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1 RATIONALIZATION, EVIDENCE, AND PRETENSE

2
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4

5 *Abstract*

6 In this paper I distinguish the category of “rationalization” from
7 various forms of epistemic irrationality. I maintain that only if we
8 model rationalizers as pretenders can we make sense of the
9 rationalizer’s distinctive relationship to the evidence in her posses-
10 sion. I contrast the cognitive attitude of the rationalizer with that of
11 believers whose relationship to the evidence I describe as “waffling”
12 or “intransigent”. In the final section of the paper, I compare the
13 rationalizer to the Frankfurtian bullshitter.
14

15 The concept of *rationalization*, in the sense of biased post-hoc
16 self-justification, has come to play a crucial theoretical role in
17 recent empirically-minded moral psychology. Dan Ariely (2012)
18 identifies rationalization the engine of interpersonal dishonesty.
19 It is our capacity to rationalize that enables us to benefit from
20 dishonesty and simultaneously to think of ourselves as honest
21 people. Jonathan Haidt (2001) maintains that people habitually
22 construct reasonable sounding justifications for morally impor-
23 tant choices while their real motives remain hidden to them.
24 Indeed, Haidt contends that *most* moral reasoning is post-hoc: we
25 decide what is wrong or right based on emotionally driven intu-
26 tions, and then we make up “reasons” to explain and justify our
27 decisions. Joshua Greene (2007) concurs with Haidt that much of
28 what passes for moral *reasoning* is in fact *rationalization*, and main-
29 tains that deontology is worse of than consequentialism in this
30 regard.

31 Considering the central theoretical role that rationalization
32 plays in much of this work, there has been surprisingly little
33 sustained philosophical attention to characterizing it precisely
34 and exploring its normative dimensions. How should we draw the
35 distinction between reasoning and rationalizing? How much lati-
36 tude do rationalizers have in arriving at their desired conclusions?
37 Are rationalizers in the business of forming beliefs at all? What
38 epistemic threat do rationalizers pose to us?

1 In this paper I work toward answering these questions by exam-
2 ining the relationship of the cognitive attitudes of the rationalizer
3 to the evidence that he possesses. I review two contrastive cases
4 [1] described by Adam Elga (2005), one in which a thinker's belief is
5 *entirely unconstrained* by evidence, and one in which a thinker's
6 belief *oscillates* between being constrained and unconstrained,
7 depending on whether the thinker is paying attention. I dub these
8 figures "the intransigent" and "the waffler" respectively, and
9 briefly remark on the distinctive forms of irrationality they
10 exhibit. I then introduce a third figure who complicates the
11 picture. This figure, "the rationalizer" arrives at his conclusions via
12 a process that is *continuously partially constrained* by his appraisal of
13 the evidence. I construct a model that explains how such a rela-
14 tionship to the evidence is possible. This model hinges on a
15 hypothesis that the rationalizer *makes as if* he is guided in deliber-
16 eration by the norm of truth, but is in fact constrained only indi-
17 rectly by the norm of truth. I maintain that only if we model
18 rationalizers as *pretenders* can we make sense of the characteristic
19 features of rationalization. In the final section of the paper, I
20 compare the rationalizer to the Frankfurtian bullshitter.

insert comma
after "the
rationalizer"

22 I. Waffling and Intransigent Believers

23
24 [2] Adam Elga (2005) relates that his friend, Daria, believes in astrol-
25 ogy. Even worse, she clings to her belief in defiance of the evi-
26 dence. For an epistemologist, such a friendship cannot be
27 uncomplicated. Cases like Daria's bring us to question how far a
28 thinker's beliefs may stray from her considered judgement of what
29 the evidence supports.

30 Elga relates how he confronted his friend Daria with evidence
31 that her belief in astrology was unfounded, bringing to her atten-
32 tion reputable studies showing that the position of distant stars at
33 the time of one's birth has no consequence for one's personality
34 or for one's prospects. Daria conceded the weightiness of the
35 evidence against her belief and she was unable to find any con-
36 trary evidence to support her belief. But ultimately, Daria stuck to
37 her guns: 'I still believe in astrology just as much as I did before
38 seeing the studies'. And her reason? 'Believing in astrology makes
39 me happy' (115).

40 Elga relates that he was 'floored' at Daria's response (115).
41 Before being confronted with the evidence, her pattern of belief

1 formation, though irrational, was at least familiar. Elga had sup-
2 posed that she was unconsciously biased in favor of it, attending
3 more closely to astrological predications that came out right than
4 to those that came out wrong. But he had assumed that at a
5 minimum she must form her belief in astrology based on consid-
6 erations that *appeared* to her at the time to support such a belief.

7 What Elga finds truly perplexing (and also infuriating) is that
8 Daria refuses to revise her belief even after taking stock of the
9 overwhelming evidence against it. He maintains that Daria know-
10 ingly violates the following norm of rationality:

11
12 (E) One ought not to have beliefs that go against what one
13 reasonable thinks one's evidence supports. (116)
14

15 According to Elga, violating (E) is deeply irrational. Nonethe-
16 less he is wary of adopting an attitude of condescension too
17 quickly. Why? Because he suspects that, despite having the con-
18 science of an epistemologist, he himself is guilty of a similar
19 transgression. That is, he suspects that he knowingly and persis-
20 tently violates (E). Here is why. Elga has read the social psychology
21 literature on the pervasive and powerful biases that distort self-
22 evaluation. Furthermore, he is largely convinced by it. He thinks
23 that social psychologists have discovered that most people are
24 subject to persistent positive illusions about themselves.
25 (Depressed people, on the other hand, have been found to have
26 more accurate self-evaluations). These positive illusions, psycholo-
27 gists tell us, have a role in fostering increased happiness, motiva-
28 tion, and productivity. None of this Elga finds too surprising.
29 Positive illusions, as long as they are not too extreme, seem to be
30 the sorts of things that help people to get by.

31 Of course, appreciating the validity of this research should have
32 implications for one's own self-evaluations. In particular, one
33 (epistemically) ought to re-calibrate one's evaluations in the light
34 of them. Elga is convinced that most people overrate themselves,
35 and he has no reason to believe that he is an exception. So, on
36 pain of violating (E), he (epistemically) ought to ratchet down his
37 own self-evaluations. But alas, this does not happen.
38

39 I mouthed the words "I'm not as good as I thought I was." But
40 they didn't sink in. As soon as it was time to make dinner, write
41 a paper, or see a friend – indeed, as soon as it was time to do
42 anything but sit in my office brooding about the positive

1 illusion literature – the impact of that literature on my self-
2 evaluations completely evaporated. (119)
3

4 But is this shamefaced epistemologist really on par with a
5 believer in astrology with respect to theoretical irrationality? The
6 conclusion of Elga's story, although maudlin, is not as bad as all
7 that. Elga notes that while confronting the positive illusion evi-
8 dence in moments of cool reflection, he *does* adjust his self-
9 evaluations in light of the evidence. It is only when he enters the
10 fray of ordinary life – eating breakfast, playing basketball, teaching
11 – that the positive illusion studies get 'shoved on the back-burner'
12 and the recalibrations come undone (121). This all happens
13 without conscious awareness.

14 Elga characterizes this discrepancy as 'waffling' between two
15 belief states, a reflective state that takes into account our tendency
16 to overrate ourselves, and a non-reflective state that does not.
17 Although both Elga and Daria violate (E), Elga maintains that
18 Daria's way of doing so is epistemically more pernicious. Daria has
19 beliefs that by her own lights go against the evidence, and this
20 combination of beliefs persists even when she is aware of the
21 tension. The waffler does not suffer from a pathology this grave.
22 In his reflective state, he brings his beliefs in line. As such, at least
23 we can say of him that he is disposed to properly resolve the
24 tension between belief and evidence in the moments when he
25 pays attention. At no time does Elga both recognize that he is
26 violating the norm and persist in violating it. Daria, on the other
27 hand, is in continuous violation of the norm, even when such
28 violation is brought into focus.

29 I think Elga's remarks on the irrationality of each figure are
30 plausible, but there is one sense in which Daria is better off than
31 Elga. Although Daria is inconsistent in the sense that her beliefs
32 are incompatible with her assessment of the evidence, she consist-
33 ent in the sense of there being uniformity between her reflective
34 beliefs and her non-reflective beliefs. It is an unfortunate fact
35 about Elga that from the point of view of his own reflective self he
36 has irrational beliefs about himself most of the time. This a an
37 infelicitous estrangement. Although we might describe Daria as
38 'alienated' in the sense that she is unable to adduce relevant
39 reasons for her own belief, she is not alienated in the straight-
40 forward sense that Elga is.¹ When it comes to self-evaluation, there
41

insert "is"

insert "is";
delete "a"

42 ¹ I owe this point to P.D Magnus.

1 are 'two Elgas'. Consequently, a spectator's assessment of what
2 Elga believes about himself may vary depending on whether he
3 catches Elga in a reflective or a non-reflective moment. Such is
4 not the case with Daria. Her belief in astrology is steady and
5 unvarying.

7 II. Deliberative Exclusivity

8
9 While the phenomena that Elga relates are entirely familiar, one
10 might respond with scepticism regarding whether Daria really
11 *believes* in astrology despite her insistent avowal. Of course, 'S
12 believes in x ' where x ranges over comprehensive theories or
13 world-views is a tricky thing to interpret. Most straightforwardly,
14 someone who believes in astrology might think that an
15 astrologist's predictions of the future based on an individual's
16 birth sign are highly reliable. Alternatively, she could think that
17 'there is some validity' to the predictions of the best astrologers,
18 but the nature of the 'validity' she refers to may be hopelessly
19 under-specified. Finally, the believer in astrology could think that
20 astrological understanding of human temperament 'gets at some-
21 thing deep' about man's connection to the cosmos, a very vague
22 belief whose truth conditions are devilishly difficult to make
23 precise. With some probing we are not unlikely to find that the
24 astrology advocate himself 'waffles' between these different inter-
25 pretations, allowing him to duck commitment by changing the
26 subject when challenged.

27 But even if we fix on a clear interpretation of 'believing in
28 astrology' and we assume that Daria believes in astrology in that
29 sense, we might still be reluctant to say that Daria really has this
30 belief if she clings to it despite reviewing and appreciating the
31 overwhelming evidence against it. Perhaps the robust phenom-
32 enon of *deliberative exclusivity* in doxastic deliberation underwrites
33 our scepticism.² The phenomenon is this: it seems that a thinker
34 cannot in full consciousness decide whether to believe that p in a
35 way that issues directly in forming a belief by adducing anything
36 other than considerations that she regards as relevant to the truth
37 of p . In the philosophical debate over the "aim of belief" a rare

38
39 ² I borrow the term "exclusivity" from Steglich-Petersen (2009). In discuss rationaliza-
40 tion and the scope of exclusivity in D'Cruz (forthcoming).

1 point of agreement between normativists³ (who hold that it is a
2 conceptually constitutive normative feature of beliefs that they
3 ought to be true), teleogists⁴ (who hold that belief aims at truth in
4 the psychological sense that beliefs are intended by agents or
5 regulated by sub-personal mechanisms to be true), and skeptics⁵
6 (who hold that various formulations of the aim thesis are false or
7 platitudinous) is that from the perspective of first personal
8 doxastic deliberation, only considerations that appear to subject
9 as relevant to the truth of the proposition being considered can
10 have any influence on the deliberative outcome. Indeed, the
11 many of participants in the contemporary debate take it as an
12 important desideratum that their theories account for this aspect
13 of the phenomenology of doxastic deliberation. When I deliber-
14 ate about whether to believe that *p*, it makes no difference what I
15 feel I morally ought to believe, nor what practical aims I might
16 have, nor what it would be most pleasant to believe. From this
17 perspective, whether to believe a proposition is exclusively a
18 matter of whether the proposition is true.

19 Exclusivity is widely accepted among philosophers. Even prag-
20 matists who maintain that there are non-evidential reasons for
21 belief deny that we ever explicitly evaluate the rationality of our
22 beliefs in terms of how well they promote our goals: 'Offering you
23 a million dollars to believe that the earth is flat may convince you
24 that you have a good economic reason to believe the proposition,
25 but in itself it won't be enough to persuade you that the earth is
26 really flat.' (Foley 1993,16)

27 By adducing the consideration 'believing in astrology makes me
28 happy' and thereby arriving at the conclusion 'astrology is true'
29 Daria appears to violate deliberative exclusivity. Such violation is
30 surely very rare – we might even doubt that it is possible. And this
31 gives us pause in attributing the belief to Daria. But is deliberative
32 exclusivity hegemonic? Huddleston (2011) offers a case, rather
33 similar to that of Daria, as a counter-example:

34
35 Mary, let us say, believes that there is a God. Yet Mary is a
36 particularly self-conscious religious believer. For she also
37 believes she has no evidence for this belief. And further-
38 more she is consciously aware of her own lack of evidence.

39
40
41 ³ See Boghossian (2003), Engel (2013), Shah (2003), Shah and Velleman (2005),
Wedgwood (2013).

42 ⁴ See Velleman (2000), McHugh (2011) and Steglich-Petersen (2006, 2009, 2011).

43 ⁵ See Owens (2000, 2003), Glüer and Wikforss (2009), Hazlett (2013).

1 Nonetheless, she still believes that there is a God. Is it really
2 inconceivable that there could be a person with this belief and
3 this belief about her evidence? Surely not. Indeed, I think I
4 know people like this. (211)

5
6 Huddleston concedes that if a person believes he lacks neces-
7 sary evidence or appreciates conclusive contrary evidence it is
8 *typically* the case that he must push such beliefs out of his con-
9 scious awareness in order to continue believing. But he contends
10 that this need not *always* be the case. Huddleston dubs this small
11 subset of atypical beliefs “naughty beliefs” – beliefs that are recal-
12 citrant in the face of epistemic authority. Superstitious beliefs are
13 among his paradigm examples.

14 I think that it is still a live question whether we ought to classify
15 the attitudes described by Elga and Huddleston as beliefs, and it is
16 not my aim in this paper to settle the question. But we are at least
17 now in a position to articulate two competing accounts of the kind
18 of mistake that Daria is making. We might think, following Elga
19 and Huddleston, that Daria is irrational in that she believes that *p*
20 despite the fact that she thinks that the evidence supports *not-p*.
21 Or else, we might think that Daria’s irrationality consists in her
22 inability to accurately introspect or to accurately report her own
23 beliefs. (Alternatively, if we are feeling uncharitable, we may think
24 that Daria is not being sincere and that her putative *belief* is merely
25 a rebellious *posture*.)

26 For my purposes, it is not required that we decide which of
27 these interpretations of Daria is most apt. The important thing to
28 note is that Elga’s distorted belief in his own ability invites none of
29 this brand of scepticism. Elga’s pattern of belief formation is
30 altogether congruent with deliberative exclusivity. It is only in
31 non-deliberative contexts that Elga fails to recalibrate his belief to
32 account for the relevant evidence. This kind of disparity in truth-
33 regulation between deliberative contexts and non-deliberative
34 contexts has been remarked on elsewhere. In discussing the stand-
35 ard case of the self-deceived cuckolded husband, Nishi Shah
36 (2003) contends that ‘if the husband turns his mind to the ques-
37 tion whether to believe that his wife is faithful, then the concept of
38 belief engages his thought, directing him to accept a proposition
39 about his wife’s fidelity only if he can discern its truth.’ (473)
40 Contrariwise, Shah contends that if the husband ‘never bothers to
41 ask himself this question, however, then he may very well be
42 induced by wishful thinking or other non-evidentially sensitive

1 processes to be in a state of mind that, third-personally, we would
2 judge to the belief that his wife is faithful.' (473) We may aptly dub
3 the phenomenon that Shah describes as a kind of 'counterfactual
4 waffling'. It may never be that case that this man turns his mind to
5 the question whether to believe that his wife is faithful. But were
6 he to 'doxastically deliberate', then he his belief would be regu-
7 lated so as to conform to his appraisal of the evidence.

9 III. Enter the Rationalizer

10 In what follows, I introduce a new figure who complicates this
11 picture, but whose troubled relationship to the evidence is just
12 as familiar as that of Daria and Mary, the intransigent believers
13 (or 'believer' if the reader prefers), and Elga, the waffling
14 believer. This figure is unlike Elga, whose oscillation between
15 theoretical rationality and irrationality tracks his relative atten-
16 tion or inattention to the evidence. Elga cares about the truth
17 and worries that his beliefs might diverge from it. The figure I
18 will describe displays no such oscillation, and no such devotion
19 to the truth. At the same time, this individual is not endowed
20 with Daria and Mary's breezy indifference to obvious and deci-
21 sive countervailing evidence. Unlike Daria and Mary, the
22 rationalizer presents himself as genuinely concerned with follow-
23 ing the evidence where it leads. He has a more complicated
24 relationship to the evidence which presents us with a distinct
25 category.

26 I maintain that when a thinker is *rationalizing*, the way that he
27 reaches his conclusion is characterized by *continuous partial regu-*
28 *lation* by his appraisal of the evidence (in sharp contrast to the
29 oscillating full regulation of wafflers). As an illustration, consider
30 the following imagined train of thought from Fred, whose paper
31 has been rejected from a prestigious journal. When he gets
32 around to reading the written feedback, he finds to his dismay
33 that the comments he receives rehearse in painstaking detail all
34 the reasons why his paper is not up to snuff. He asks himself, 'Do
35 the reviewers comments establish that my paper is unworthy?' In
36 response to the charge that his thesis is not substantiated, he tells
37 himself that his work is just too heterodox and creative. Faced with
38 the criticism that he fails to engage the relative literature, he
39 insists that the expectation that he read *everything* is simply unre-
40asonable. He postulates that the referees are conservative, that they

Should be
"believers"

1 are intellectually lazy, that they don't *want* to understand, or even
2 worse, that they plan to steal the ideas for themselves.

3 Notice that Fred, unlike Daria, *does* feel required to reckon with
4 the available evidence. He does not arrive at **their** conclusion
5 'arbitrarily' or 'at will'. In fact, the considerations that he adduces
6 may well address the reviewers' litany of complaints head-on.
7 Furthermore, it is never guaranteed that he will reach the conclu-
8 sion he wants: concocting an account that sounds *plausible* is
9 essential. As a result, he would never say, as might Daria, that he
10 believes his paper is worthy because this belief makes him feel
11 happy. On the contrary, he would mostly likely present himself as
12 an ally of *Elga*, heartily endorsing the principle that one ought not
13 to have beliefs that go against what one reasonable thinks one's
14 evidence supports.

Should be
"his"

15 Notice also that Fred displays none of the waffling that we saw
16 in *Elga*'s self-evaluations. Fred's fervent avowal of his paper's
17 worthiness does not evaporate after he brings into focal aware-
18 ness all of the powerful reasons that others advance for thinking
19 that his work is unworthy of publication. This close attention
20 does not (even temporarily) shake him of his professed view. As
21 a result, Fred is also unlike the 'counterfactual waffler' for whom
22 doxastic deliberation is a latent truth serum. Upon assessing the
23 evidence in deliberation, he proceeds to smoothly explain it
24 away.

25 26 IV. Rationalizers as pretenders

27 Perhaps we ought to feel pity for Fred. But even if we are sympa-
28 thetic, we may also feel something better expressed by a disdainful
29 rolling of the eyes. I think that this feeling of contempt is best
30 explained by our deep suspicion that people like Fred *know very*
31 *well* that the considerations they adduce in 'deliberation' do not in
32 fact establish the conclusions they reach. We would not be at all
33 surprised, for example, if Fred avoids discussing this matter with
34 honest friends and colleagues who would quickly debunk **their**
35 rationalization. Indeed, the very structure of the rationalization
36 he constructs is designed to evade easy debunking. Fred is not
37 altogether naïve, nor is he deluded. But then how does he manage
38 to reach his conclusions in the light of deliberative exclusivity? Is
39 he like like Daria who knows that the evidence does not support
40 her belief in astrology?
41

Should be
"his"

1 Rationalizers deploy a distinctive repertoire of strategies to
2 reach their desired conclusions. A common tactic is to adduce
3 considerations that have only the appearance of relevance to the
4 deliberative question. We might call these 'pseudo-reasons'. This
5 deft form of obfuscation gives the rationalizer's account the
6 outward semblance of reasoned argument. Alternatively, the
7 rationalizer may adduce considerations that are in fact relevant to
8 the question at hand, but proceed to give them undue weight or
9 present them as conclusive reasons even though he knows they are
10 not conclusive. Finally, the rationalizer may support his conclusions
11 with empirical claims that are difficult to verify or to falsify.

12 What all of these strategies have in common is that they inculcate
13 the *appearance* of sound reasoning while still affording the desired
14 flexibility in the outcome of deliberation. Furthermore, all of these
15 strategies serve to protect the rationalization from being quickly
16 and easily debunked. Our contemptuous rather than exculpatory
17 attitude suggests that rationalization is something that rationalizers
18 *do*, not merely an infelicitous influence on their belief-forming
19 mechanisms that *befalls them*. Finally, it's not quite right to say that
20 Fred deliberated *badly*; he do not really deliberate at all. Fred *make*
21 *as if* he is deliberating, even though his 'deliberative conclusion'
22 has been settled before any 'weighing of reasons'.

23 As with the case of explicit fictions, being 'realistic' helps with
24 the suspension of disbelief. The story told cannot be wildly
25 implausible, far-fetched, or manifestly self-contradictory. (Fred
26 cannot maintain that his paper was rejected because he chose the
27 font 'Garamond', or because the reviewer is both jealous and not
28 jealous). Such a rationalization would be unstable and vulnerable
29 to easy debunking. Just as reader of a novel may 'pop out' of story
30 whose plot is obviously incoherent, so also a thinker will not be
31 moved by a rationalization that lacks the basic discursive moves
32 characteristic of honest inquiry.

33 In paradigm cases rationalizers *make as if* they are guided **by aim** "by the aim"
34 of truth (believe p only if p), when in fact they are guided a
35 related, but distinct aim, that of *plausibility*. The aim of plausibility
36 requires that the considerations that rationalizers adduce in
37 support of their conclusions have the *appearance* of constituting
38 sufficient reason, and it is compatible with the knowledge that the
39 considerations do not in fact establish the relevant conclusion.⁶
40

41 ⁶ See Audi (1985) p. 163. Audi plausibly analyzes rationalizations of past actions as
42 "purported accounts".

1 Rationalization is thus the negotiation of two compatible but
2 interacting aims: the aim of reaching a conclusion that is for
3 whatever reason desirable, and the aim of getting there with a
4 story that is plausible. These aims, taken individually, are in some
5 instances pursued sub-optimally. It may be the case that the
6 rationalizer is unable to construct a sufficiently plausible account
7 that leads to the conclusion that is most desirable.

8 My target phenomenon of rationalization may strike readers as
9 redolent of a more widely discussed philosophical puzzle – that
10 of self-deception.⁷ A sophisticated deflationist account of
11 self-deception due to Al Mele (2001) explicitly takes on cases
12 involving protracted doxastic deliberation on the part of the self-
13 deceivers. Appealing to the empirical work of James Friedrich and
14 Yaacov Trope, Mele analyzes this deliberative self-deception in
15 terms of the asymmetric treatment of supporting and threatening
16 data in the process of motivationally biased hypothesis testing.
17 The person who ponders whether it is the case the p and tests her
18 hypothesis that p tries to avoid *error costs*, i.e. expected costs caused
19 by believing that $\sim p$ when it is the case the p (Mele 2001, 31–46).
20 The error costs can be *asymmetric* in the sense that a person may
21 incur more costs by believing falsely that p than by believing falsely
22 that $\sim p$. When this occurs, the person will adopt a different *confi-*
23 *dence threshold* for accepting her hypothesis and for rejecting her
24 hypothesis. The basic principle is that the ‘lower the threshold,
25 the thinner the evidence required to reach it.’ (34) According to
26 the theory, biased hypothesis testing is responsible for the fact
27 that in deliberation a subject often arrives at beliefs that are
28 consistent with her desires. Notably, Mele’s deflationist account
29 does not require that self-deception is intentional, nor does it
30 suppose that the self-deceived subject holds the true belief. Mele’s
31 account only requires that the body of evidence possessed by the
32 subject at the time of entering into self-deception provides greater
33 warrant for P (the true belief) than for not-P (the false belief).⁸

34
35 [12] ⁷ Tamar Gendler (2008, 2010) defends a pretense account of self-deception that I find
36 persuasive. She does not explore the topic of rationalization.

37 ⁸ Intentionalists about self-deception object that deflationist accounts fail to distinguish
38 wishful thinking (which is non-intentional) from self-deception (which is intentional)
39 (e.g., Bermúdez 2000). Non-intentionalists respond that what distinguishes wishful think-
40 ing from self-deception is that self-deceivers recognize evidence against their self-deceptive
41 belief whereas wishful thinkers do not (Bach 1981; Johnston 1988), or that self-deceivers
42 merely possess, without recognizing, greater counterevidence than wishful thinkers (Mele
43 2001).

1 Deflationist accounts of self-deception capture important and
2 interesting facets of our mental lives, and that they aptly model
3 pervasive forms of motivationally biased belief formation. But it
4 would be a mistake to assimilate rationalization to motivationally
5 biased hypothesis testing. The motivationally biased doxastic
6 deliberator aims at true belief, even when the course her deliber-
7 eration is distorted by her desires. In contrast, rationalizers have
8 most often already set upon their 'conclusion' before the mock-
9 deliberative process even begins. Ted never in fact tries to *figure*
10 *out* whether his paper was justly rejected; he merely pretends to be
11 figuring this out. What rationalizers engage in is not irrationally
12 biased inquiry, because it is not inquiry at all. Rather, it is pretend
13 inquiry, a kind of performative pretense that is constrained by the
14 evidence only indirectly. The evidential constraint issues from the
15 relationship of verisimilitude that the rationalization should bear
16 to honest deliberation. To adopt the terminology of Stephen
17 Colbert, the rationalization must have 'truthiness'.

18 19 **V. Rationalizers and bullshitters**

20
21 The figure of the rationalizer, although not much discussed in
22 contemporary philosophy⁹, may strike readers as nonetheless
23 similar to a character who is better known: the Frankfurtian
24 **4** bullshitter. Recall that Frankfurt (1986) distinguishes between
25 'telling a lie' and merely 'producing bullshit'. Briefly, when a
26 person tells a *lie*, she deliberately tries to cause another person to
27 believe something that she takes to be false. When a person
28 merely produces bullshit, she misleads another person as to *what*
29 *she is up to*.¹⁰ To illustrate the distinction, Frankfurt offers the
30 example of a 'Fourth of July Orator' who waxes bombastic about
31 'our great and blessed country, whose Founding Fathers under
32 divine guidance created a new beginning for mankind.' (120–21)
33 The orator is not lying, since he is not concerned with bringing
34 about false beliefs in his audience about the role of the deity
35 in founding the country: he is uninterested in his audience's
36

37 ⁹ Theorist of psychoanalysis have explored the phenomenon of rationalization in some
38 detail. For pioneering work, see Jones (1908) who introduces the term and Fenichel
39 (1945) who categorizes types of rationalization.

40 ¹⁰ In fact, Frankfurt proposes multiple ways of distinguishing between lies and bullshit,
41 but I focus on this way of drawing the distinction simply because it is most relevant to my
42 discussion of rationalization.

1 historical or theological views. Rather, the orator is trying to
2 convey a certain impression of himself as a patriotic man. The
3 orator **is** merely *makes as if* he is trying to convey information
4 about the founding fathers. For Frankfurt, bullshitting 'unfits' a
5 person for the truth by fostering an habitual indifference to it.

delete "is"

6 We might think of rationalizers on the model of 'self-
7 bullshitters': They are Frankfortian bullshitters who bullshit
8 others as well as themselves. Rationalization and bullshit both
9 involve the use of misdirection. Bullshitters make as if they are
10 concerned with conveying the content of what they say, when in
11 fact they are merely trying to convey certain impression of them-
12 selves. Rationalizers make as if their aim is honest inquiry, when in
13 fact it is often only plausibility and self-justification. Like expert
14 rationalizers, expert bullshitters exercise skill in crafting their
15 bullshit in such a way that it is not easily detected or debunked.

16 Understood this way, both rationalization and bullshitting are
17 species of what we might refer to as *posturing*, in the sense of
18 taking up pose that is intended to convey a pre-determined
19 impression. Both figures can be understood as engaging in a kind
20 of performative pretense (although only the bullshitter requires
21 an audience apart from himself). The bullshitter is successful if he
22 manages to convince his audience that the posture he adopts is in
23 fact expressive of the person he really is. The rationalizer succeeds
24 if he is able to create vivid a representation in thought (that need
25 not amount to belief) that makes him feel better about himself,
26 soothes his conscience, or realizes whatever other pragmatic aim
27 he might have.¹¹

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41 ¹¹ Thanks for useful comments from Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij, Bradley Armour-Garb,
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RE Query Reference 4: Frankfurt, H. (1986/2006) On Bullshit Raritan 6, pp 81-100. Reprinted in booklet form, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006)

RE Query Reference 6: In footnote 7, Gendler (2008) should be Gendler (2007). Gendler 2007 exists in the References.

RE Query Reference 9, McHugh, C. (2011) What Do We Aim At When We Believe? *Dialectica* 65, pp. 327-482.

RE Query Reference 10: Should be "Steglich-Petersen" not "Steglish-Petersen".

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RE Query Reference 11: Hazlett, A. 2013. *A Luxury of the Understanding: On the Value of True Belief* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

RE Query Reference 12: As I noted above, in footnote 7, Gendler (2008) should be Gendler (2007)