “Is *p* true?” is often an indicator that one has turned one’s minds toward non-alethic considerations. Consider the person who thinks, “The balance of the evidence points to the treachery of my friend, but still, *should I believe this?*” Such a person might have in mind the implications of the belief “my friend has betrayed me” for her friendship, or she might have in mind the implications for her own happiness. These are considerations that she is well aware are irrelevant to the truth of the proposition. Although the process of weighing of these truth-irrelevant considerations cannot issue directly in belief, their consideration can form part of the process of doxastic deliberation.⁴

Third, not only is it possible to consider non-truth-relevant considerations in deliberation about what to believe, but these sorts of considerations can and do influence the outcome of deliberation, although not directly. An individual’s view that it would be useful to believe certain things about herself to gain confidence in a job interview may well influence the body of evidence she examines as well as the evidential standards she applies. Researchers in psychology find that when faced with an unpalatable proposition, people frame their inquiry with the question, “*Must I believe this?*” Contrariwise, when people are faced with a proposition that they wish for whatever reason to accept as true, they frame their inquiry with the question, “*Can I believe this?*” In the latter case, their permissive evidential standard is manifested in a partial or truncated search for evidence (Dawson, Gilovich, & Regan, 2002; Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Ditto et al., 1998), consideration of a biased assemblage of evidence (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Kunda, 1987; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979), and superficial processing of available information (Ditto et al., 1998). In the former case, their stringent evidential standards are manifested by a relatively thorough search through all relevant information, maximizing the chances that any flaws or limitations of the data will be spotted (Dawson, Gilovich, & Regan, 2002; Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Ditto et al., 1998).

Finally, we should not be tempted to think that the process of deliberation inoculates the deliberator from the influence of wishful thinking. In discussing the standard case of the self-deceived cuckolded husband, Shah contends that

if the husband turns his mind to the question whether to believe that his wife is faithful, then the concept of belief engages his thought, directing him to accept a proposition about his wife's fidelity only if he can discern its truth. (2006, p. 473)

Contrariwise, Shah contends that if the husband

never bothers to ask himself this question . . . then he may very well be induced by wishful thinking or other non-evidentially sensitive processes to be in a state of mind that, third-personally, we would judge to be the belief that his wife is faithful. (2006, p. 473)

But as we shall see, there is no reason to think that wishful thinking is any less present in deliberative contexts than it is in non-deliberative contexts. On the contrary, there is much evidence from psychology that the process of deliberation provides occasion for particularly sophisticated and elaborate forms of wishful thinking. As I will argue in the next section, transparency and truth-regulation are entirely independent of each other. Transparency is a thesis about the *feeling* of ineluctable truth regulation, but it has no implications for de facto truth-regulation.

Having sought out and eliminated ways of understanding transparency that are not essential to the phenomenology of doxastic deliberation, we are now in a position to identify the core notion. The core notion is this: A thinker cannot in full consciousness decide whether to believe that p in a way that issues directly in forming a belief by adducing anything other than considerations that she regards as relevant to the truth of p . I will refer to this core notion as "exclusivity." Exclusivity is endorsed by nearly every philosophical camp, including pragmatists about reasons for belief. Richard Foley, who maintains that there are non-evidential reasons for belief, cites exclusivity to explain why we do not evaluate the rationality of our beliefs in terms of how well they promote our intellectual goals:

Offering you a million dollars to believe that the earth is flat may convince you that you have a good economic reason to believe the proposition, but in itself it won't be enough to persuade you that the earth is really flat. (1993, p. 16)

For pragmatists like Foley, the psychological phenomenon of deliberative exclusivity has no normative implication despite its robustness, whereas for normativists like Shah and Velleman, the best explanation of this phenomenon is that the very concept of belief includes a standard of correctness. I do not try to adjudicate this disagreement here. It is the fact of exclusivity that is relevant to my investigation, not its explanation.

Even when narrowed and restricted in this way, deliberative exclusivity makes the phenomenon of rationalization look very puzzling. As I will argue, the rationalizer adduces considerations that she *knows* to be irrelevant to the truth of target proposition, she weighs these considerations quite explicitly in the guise of reasons, and she arrives at her conclusion directly. But before we can arrive at an understanding of how rationalization is possible in light of exclusivity, we need a clearer picture of what rationalization looks like. I turn to this in the next section.

4. A Picture of Rationalization

While contributors to the philosophical debate on the aim of belief make substantive claims about the phenomenology of doxastic deliberation, they rarely devote careful attention to its contours. In particular, in the discussion of transparency there is very little attention given to the distinctive manner in which non-evidential considerations find their way into otherwise ratiocinative belief-formation. I turn, then, to a literary example. A pitch-perfect rendering is to be found in the second chapter of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1833). I analyze it in detail not just because it provides a brilliant illustration of the phenomenon in question, but also because it foregrounds the characteristic strategies of and constraints on rationalization, strategies, and constraints that form the basis of my model.

Some quick background: When Mr. Dashwood dies, his estate passes directly to his only son, John Dashwood. Mr. Dashwood's second wife and their daughters, Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret, are left only a small income. On his deathbed, Mr. Dashwood extracts a promise from his son, John, to use his inherited fortune to take care of his half-sisters. In what follows I reproduce in some detail a conversation between John and his wife Fanny, where they deliberate about exactly how much is owed to the half-sisters. Earlier, John had decided that a lump sum of 3,000 pounds, as recommended by his father, would be the correct amount. He supposes that to set aside this amount of money for his half-sisters would be sufficient to secure their financial security and would discharge his obligation to his father. John's anticipation of his own substantial inheritance "warmed his heart, making him feel capable of generosity."⁵ Over the course of a conversation with his wife, however, his magnanimous feelings give way to his wife's meanness. At the beginning of the conversation, he needs to be convinced by his wife; toward the end of the conversation, he is a consummate co-rationalizer. Below I have excerpted and numbered the rationalizing considerations they adduce so that I can refer to them later.

Upon hearing of the 3,000 pounds, Austen's narrator describes Fanny imploring her husband John:

- (1) How could he answer it to himself to rob his child, his only child too, of so large a sum?

Fanny then casts doubt on the sisters' claim to the money, considering their pedigree:

- (2) And what possible claim could the Mrs. Dashwoods, who were related to him only by half blood, which she [Fanny] considered no relationship at all, have on his generosity to so large an amount?

Fanny also casts doubt on whether Dashwood the Elder was sound of mind when he extracted the promise from his son, John:

- (3) He did not know what he was talking of, I dare say; ten to one but he was light headed at the time. Had he been in his right sense he could not have thought of such a thing as begging you to give away half your fortune from your own child.

John begins to allow himself to be carried along:

- (4) He did not stipulate any particular sum, my dear Fanny, he only requested me in general terms, to assist them, and make their situation more comfortable than it was in his power to do.

Hesitant in the face of his wife's unwholesome purposes, John insists that he will not break his promise to his father: "The promise, therefore, was given, and must be performed."

But Fanny sees, in the vagueness of the content of the promise, an opening:

- (5) Well, then, let something be done for them; but that something need not be three thousand pounds. Consider . . . that when the money is once parted with, it can never return. Your sisters will marry and it will be gone forever. If, indeed, it could ever be restored to our poor little boy—

John accepts the invitation to fix upon his son's welfare:

- (6) Why to be sure . . . that would make a great difference. The time may come when Harry might regret that so large a sum was parted with. If he should have a numerous family, for instance, it would be a very convenient addition.

Responding to his wife's entreaties, John reduces the sisters' inheritance by half:

- (7) Perhaps, then, it would be better for all parties if the sum were diminished by one half.—Five hundred pounds would be a prodigious increase to their fortunes.

Remarking that the sisters could hardly expect more, Fanny retorts:

- (8) There is no knowing what they may expect . . . but we are not to think of their expectations: the question is, what you can afford to do.

John recalls the fact that the young women are also heirs of their mother:

- (9) Certainly; and I think I may afford to give them five hundred pounds apiece. As it is, without any addition of mine, they will each have about three thousand pounds on their mother's death—a very comfortable fortune for any young woman.

John has the idea of giving the money to their mother instead, not all at once but as a modest annuity:

- (10) I do not know whether, upon the whole, it would not be more advisable to do something for their mother while she lives, rather than for them—something of the annuity kind I mean. My sisters would feel the good effects of it as well as herself. A hundred a year would make them all perfectly comfortable.

Fanny hesitates to give her assent to the plan:

- (11) But, then, if Mrs. Dashwood should live fifteen years, we shall be completely taken in.

When John points out how unlikely this is, Fanny brings up the fact that her mother's servants, who were given an annuity, lived a very long time:

- (12) But if you observe, people always live forever when there is an annuity to be paid them.

John is only too happy to be persuaded:

- (13) It is certainly an unpleasant thing . . . to have those kind of yearly drains on one's income. One's fortune, as your mother justly says, is not one's own. To be tied down to the regular payment of such a sum, on every rent-day, is by no means desirable: it takes away one's independence.

Fanny points out another disadvantage of the annuity is that it will occasion no sense of gratitude on the part of the sisters:

- (14) And, after all, you have no thanks for it. They think themselves secure; you do no more than what is expected, and it raises no gratitude at all.

She also emphasizes that their own financial security is never certain:

- (15) It may be very inconvenient some years to spare a hundred, or even fifty pounds from our own expenses.

By now an equal participant in their joint rationalization, John decides that the sisters should get only "fifty pounds now and then" to ensure that they do not fritter away their money:

- (16) I believe you are right, my love; it will be better that there should by no annuity in the case: whatever I may give them occasionally will be of far greater assistance than a yearly allowance, because they would only enlarge their style of living if they felt sure of a larger income, and would not be sixpence the richer for it at the end of the year. It will certainly be much the best way. A present of fifty pounds, now and then, will prevent their ever being distressed for money, and will, I think, be amply discharging my promise to my father.

John emphasizes how few the sisters' expenses may be:

- (17) They will live so cheap! Their house-keeping will be nothing at all. They will have no carriage, no horses, and hardly any servants; they will keep no company, and can have no expenses of any kind! Only conceive how comfortable they will be! Five hundred a year! I am sure I cannot imagine how they will spend half of it; and as to your giving them more, it is quite absurd to think of it.

As if to dispense any lingering doubts, Fanny declares:

- (18) And I must say this, that you owe no particular gratitude to him, nor attention to his wishes; for we very well know that if he could, he would have left almost everything in the world to them.

The narrator concludes:

- (19) This argument was irresistible. It gave to his intentions whatever of decision was wanting before; and he finally resolved, that it would be absolutely unnecessary, if not highly indecorous, to do more for the widow and children of his father than such kind of neighborly acts as his own wife pointed out.

There are number of things that can be learned from Austen's rendering of this couple's undeniably impressive rationalization. The manner in which the Dashwoods arrive at their conclusion is rather subtle and merits close attention. To get a clearer

focus on exactly what they are doing, it will be useful to contrast this case of deliberative rationalization with four other related, but distinct, activities.

It's important to note that neither John nor Fanny explicitly represents to the other or to themselves that the goal of their deliberation is to reach the conclusion that what is owed to the sisters is far less than the 3,000 pounds initially supposed. The strategy of the Dashwoods involves a kind of misdirection that is absent in the deliberation of people who knowingly and in full consciousness aim to cultivate states of mind that they hope will conduce to belief in a particular proposition. Consider, for example, the contrast case of a composer suffering from crippling self-doubt who on the advice of his therapist embarks on a project of self-affirmation, deliberately and strategically directing his attention at regular intervals to hallmark past accomplishments each time his belief in his own capacity to compose is clouded with uncertainty. For this man, the content of the target belief (*I am a competent composer*) is presented clearly and explicitly, as are the considerations in support of the target belief (*I composed an excellent fugue last year. I composed a superb sonata last month.*).

Second, the rationalizing of Austen's characters is distinct from the strategy of the person who tries to bring himself to believe in God by applying the logic of Pascal's Wager. In trying to bet his way to theistic credence, this person explicitly presents himself with a non-epistemic reason to believe, and he presents that reason *as* non-epistemic. He tries to combine the aim—believe *p* only if *p* is true—with a pragmatic aim—believe *p* because it makes salvation more likely and damnation less likely.⁶ Pascal himself saw the difficulty with this approach, which is why in *Pensée* 233 he counsels surrounding oneself with faithful people, going to mass, and taking holy water (2003, p. 68).

While the Dashwoods do not try to weigh evidential reasons against pragmatic ones, neither do they deploy the kind of indirect tactics that Pascal suggests. This suggests a third contrast case: It is not the strategy of the Dashwoods to cultivate behavioral habits or immerse themselves in a social environment conducive to the formation of a particular belief. Granted, they may well avoid the sorts of people they suspect would prick their consciences or debunk their self-justifications. But these later evasive maneuvers are not essential to the manner in which they reach their conclusion.

Finally, what happens in Austen's dialogue is also distinct from what happens in the shopworn philosophical example of the self-deceived cuckold who comes to believe in his wife's fidelity because the thought of her infidelity is so abhorrent to him. While such a case does involve an unarticulated refusal to face up to readily available evidence, it does not involve (at least as it is usually described) the careful and protracted weighing of considerations. We picture the man's desire that he not be a cuckold as an irrational "influence" on his beliefs, a blind force that gums up the works of rationality in the way that a strong magnet impedes the proper functioning of a computer. The man's desire does not present itself in the guise of reasons, nor does he work with the evidence in the manner of a deliberating agent.

It is noteworthy that Mr. and Mrs. Dashwood *do* work with the evidence. The considerations that they adduce are not the product of idle fantasy or pure whimsy. On the contrary, on the route to their deliberative conclusion the Dashwoods

take into consideration a number of verifiable facts and plausible conjectures. Take consideration 1: Passing on more money to the sisters might have the effect of making their son less well off. This is reasonable. Fanny's insistence that the Dashwood sisters are related only by half blood (consideration 2) is also firmly rooted in reality. And it is also the case that Dashwood the Elder did not stipulate a specific sum for the half-sisters (consideration 4).

Not only do many of the considerations adduced by the Dashwoods appear to be constrained by the truth, these considerations play an essential role in the deliberative formation of their conclusion. They do not arrive at their conclusion "arbitrarily" or "at will." Indeed, the Dashwoods have in common with honest inquirers that there is never any guarantee that they will reach a conclusion that is amenable or desirable. Honest inquirers risk arriving at conclusions that are unwelcome because such conclusions may not be best supported by the evidence. The Dashwoods risk arriving at conclusions that are unwelcome because it takes great care and ingenuity to construct a rationalization that issues in the desired conclusion and that at the same time resists easy and obvious debunking.

The Dashwoods can and do acknowledge the considerations that lead them to their conclusion; they articulate these considerations explicitly. In a key footnote, Shah and Velleman address this matter:

Our claim here is not that deliberation about what to believe cannot be influenced by non-evidential considerations; it is that such deliberation cannot explicitly treat such considerations as relevant to the question what to believe. Any influence that such considerations exert must be unacknowledged. (2005, p. 531, note 16)

In a later paper, Shah later reiterates and elaborates this idea:

This does not mean that deliberation about what to believe cannot be influenced by non-evidential considerations; it just means that such deliberation cannot explicitly treat such considerations as relevant to the question of what to believe. Any influence that such considerations exert must be unacknowledged. But this is just as it should be. Transparency is a conscious phenomenon: we cannot consciously acknowledge considerations which are irrelevant to the truth of p as determining whether to believe that p . However, as we know very well, what cannot be consciously acknowledged often has a powerful influence none the less. (2006, p. 489)

Attending to the phenomenology of rationalization forces us to revisit Shah and Velleman's contention that the influence that non-epistemic considerations exert must be "unacknowledged." As our example shows, the rationalizers need not avoid acknowledging what their reasons are—their conclusion survives this acknowledgement. What they cannot acknowledge is the fact that the considerations they adduce are non-conclusive or even irrelevant to establishing the truth of their conclusion. For the rationalization to remain intact, rationalizers must forswear conscious acknowledgement of certain *features* of the deliberative considerations, not the considerations *themselves*. This requirement is distinctive of first-personal deliberation. Consider the contrasting mental attitudes of Austen the author, who in composing the dialogue may present to herself quite clearly the flimsy and self-serving

quality of the reasoning of her characters, and that of the Dashwoods, who cannot attend to these qualities if they are to arrive at their conclusion.

But given the assumption that the Dashwoods are no dolts, it is easily within their ken to grasp the flimsiness of their reasoning. Fanny, in particular, is possessed of a canny intelligence that is incompatible with our thinking that she simply falsely believes that all that is due to the sisters is occasional gifts. Moreover, the couple's intricate and sedulous evasions make it implausible that they have no awareness of the irrelevance of the considerations they adduce. Indeed, the moral intuition that they are blameworthy for such self-serving reasoning (Austen clearly means for us to feel this way) is incompatible with thinking that they are excused by naïveté or feeble-mindedness. If we think the Dashwoods are simply *deluded*, the moral opprobrium with which we regard them would not make sense. And although Fanny may be the instigator, John is not to be exonerated since their joint rationalization would fail in the absence of mutual cooperation. Here we find a disanalogy between joint rationalization and joint honest inquiry—the former usually requires that ulterior motivations are aligned, whereas the latter always requires a mutual commitment to follow where the evidence leads.

Rationalizers employ a distinctive set of strategies to reach their desired conclusions. For instance, they may adduce pseudo-reasons, considerations that have only the appearance of relevance to the deliberative question. Considerations 13 and 17 are of this type. It is not relevant to the question of what the sisters are due whether they can live cheaply or whether they will feel gratitude toward their “benefactor.” Also note consideration 15—just because Mr. Dashwood owes no debt of gratitude to Dashwood the Elder does not imply that he is released from his promise. Rationalizers may also adduce weak reasons, considerations that are relevant to the question at hand, but that are given undue weight or taken as conclusive reasons. Considerations 1 and 3 are of this type. Of course the Dashwoods must consider the wellbeing of their son, but giving the half-sisters a decent inheritance is unlikely to imperil him. Finally, rationalizers will often support their conclusions with empirical claims that are difficult to verify or to falsify. This is exemplified by the conjecture that people who receive an annuity live longer (consideration 12), or the conjecture that in the future it may be painful for their family to spare even fifty pounds (consideration 15).

Although this taxonomy is probably not exhaustive, I think that it is illustrative. What all of these strategies have in common is that they inculcate the *appearance* of sound reasoning while still affording crucial flexibility in the outcome of deliberation. The transparency phenomenon that Shah and Velleman describe (the phenomenon whereby the deliberative question gives way to the factual question) is just as robust in rationalization as it is in honest doxastic deliberation. In both cases, the discursive move *p is true* ultimately settles the question. Reaching the conclusion *p is true* is just as decisive for the rationalizer as it is for the honest inquirer. In the pragmatics of deliberation, honest or not, this kind of discursive move serves as a “deliberation-stopper.” Shah and Velleman characterize this transition as immediate, effortless, and ineluctable. In section 3, I gave reasons to be skeptical of the universality of the smoothness and immediacy of the transition from the alethic question to the doxastic

question. Nonetheless, to the extent that this transition ultimately is made, it is no less the case in episodes of rationalization. Were the Dashwoods to agree that “it is true that we owe the sisters nothing more than kind and neighborly acts,” the question would be settled. Accordingly, the relative strength or weakness of truth-regulation and the feature of transparency are entirely independent of each other.

5. A Pretense Model of Rationalization

In the introduction to this paper, I submitted that a satisfactory model of rationalization will reconcile these three features:

- (1) *Deliberative exclusivity*. A thinker cannot in full consciousness decide whether to believe that p in a way that issues directly in forming a belief by adducing anything other than considerations that he or she regards as relevant to the truth of p .
- (2) *Non-naïveté*. Rationalizers know that the considerations they adduce are not sufficient to establish the conclusions they reach.
- (3) *Deliberative weighing*. The considerations adduced in the process of rationalization play an essential role in the deliberative formation of the conclusion. The influence of the rationalizing consideration has its effect via the content of the consideration, and the consideration is weighed explicitly.

In order to reconcile the fact that rationalizers *know* that the considerations they adduce do not establish the conclusions they reach with the fact that they cannot so *regard* them while rationalizing, I maintain that we must understand rationalizers as engaging in performative pretense. While it is not possible for an individual to believe that p when she knows that p is false, there is no difficulty with pretending that p (in the sense of making as if p) when she knows that p is false.⁷

In advancing a pretense account of rationalization, I must address the understanding of pretense as offline processing that is altogether segregated from belief and devoid of motivational force. Nichols and Stich, for example, explicitly set out to provide a model of pretense that explains how it is that “the events that occurred in the context of pretense have only quite limited effect on the post-pretense cognitive state of pretender” (2000, p. 120). While this “quarantining” of pretense contents from belief contents is typical, it is not universal. As Gendler (2003) points out, in some contexts quarantining gives way to its opposite—“contagion”—whereby the pretended contents come to be believed, or treated as if they are believed, merely because they are pretended. In cases of affective transmission mere contemplation of a content that is emotionally charged causes the thinker to behave and feel in a way that is consistent with belief in that content (Gendler, 2003, p. 131). This explains why if Mr. Dashwood is later accused of renegeing on his promise, he may respond with genuinely felt outrage and indignation.

In order to understand rationalization as performative pretense, we must also address the understanding of pretense whereby the pretender processes belief-eligible content in the same way that he or she processes belief. For example, Nichols and Stich’s model of pretense sets out to explain how it is that “inference mechanisms

treat pretense representations in roughly the same way that the mechanisms treat real beliefs" (2000, p. 125). Although Nichols and Stich are right that such "mirroring" is typical, Gendler (2003, p. 137) points out that pretense episodes may also manifest "disparity," the tendency whereby pretense content differs from non-defective belief content in that what is pretended may be incomplete (some features may remain permanently unspecified and unspecifiable) as well as incoherent (some features may be logically and conceptually incompatible).

In the light of this more nuanced understanding of the relationship between belief and pretense, it is useful to reexamine Shah's discussion of the self-deceived cuckold. Shah maintains that

if he views the attitude as a belief, then he will take evidence to be solely relevant, but if he thinks of the attitude as something he is assuming for the sake of a *pretense*, for example, then he won't take evidence to bear at all on whether to maintain or abandon the attitude. (2003, p. 468)

The Dashwood rationalization subverts this kind of dichotomous analysis. While the Dashwoods clearly do not proceed in the same way they would if they took the evidence to be solely relevant to their deliberative question (witness their low evidential standards and irrelevant considerations), they are in important ways constrained by the evidence (witness their eschewal of outright contradiction and manifest falsity). What best explains the complex structure of their rationalization? I think that the best explanation is that they are engaged in a kind of pretense whose content includes their being guided by the aim of inquiry, which requires that the conclusion they reach is correct only if there is sufficient reason to believe it. Accordingly, rationalizers *make as if* the considerations they adduce are sufficient to establish the conclusions they reach, even though they know that this is not the case. Their episodes of pretense exhibit mirroring in that they reproduce the rhetorical and characteristic discursive moves of honest inquiry. At the same time, they also manifest disparity in their tolerance for (suitably disguised) incoherent content.

As with the case of explicit fictions, being "realistic" helps with the suspension of disbelief. The story told cannot be wildly implausible, far-fetched, or manifestly self-contradictory. If it is, the rationalization will be unstable and vulnerable to easy debunking. Just as a reader of a novel may "pop out" of a story whose plot is obviously incoherent, so also a thinker will not be moved by a rationalization that lacks the basic characteristic discursive moves of honest inquiry. The ability to rationalize is an achievement requiring a good deal of cognitive sophistication, and individual thinkers will vary in their possession of the skill required.⁸ The journeyman rationalizer will concoct rationalizations that are vulnerable to easy debunking by his own conscience or by the criticism of others. The maestro rationalizer will concoct far-ranging rationalizations that ultimately efface any awareness of their falsity.⁹

By assembling considerations with apposite rhetorical properties and logical relations, the rationalizer cultivates the appearance of plausibility. This is why the rationalizing considerations cannot be manifestly contradictory or irrelevant—the juxtaposition of these contents plays an essential role in the formation of the

conclusion. In a sense, pretending comes in twice in my model, both during the mock-ratiocinative process, and also in the final attitude with which the process concludes.¹⁰ The resulting attitude of pretense plays the role ordinarily played by belief; it guides the rationalizer's actions and occupies the rationalizer's thoughts in a wide range of circumstances. However, when rationalizers find themselves in high-stakes contexts, or when they are subjected to demanding scrutiny from others, they may abandon the pretense. For example, Mr. and Mrs. Dashwood might have their rationalization debunked by an honest, clear-eyed, and persuasive friend.

Modeling rationalization in this way is compatible with endorsing deliberative exclusivity. Deliberative exclusivity only precludes deliberation from issuing directly in *belief* via considerations that the thinker regards as truth-irrelevant. But if rationalization is understood as a process that issues in an attitude of *pretense*, then it is exempt from the constraint of deliberative exclusivity. The process of rationalization should be distinguished from deliberation about what it would be good to pretend, the sort of activity that might engage students in an acting class. This kind of deliberation issues in a *belief* about what to pretend, and it is therefore subject to deliberative exclusivity. In contrast, rationalization is pretend deliberation.

Close attention to rationalization reveals a degree of complexity within our mental architecture. Although rationalizers regard the considerations they adduce as sufficient to establish the conclusions they reach, they know that they are not sufficient. The rationalizer has a dispositional belief that he or she lacks sufficient evidence for his or her conclusion. If that belief comes to occupy his or her thoughts, then the rationalization will crumble in much the same way that a spectator attending to the mechanics of a film will undermine "suspension of disbelief." This analysis accords well with the phenomenology of having one's rationalizations debunked; one has the feeling of having known of their flimsiness all along rather than of having just learned of it.

Here one might object that it is simply implausible to suppose rationalizers are engaging in pretense. The experience of rationalizing certainly *feels* rather different from acting in a play or participating in a child's game of make-believe. Surely rationalizers are not consciously thinking of the attitudes they are adopting as something other than belief! But just as a method actor who is preparing for a role can pretend that certain things are true of his life without consciously attending to the fact that this is what he is up to, so too the rationalizer may pretend that certain considerations provide conclusive reasons for belief. The difference between the rationalizer and the method actor is that the method actor has at an earlier time consciously framed his activity as one of imaginative and performative pretense, whereas the rationalizer has not.

Often it is only in abeyance that individuals become fully aware that they have been adopting the projective attitude of pretense rather than the receptive attitude of belief. Consider, for example, an undergraduate student who is exploring new fields and trying to discover where her passion resides. She sits in a freshman seminar on "Althusser and Death" with rapt attention (although she understands little of what is said), emulating the stylish sophistication and attractive mysteriousness of her

classmates. It is only in later years when she gets a taste of what it really feels like to be passionately immersed in a subject she loves that she realizes that in fact she was pretending to be interested in Althusser all this time. If she were able to understand herself better as a freshman, she may have realized this more quickly. (It should be evident that a case like this is importantly different from a case of a cynical student who consciously decides to adopt the tactic of pretending to be interested in Althusser in order to, say, impress her instructor.) A rationalizing deliberator does not “think of the attitude as something she is assuming for the sake of a *pretense*,” at least not at the time of deliberation. Rather, she “slips into pretending” without attending to the fact that she is doing this.

Readers might be unsettled by the suggestion that one can pretend without occurrent awareness that one pretends from this admittedly merely suggestive example whose interpretation may be contested.¹¹ One might object that it does violence to the concept of pretense to admit cases where one is not occurrently aware that one is pretending, and where one has not earlier framed one’s activity as an episode of pretense (as one has in the case of method acting). On this matter, I am content to cede ground. It is not essential to my account that “pretending” in rationalization is cut from the same cloth as the pretending that we do in imaginary games or dramatic acting. It is the features of the imagination—mirroring and disparity, quarantining and contagion—that are essential for my model of rationalization. If readers prefer to distinguish pretense from “pretense-like rationalization,” I have no objection.

6. Rationalization and Honest Inquiry

A common feature of everyday doxastic deliberation is that practical and epistemic considerations are often woven very finely. Consider a married couple’s deliberation about whose elderly parents are more feeble, where the veiled subtext is a negotiation about whose parents they ought to visit next. Each side advances considerations that emphasize the frailty of his or her parents (and therefore the necessity of a visit): cataracts, a gouty foot, an irregular heartbeat. In the end, there may be a consideration adduced by one side that is so weighty and so manifest that it definitively settles the question (say, the urgent need for bypass surgery). If this is the case, the rationalization of the other side will be quickly short-circuited. But this does not imply that the considerations on the other side were totally “made up” or “arbitrary.” The illnesses need not have been invented.

Deliberation is activity that is extended in time and often discontinuous, like “washing the car.” The course that an episode of deliberation takes can be influenced by multiple practical aims of the agent. For example, the intensity of scrutiny that an agent directs toward a particular hypothesis may be influenced by the stakes or the desirability of that hypothesis turning out to be true. This is a feature even of “pure” doxastic deliberation. Sometimes in the course of deliberation, a thinker will adduce considerations that she knows are irrelevant or inconclusive, and she will make as if these considerations are relevant or conclusive. When she does this, she rationalizes.

Shah and Velleman's transparency thesis is intended to articulate a constitutive standard for genuine doxastic deliberation. Competent users of the concept of belief abide by the prescription to accept p only if p is true. Shah and Velleman may well maintain that rationalization and doxastic deliberation are altogether different things. But it is worthwhile to bear in mind that episodes of the activity of doxastic deliberation may encompass interludes of rationalization. Similarly, many episodes of rationalization include interludes of genuine deliberation. For an apt characterization of which moments of this extended activity constitute rationalization, we need a model of rationalization, and a way of understanding how pretense enters the picture.

Recall Gendler's way of distinguishing belief from pretense:

If I bear an attitude of belief toward p , I should be willing to submit my evidence for p to rational scrutiny, and I should be committed to abandoning my belief if I acquire grounds for thinking it false. . . . If I bear an attitude of pretense towards p , I am not committed to submitting my evidence for p (should I have any) to rational scrutiny, nor am I committed to abandoning my pretense if I have or acquire grounds for thinking it false. (2003, pp. 237–238)

Attending closely to the phenomenology of doxastic deliberation shows that this dichotomy is not as clear cut as it may seem. The "commitment" in question is not "off" or "on"; it may vary by degree, and it may be stronger or weaker with respect to different deliberative considerations. In contexts of rationalization, unlike standard cases of self-aware imaginative pretense, individuals often submit their evidence to a moderate degree of rational scrutiny (although, of course, not scrutiny that is so intense that the rationalization will crumble). Conversely, should rationalizers become vividly aware of grounds for thinking that their conclusions are false, suspension of disbelief will be undermined, and they will be forced to abandon them.¹²

Deliberative episodes may vary in their relative proximity to the pole of "shameless rationalization" and that of "unadulterated inquiry." Within a single deliberative episode, entirely genuine deliberative considerations may be weighed against others that are highly contrived. For example, a subject may exercise a good deal of care and scrutiny in his or her investigation, but still steer clear of certain narrowly defined hypotheses that might lead to conclusions that are "unthinkable." Consider the case of a detective who doggedly and exhaustively follows all his leads except for those that may bring him to believe in the guilt of his son (which he brushes off with a feeble rationale). Near the other pole of the spectrum, a subject may require only the flimsiest cover to adopt what is evident to everyone else as a very implausible posture. An omnivorous student in my ethics class once argued that vegetarianism was immoral because if humans ate only plants, nonhuman herbivores would starve to death. (To debunk the rationalization another student had only to ask, "Is that really what you think?")

Following Gendler, the question of whether a particular deliberative consideration should be construed as belief or pretense can be framed in terms of how we characterize the willingness of the rationalizer to submit the consideration to rational scrutiny. As an illustrative contrast, consider first the inclinations of the honest pretender (e.g., the knowing participant in a game of make-believe). There is no expectation,

normative or otherwise, that such an individual will possess sufficient evidence for what he pretends. Moreover, directing his attention to such matters is likely to interfere with the suspension of disbelief, obstructing pretense-based emotions and desires. For this individual, scrutiny would be pointless. The rationalizer is similarly unwilling to submit her deliberative considerations to rational scrutiny, but there is an important difference. The rationalizer allows the contents of her pretense to occupy her thoughts, modulate her emotions, and guide her actions across a wide range of contexts that are not marked as pretend. In contrast with the rationalizer, the role-player has at an earlier time explicitly framed his activity as one of pretense. As a result, he is able to critically evaluate the circumscription of contexts in which acting in the mode of “as if” is appropriate.¹³ My (admittedly armchair) hypothesis is that this deliberate and conscious framing diminishes the likelihood of contagion, the process whereby pretended contents come to be believed.¹⁴ We do not often worry that the method actor playing the role of a villain will end up committing real crimes. But we do worry that the chronic rationalizer who lacks honest friends will end up deluded.

7. Conclusion

Rationalization is marked by an inherent tension between arriving at the desired conclusion (e.g., I am honest, I am rational, I am good) and getting there with a plausible story. The negotiation of these aims is sometimes a protracted balancing act that can be performed with varying degrees of proficiency. It is never guaranteed at the outset that rationalization will realize its aims. While rationalizers are partially constrained by their evidence base, they do their utmost to relax the constraint. Sometimes the goal is defined positively (e.g., arriving at the conclusion that one is faithful to a promise). Sometimes the goal is defined negatively (e.g., avoiding the conclusion that one's grandson is callous). In paradigmatic cases, rationalization is something that cognizers *do* rather than something that befalls them—it is not a mere “influence” on their belief-forming processes. In contexts where facing up to the truth is morally weighted or practically important, rationalizing deliberators are guilty of a kind of culpable negligence. Their failing is that they do not attend to the fact that they are pretending. The severity with which we view this recklessness will depend on the topic at hand and the purpose of the rationalization. Buttressing one's own self-confidence is one thing; cheating someone of an inheritance is another. But the details of the moral evaluation of rationalization are a topic for another investigation. This paper lays the foundation for that investigation by giving an account of just what it is that rationalizers do.

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Notes

- [1] I follow Steglich-Petersen (2009) in adopting this term. Exclusivity is endorsed by Hieronymi (2008), Owens (2003), Shah (2003), and Steglich-Petersen (2009) among others.
- [2] McHugh (forthcoming) dissents.
- [3] See Wedgwood (2002) for a separate defense of the conceptual claim that truth is belief's standard of correctness.
- [4] I suspect that Shah and Velleman would deny that people are engaged in genuine doxastic deliberation when they turn their minds to questions such as these. This move requires that we have a conception of "pure" doxastic deliberation that is idealized from what we ordinarily understand as deliberation about what to believe "out in the wild." I see no problem with making this distinction in principle.
- [5] The following quotations are from Austin (1833, pp. 5–10).
- [6] Owens (2003) argues that it is impossible to weigh the "aim of belief"—believe p only if p is true—with other aims. This leads him to think that there is no aim of belief at all (since aims are the sort of things that we can weigh).
- [7] Gendler (2008, 2010) advances an account of self-deception as pretense. This paper can be seen as an extension of her basic idea to discursive contexts. I think that rationalization is best understood as a discursive species of self-deception. The non-discursive variety of self-deception described by Gendler (2008) does not involve the intricate combining of the aim of arriving at a desired conclusion (e.g., I am honest, I am rational, I am good) and the aim of getting there with a plausible story. Looking at self-deception that takes a discursive form invites investigation of related phenomena, such as deliberative exclusivity.
- [8] Kunda (1990) provides an excellent survey of classic psychological work on the mechanisms subserving motivated reasoning (strategies for accessing, constructing, and evaluating beliefs) that suggests that subjects exhibiting motivated reasoning are constrained by their variable ability to produce seemingly reasonable justifications for their conclusions.
- [9] LeCarré's novel *Little Drummer Girl* (1983), the story of an English actress turned double-agent, is a masterful illustration of this phenomenon.
- [10] This was pointed out to me by an anonymous referee for this journal.
- [11] Griffiths and Scarantino (2009) have undertaken some very suggestive empirical work on sulking that seems to indicate that sulking behaviors are modulated by strategic aims of which the subject is largely unaware at the time of their expression. Although the sulking behavior is often in part performative pretense, subjects do not seem to be occurrently aware of this fact.
 Velleman analyzes an entire category of "arational" actions as instances of pretending where you are not presently think of yourself as pretending. Examples include talking to yourself while imagining yourself in conversation with someone else, saying things that you wish you had said or could say (2000, p. 264). He maintains that such actions can only be explained in terms of "wishes" and "imaginings" (rather than beliefs and desires). But in paradigm cases it is only in abeyance that we become aware that we were pretending in this way.
- [12] An anonymous referee from this journal alerted me to the interesting contrast between the kind of rationalizers I describe and fanatics, who often support their fanatical beliefs with rationalizations, but who do not abandon their beliefs when pressed even if they cannot provide any sufficient justification for them.
- [13] Gendler encouraged me to pursue this idea.
- [14] Characterization of the processes by which pretended contents come to be believed is largely within the ambit of empirical psychology. For suggestive recent work on this question, see Chance, Norton, Gino, and Ariely (2011).

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