



Agent-centered epistemic rationality

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Abstract

It is a plausible and compelling theoretical assumption that epistemic rationality is just a matter of having doxastic attitudes that are the correct responses to one's epistemic reasons, or that all requirements of epistemic rationality reduce to requirements on doxastic attitudes. According to this idea, all instances of epistemic rationality are instances of rational belief. Call this assumption, and any theory working under it, *belief-centered*. In what follows, I argue that we should not accept belief-centered theories of epistemic rationality. This is an argument in three acts. In the first, I present counterexamples that problematize the belief-centered assumption: cases whose protagonists (i) fail to meet any plausible requirements on belief but (ii) nevertheless appear epistemically rational. In the second act, I consider alternative explanations of the counterexamples, friendly to the belief-centered theorist, and find them wanting. In the third and final act, I show that there are significant theoretical benefits to acknowledging a distinct agent-centered dimension of epistemic rationality and sketch a candidate agent-centered approach: a view that grounds an agent's epistemic rationality in the possession of *good epistemic policies*. In the end, we see that a complete theory of epistemic rationality is as much of a theory of rational *agents* as it is of rational *belief*.

Keywords Rationality · Epistemic rationality · Rational belief · Epistemic agents · Epistemic agency · Agent rationality

¹ Rationality may be a bit nebulous. By 'rationality' here I mean that property we attribute when something is praiseworthy ('that was the rational choice, John') or criticizable ('the decision to rob the train was irrational, Arthur'); I do not mean the capacity of rationality that perhaps Aristotle means to refer to when he calls man a rational animal. There are norms, constraints, or standards associated with rationality such that when an agent or concrete action/state fails to meet those standards, they're criticizably irrational; when an agent meets those standards, they're praiseworthily rational. This is the normative, or at least evaluative, notion that I think many of us have in mind when thinking about rationality (on rationality's normativity, see, e.g., Earl Conee, Errol Lord, Derrick Parfit, and Michael Titelbaum, amongst others).

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Prologue: belief-centered epistemic rationality

Our focus is what I call *belief-centered conceptions of epistemic rationality*: those that explain the whole of epistemic rationality via the rationality of beliefs.¹ Views may do this in a number of ways: they might treat rationality as *primarily* a property of beliefs, and only derivatively a property of agents; they may state that the *only* rational requirements are requirements on belief; they may simply treat the question *what does it mean to be epistemically rational?* as fully answered by an account of the conditions under which beliefs are rational. We can see this exemplified in Thomas Kelly when he says:

By epistemic rationality, I mean, roughly, the kind of rationality which one displays when one believes propositions that are strongly supported by one's evidence and refrains from believing propositions that are improbable given one's evidence. (2003, p. 612)

While this is an admittedly rough characterization of the core idea, it flags the focus of belief-centered views: the property of epistemic rationality is instantiated *just in case* one holds beliefs that fit one's evidence and avoids beliefs that fail to fit one's evidence.

The unifying feature of the belief-focused family of views is that they are in an important sense *reductionist*, where the most common versions of this reduction appear to take one of the following forms:

- (R1) epistemic rationality *just is* belief rationality (the property of being epistemically rational is *only ever had by beliefs*), or
- (R2) epistemic rationality is fully explained by belief rationality (the property of being epistemically rational can be instantiated by agents, but only when and because they have some relevant rational belief).

Accordingly, the feature that distinguishes the members of this family of conceptions is how they understand the relationship between being epistemically rational and having beliefs (and doxastic attitudes generally). In what follows, I mean by "belief-centered view" any view of epistemic rationality that accepts either R1 or R2.

We might understand (R1) and (R2) as consequences of a general commitment to epistemic normativity being nothing more than belief normativity. As Daniel Singer and Sara Aronowitz put it, "according to the standard view, epistemic normativity only governs belief. Put in terms of reasons, the claim is that all epistemic reasons are reasons to believe." (p. 75) This highlights two important facts. First, this picture is taken to be the standard view. While this may not always be made explicit by many epistemologist, it appears implicit in many of their views. Second, it flags that an important way of cashing out the view is in terms of reasons (to this second point we return in Act III, §3.3). Commitment to this general claim about epistemic normativity entails commitment to theses like (R1) and (R2).

Treating rationality as belief-centered appears to be a default position among epistemologists, for what many care about is whether a belief fits the believer's evidence and epistemic reasons. Harvey Siegel emphasizes the central role of reasons, writing:

it is a commonplace among theorists of rationality that rationality is fundamentally a matter of reasons, and that an action, belief, strategy, plan, decision, opinion, attitude, hope, fear, vote, or whatever, is rational exactly insofar as it is bolstered by the reasons that have been or can be offered in its support... [Rationality] generally and epistemic rationality in particular are ultimately a matter of the support offered (or not) by reasons or evidence. (p. 609)

Such *reasons-first* pictures of epistemic rationality tend to be belief-centered, and evidentialism—as endorsed by Kelly, Trent Dougherty, and Richard Feldman—is an influential example of a belief-centered theory.²

For example, on Dougherty's view,³ any evaluation beyond how well a belief it fits one's evidence is non-epistemic. Dougherty (2011) writes,

My position is that all instances of epistemic irresponsibility are in fact either forms of instrumental irrationality or moral irresponsibility insofar as there is anything amiss that goes beyond one's beliefs not fitting the evidence one has at the time (merely having a belief not fit one's evidence can't be sufficient for irresponsibility, of course, because that might be completely beyond one's control)... As Feldman puts it, our judgments about intellectual responsibility are 'moral and prudential evaluations of behavior related to the formation of beliefs'. (p. 536)

Dougherty's approach, when framed around rationality, is that any evaluation of rationality that is not an evaluation of whether one's belief fits their evidence is not an evaluation of epistemic rationality.⁴

Let this conclude the background of belief-centered approaches and bring us to the main event.

1 Act I: an argument against belief-centered views

Belief-centered conceptions of rationality are susceptible to a particular kind of counterexample, one in which an agent is incapable of adopting a belief that would be required, on a belief-centered view, in order for her to be rational, yet the agent is, intuitively, rational. Let us look at two counterexamples of this kind.

² This is not to suggest that evidentialism is the only belief-centered view. Varieties of virtue epistemology may be belief-centered by grounding epistemic rationality in belief rationality. While the virtue-theoretic picture fits nicely with a rejection of belief-centered thinking, one can certainly have a belief-centered and virtue-theoretic theory (e.g., a view that calls a belief rational when it is the product of an epistemic competence).

³ Most clearly found in Dougherty (2011). Note that while Dougherty's specific thesis is about responsibility, it has a parallel argument about rationality and has implications for epistemic normativity generally.

⁴ Dougherty's reasons for reducing epistemic responsibility to moral responsibility (or instrumental rationality) are similar to some I offer for *extending* epistemic rationality. He argues that a belief's not fitting the evidence cannot be *sufficient for irresponsibility* due to the fact that it may be involuntary. Where Dougherty zigs—arguing that this shows that there is no *epistemic* irresponsibility present—I zag, arguing that it reveals not that epistemic rationality is absent, but that epistemic rationality is properly attributed to the *agent*, not her belief.

Deep racial bias. April is an excellent reasoner—both because she understands logic, rarely erring in reasoning and judging, and because she reliably considers all relevant, possessed evidence when engaging in complex reasoning and making judgments. April competently and correctly judges on the basis of her evidence that members of all races deserve equal moral respect. Nevertheless, she cannot shake a biased belief from childhood; despite her competent judgment, April’s doxastic state still represents the world as though members of all races were *not* equally deserving of moral respect. The belief is too deeply entrenched to be affected by even the most compelling conscious reasoning (she might truly say of what she judges ‘*I just can’t believe it!*’, or she might not even realize that she has the biased belief).⁵

Severe self-doubt. Timmy is pursuing a PhD in mathematics. He suffers from severe imposter syndrome and deals with persistent self-doubt. While he is in fact intelligent, competent, and capable of a promising career in mathematics, he cannot help but believe that he is not. Crucially, Timmy cannot shake the belief that he is not suited for professional mathematics despite compelling evidence that he *is* so suited. This evidence includes: endorsement and praise from his professors, his excellent grades, and his high-quality work. Timmy is aware of his self-doubt issues, and in his moments of quiet reflection, he competently reasons from his evidence to the conclusion he *is* competent, intelligent, etc.⁶

These examples involve beliefs that a belief-centered view would not call rational. Consider, e.g., Benjamin Kiesewetter’s rational requirement on beliefs:

If [S] has sufficient evidence for *p*, and [S] attends to *p*, then [S] is rationally required to believe *p*. If [S] lacks sufficient evidence for *p*, then [S] is rationally required not to believe *p*. (185)

On both counts, April and Timmy fail. So, if we hold (R1) or (R2), we cannot call either protagonist epistemically rational. While both protagonists see that their respective bodies of evidence support particular claims (and go so far as to seriously *judge* them to be true), each fails to form the corresponding belief.

Must we refrain from describing April and Timmy as epistemically rational simply in virtue of their beliefs? It seems not. In their epistemic endeavors, both are doing their best. At a certain point, however, things are out of their control. In much the same way that some virtue epistemologists describe an agent as justified in her belief even if it does not achieve the aim of truth (or knowledge), we should be open to describing April and Timmy as epistemically rational even in light of their failure to achieve the aim of true *belief*—not only because the truth condition is out of our voluntary control, but because sometimes belief is as well.

⁵ As John Hawthorne, Yoaav Isaacs, and Maria Lasonen-Aarnio suggest, an individual “might have a belief and yet fail to realize one has it.” (p. 207) If we grant this, April may falsely believe that she believes what she judged, that *members of all races deserve equal moral respect*.

⁶ N.b. that one might use the same kind of cases to generate an argument for thinking that knowledge does not require belief (along the lines of Jody Azzouni’s argument). I welcome this consequence with open and loving arms. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

To generalize from the two cases, the counterexamples that make trouble for belief-centered views are those where the following conditions hold:

- (i) An individual has a belief that a belief-centered view would call irrational: she believes that $\neg p$ even though she is rationally required to believe that p .
- (ii) The individual has reasoned well (consulted all the relevant possessed evidence, made no errors in reasoning, etc.) and judged that p is true.
- (iii) The individual is unable to give up her belief that $\neg p$.

Cases fitting these descriptions are genuine counterexamples, I contend, because conditions (ii) and (iii) describe circumstances in which an agent is epistemically rational despite having an unsupported belief. What seems to ground the intuition that the protagonists are rational despite lacking some desirable belief is that those protagonists are *doing the right sort of things* for succeeding in their epistemic endeavors and are in fact acting in epistemically exemplary ways: given their epistemic situation and the range of things they can do, they are doing their epistemic best. An agent who is acting in an epistemically exemplary way cannot be said to be irrational. But, since according to belief-centered views, an agent is rational when (and presumably because) their beliefs are rational, and since condition (i) ensures that the agent's relevant belief is *not* rational, the proponents of such views must say that the agent is not epistemically rational. This is the heart of the problem with belief-centered conceptions of rationality.

To buttress the argument, let me say more about the crucial piece of the reasoning: treating *judging* and *judgment* as something distinct from believing and belief. The picture of judgment I rely on here is one according to which judging is a conscious mental process which we typically use for things like forming beliefs, drawing conclusions, or just making up our minds. This flags a key difference between belief and judgment: belief is a *state* an agent is in while judgment is an *activity* performed by the agent. Judgments are recognitions of the truth of some claim given some set of evidence, reasons, or premises. Judgments are also under our control in a way that beliefs are not. As is clear, some version of doxastic involuntarism is assumed here, a version sufficient to generate cases where an agent is capable of *drawing* a conclusion on the basis of their possessed evidence without *forming* the corresponding belief. This is consistent with both stronger and weaker conceptions of involuntarism.

The voluntariness of judgment plays a key role in both the negative argument just developed and the positive theory sketched below. Regarding the negative argument, it seems appropriate to assign some epistemic praise to the agent in virtue of their judgments. Our agents display epistemic competence, respond correctly to their reasons and evidence, and are doing their epistemic best with respect to the situations at hand.⁷ None of these displayed qualities need be sufficient for being epistemically rational,

⁷ Some precision may assist here. When I say that an agent is 'doing her epistemic best', I am flagging the fact that when we take the entirety of the agent's situation into account and consider the details of her epistemic circumstances, the agent herself is *doing* what we expect of a strong epistemic agent. The important connection here is not between rationality and trying one's hardest at what the one is doing: giving it the good ol' college try is not sufficient for being epistemically rational. The important connection is between epistemic rationality and *what* one does. This distinction is important. As an anonymous referee pointed out, one may treat rationality as a strictly 'evaluative' notion and contend that doing one's best is irrelevant to epistemic rationality. For, on the strict evaluative picture, the standards of rationality involve elements that

but taken together they appear to be very strong evidence for thinking that an agent is rational. These are the kinds of standards that theorists think individuals should meet in their epistemic endeavors, and the agents displaying these important components of existing views (competence, evidence respecting) via conscious, voluntary judgments not only pushes us, but shoves us towards attributing epistemic rationality.⁸

Summarizing: our examples suggest that the full story about epistemic rationality is not *just* a tale about beliefs; there is a larger saga which gives proper attention to non-doxastic considerations that matter for epistemic rationality. It seems that the virtue of *being epistemically rational* can be manifested in what an agent *does* in addition to what attitudes an agent *has*. While thinking about epistemic evaluations has an established tradition of being only about doxastic attitudes, I contend that our examples reveal that this tradition belies the full scope of epistemic rationality. There is more to an adequate theory of epistemic rationality than an account of rational belief.

2 Act II: replies and rejoinders

To further make the case for moving away from belief-centered epistemic rationality, I now consider some belief-centered replies to our examples and show why each is wanting.

2.1 Reply 1

As described above, belief-centered views maintain that epistemic rationality is ultimately belief rationality, where ‘ultimately’ means either ‘nothing more than’ (R1) or ‘fully explained by’ (R2). Views fitting such a description are not restricted to *one* sort of epistemic rationality, only that any sort is ultimately about beliefs. Proponents of (R1) or (R2) might appeal to the widely-appreciated distinction between epistemic assessments: between *propositional* and *doxastic* rationality. Can a reply be found in this distinction?

Footnote 7 continued

are out of an agent’s control, and doing one’s best only seems relevant if we assume otherwise. The argument above makes no such assumption. The claim is that, given the kinds of things agents can *do* (i.e., make judgments, reason, consciously assess evidence), they are successful and praiseworthy (in an epistemic sense) with respect to the instances of judgment and reasoning *despite* the presence of unevicenced beliefs. The standards against which we assess their success and praiseworthiness needn’t vary according to how well they can reason. For a different agent, it may be that meeting the standards for rationality—including standards for particular judgments—is out of her control (she may not be very good at reasoning), so even if she tried her hardest, she would not be doing her epistemic best in the sense I intend here. Now, if the evaluative picture assumes something stronger than this (e.g., an assumption that any sort of rational flaw bars the agent from epistemically rationality in all respects), then one can treat the argument above as also creating tension for that strong evaluative picture, since it presents scenarios where an agent’s overall state contains a rational flaw (unevidenced belief) but the attribution of rationality is still appropriate for individual, isolated doings. Of course, such a strong picture may be implausible for independent reasons.

⁸ This is all consistent with attributing an irrational belief to the agent. I am not denying that the agents can be rational and possess irrational beliefs. I think this is not uncommon, and accepting the main conclusion of this paper helps provide additional resources to correctly describe such individuals.

The distinction, roughly, concerns an agent, their evidence, and some proposition. While the propositional-doxastic distinction is typically drawn in the context of epistemic *justification*, this is no barrier to making a parallel claim about rationality, for not only is that parallel claim intuitively plausible, but the distinction has precedent in discourse about rationality,⁹ and there is no clean distinction between *justification* and *rationality*.¹⁰

With those comments out of the way, we can describe propositional and doxastic rationality accordingly:

Propositional Rationality: p is propositionally rational for S just in case p is sufficiently supported by S 's evidence.

Doxastic Rationality: S has a doxastically rational belief that p just in case (i) S believes that p , (ii) p is sufficiently supported by S 's evidence, and (iii) S 's belief that p is appropriately connected to S 's evidence.¹¹

Perhaps a belief-centered theorist (call her Beth) can employ the propositional/doxastic distinction in the following way. Beth employs it to explain away the intuitions that April and Timmy are epistemically rational. Take April. While April lacks doxastic rationality, the relevant proposition is propositionally rational, and Beth contends that April would be doxastically rational (in the belief that *members of all races deserve equal respect*) had she believed it as a result of her judging that it is true. Indeed, Beth continues, April *should* believe it—in that sense of ‘should’ reserved for things functioning as they normally do—and so *should* be both propositionally and doxastically rational, for our beliefs tend to conform to our conscious judgments and evaluations of possessed evidence.¹² In conjunction, these observations seem to explain the intuitions sparked in cases like April's in a way that does not necessitate reifying a non-doxastic kind of epistemic rationality.

But can Beth's reply get off the ground without sneaking in some non-doxastic commitments? It seems not. Cases like April's highlight that there is more to be said for an agent than whether her belief is (or would be) doxastically rational. What is important about April is that she *judges* well and that her judging is separable from forming a corresponding belief. This judging—when it does cause April to form the belief—makes the difference between April's propositional and doxastic rationality. That April's judging would make this difference betrays the failure of Beth's reply, for this fact indicates that judging well has a positive impact on one's epistemic situation, and since judging is separable from believing, it seems to confer a positive epistemic status to April even in the absence of a formed belief.

⁹ Perhaps most clearly in Richard Foley (175–86), who dedicates a section of his book to show how that his theory of epistemic rationality can accommodate the propositional/doxastic distinction.

¹⁰ Indeed, ‘justification’ and ‘rationality’ are sometimes employed interchangeably or to refer to different, but closely related concepts or properties. Lisa Miracchi, e.g., comments that the distinction between rationality and justification “roughly correspond[s] to internalist and externalist epistemic properties.” (3).

¹¹ Firth says that they should be causally connected “in a way that corresponds in the appropriate way to the evidential relationships in virtue of which the belief is propositionally warranted for him.” (220).

¹² This is just to say: when we evaluate our body of evidence E and see that it supports p , other things being equal, we tend to believe that p on the basis of that evaluation and evidence.

2.2 Reply 2

A proponent of belief-centered epistemic rationality could respond to our cases by finding some other beliefs that April/Timmy do have in virtue of which they still count as rational in lieu of the most relevant belief. For example, maybe April believes *I should believe that all races are equal*, or *I should believe that I should believe that all races are equal*, as a result of judging as she does. So, while the act of judging does not yield the target belief, it may be argued that the act of judging implies *believing that one should believe* the thing judged to be the case. Given this, the belief-centered thinker can accept the separation of judging and believing at issue in cases like April's and Timmy's without accepting its implication for epistemic rationality. This is so, she may insist, because what explains our intuition in an April/Timmy-style case is still a belief: that higher-order belief about what *should* be believed.

This reply has more and less plausible varieties. The (seemingly) less plausible version holds that the respective higher-order beliefs are sufficient to *make* April and Timmy epistemically rational (at least with respect to that proposition). This belief-centered thinker might thus hold something like: with respect to some proposition p (about which S has some doxastic attitude),¹³ S is epistemically rational just in case, when p fits her evidence, S either (i) believes that p in response to their evidence, or (ii) believes that she should believe that p in response to their evidence in favor of p . Is this a good view of epistemic rationality?

This view is as plausible as its condition (ii). When it comes to a proposition p about which S has reasoned and drawn a conclusion, does the possession of the higher-order belief make S epistemically rational? In favor of answering *yes*, because (ii) specifies that that higher-order belief be formed in response to the evidence for/against p itself (as opposed to the evidence for/against *S should believe that p*), it appears that S is still respecting her evidence in the formation of her beliefs about p , and the intuitive importance of such respect is perhaps what gives belief-centered views their initial credibility.

In favor of answering *no*, notice that what appears to best explain why S herself is epistemically rational is not having some belief (in this case, the meta-belief that S ought to believe that p), but responding to some evidence (i.e., seeing that the evidence supports p). To support this, we need to simply imagine situations like April's where no meta belief is formed (we'll return to this point below). In such a case, a protagonist like April still appears epistemically rational in virtue of correctly following her evidence. A further reason to reject this kind of view can be seen by emphasizing the tension in doxastic states—i.e., the tension between S 's belief that she should believe that p and S 's belief that $\neg p$. This sort of doxastic akrasia may be especially worrisome for a view which reduces all epistemic rationality to belief rationality.¹⁴

¹³ I add this caveat to avoid an instance where there is some proposition p which fits S 's evidence but about which S has not given any consideration (e.g., a sort of junk belief). S could still be rational in such an instance despite lacking a belief that p .

¹⁴ This is the sort of akrasia discussed by Hawthorne, Isaacs, and Lasonen-Aarnio. As they define it, "to be epistemically akratic is either.

(1) to believe [that] p and also believe that believing [that] p is rationally forbidden, or.

The more plausible version of the meta-belief strategy does not hold that their respective meta beliefs are sufficient to make April and Timmy epistemically rational, but that the presence of the meta belief explains our intuitions about the protagonists' rationality. Outside of that, the belief-centered thinker sticks to their guns and insists that, despite appearances, April and Timmy *are not* rational vis-à-vis their respective beliefs. So, such a thinker responds by providing an alternative, belief-centered explanation for the intuition, undermining the otherwise theory-falsifying datum. What explains the intuition is the fact that another, closely-related belief is rational.

The strategy succeeds only if we assume that S's judging that *p* is true necessitates S's forming the second-order belief that she should believe that *p*. But this assumption is unwarranted. We already severed the connection between judging and believing in the case that their contents match (i.e., the matching *p* between judging that *p* is true and believing that *p*). Asserting a necessary tie between (i) *judging that p is true* and (ii) *believing that one should believe that p* requires an even more dubious thread. To be sure, an individual may judge that *p* is true on the basis of some evidence without having any ideas about what one ought to believe that appear necessary to attribute the second-order belief.

Not so fast, the objector may interject: this reply needn't insist that S's judging that *p* entails S's believing that she should believe that *p*, for all all the objector needs is for the judgment-meta-belief link to hold in particular cases like April's and Timmy's that generate counterexamples, and it is plausible that individuals in such cases *do* have a corresponding meta-belief given their sophistication. That April and Timmy are excellent reasoners who attend carefully to their evidence may be a strong reason to think that they possess the meta-belief.

While this reason is strong, it is not strong enough. As already mentioned, an individual can surely follow their evidence well without having any formed ideas about how they *ought to believe*. More importantly, it seems right to describe an agent as epistemically rational *while* they are following their evidence about *p* before they come to any final conclusion regarding the truth of *p*.¹⁵ One place this seems to occur is *during* the process of inquiry, where an agent consults their evidence, sees that their evidence supports *p*, yet doesn't draw any final conclusion. The inquirer is rational for making that evidence-backed, tentative judgment (that *p*), for this agent is respecting their evidence, reasoning well, etc., and accomplishes this without forming the meta-belief (because the inquiry is ongoing). On these grounds, we can preserve our guiding intuition while circumventing the meta-belief strategy.

2.3 Reply 3

Since many of these criticisms are directed at (R2), it may be replied that (R2) is hopeless and that we should only accept (R1) as the core thesis of belief-centered epistemic rationality. In other words, this reply claims that belief-centered views do

Footnote 14 continued

(2) to not believe [that] *p* and also believe that not believing [that] *p* is rationally forbidden." (p. 206).

¹⁵ This point resembles one made below in *reply 3* when discussing what I call 'doxastic delay'; one may also use the doxastic delay example to respond to the objector here.

not need the ‘bridging’ claim between beliefs and agents to which I appeal (viz., that agents are rational when, and because, their beliefs are rational). According to this reply, *it is simply false that agents are ever epistemically rational* and epistemic rationality is only a property of beliefs.

It is hard to see how this position is tenable. Not only is it intuitively plausible that agents possess the property of being epistemically rational, but much of our everyday discourse involving terms like ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ is aimed at describing agents (and frequently in an epistemic way). Taking a note from Derek Parfit, we frequently use ‘rational’ to praise or laud in the way akin to using ‘smart’ or ‘intelligent’ and the corresponding antonyms for the kind of criticism given with ‘irrational’. (Note that while Parfit’s discussion is about whether *acts* are rational, this is no bar to applying his thinking in discussions of epistemic rationality. It is clear he means this broadly, to include our involuntary doxastic responses to epistemic reasons. Moreover, these words have epistemic connotations, or at least are sometimes used to talk about others and their successes/failures in thinking, reasoning, appreciating evidence, and so on.)

Ordinary language aside, we can find additional support for rejecting (R1). A further reason for thinking that the protagonists of April/Timmy-type examples are rational follows from what we noted earlier: what many epistemologists (and philosophers writing about rationality generally) fundamentally care about with rationality is *responding to reasons*. This appears to be at the heart of evidentialism and views about rationality generally.¹⁶ It is evident that April and Timmy respond well to their possessed reasons—they are fully aware of the reasons, weigh them correctly against each other, and so on. As we saw Siegel state earlier, “epistemic rationality in particular [is] ultimately a matter of the support offered (or not) by reasons or evidence.” (p. 609) Accordingly, agents who are acutely aware of that support, and who fit their responses to that support, seem as good candidates as any for being epistemically rational.

One further way to drive home the rejection of (R1) and further support the case that an agent can exhibit epistemic rationality even in the absence of a relevant belief is with a final example:

Doxastic delay. Leo is the most bored super genius in the world. His latest, random invention is a brain implant that causes the implantee to suffer from *doxastic delay*. He tests the device on his always-willing test subject Ralph. He explains to Ralph how the device will affect him: it causes doxastic delay—i.e., causes a short delay (of variable length) between what causes the formation of a belief and the actual having of the belief. Leo says, for example, the belief that you would automatically form upon seeing that something is supported by your evidence is instead formed a second later. “Cool”, Ralph says, and agrees to receiving the implant, with a doxastic delay of 1 second.

Now suppose Ralph is out consulting evidence (he’s a private investigator, assigned to a recent arson case). He sees that the evidence supports Donny’s innocence. However, before the doxastic delay period ends, Ralph is struck by lightning, attracted to him by the implant (Leo assures everyone who asks that he

¹⁶ E.g., Kieseewetter’s, Lord’s (2018), and Parfit’s.

did not intend this), tragically killing him and thus preventing him from forming the belief that Donny is innocent.

We can ask: would Leo be saying something true if, in the obituary written for Ralph, he states that Ralph was epistemically rational in his final investigation? More precisely, we can ask whether Ralph was epistemically rational at the end of that final investigation (and regarding the question at issue there: whether Donny was innocent). If Ralph was rationally required to believe that Donny was innocent, then we seem forced to say that Ralph was irrational. But this seems like the wrong thing to say. For, it seems obvious that Ralph's conduct is one thing and the output is another, and that conduct appears sufficient to make him rational.

Someone may reply: but Leo is *disposed* to believe, and that explains our intuition that he is rational; so, while there is no belief in this case, the fact that Leo *would* have believed is what grounds our intuition about the case. Believing (albeit counterfactually) is thus still the heart of epistemic rationality.

Even if we alter the case so that Leo is completely unable to form the belief (seeming to remove the disposition to believe),¹⁷ there is still a concern. Because we are the type of being that believes upon seeing that evidence strongly supports some proposition, is this not sufficient to still give Leo a *disposition* to believe? While Leo lacks the particular disposition to believe that particular proposition, he is generally disposed in virtue of being the sort of creature that forms beliefs upon seeing that the evidence strongly supports something. This secures a sense in which rationality is belief-focused.

Nevertheless, the essential point stands: evaluating evidence is one of the things we do, and our examples demonstrate that this is separable from something else we do (form beliefs).¹⁸ Moreover, both are epistemically evaluable, and an agent can succeed in one respect—in a way that points to her being epistemically rational—without the corresponding evaluation in the other. Because we can (and do) evaluate these separately, we see that rationality cannot be entirely belief centered.

3 Act III: the importance of *being* rational

One primary aim of this paper is to encourage conceiving of epistemic rationality as more than belief rationality. Approaching epistemic rationality with the assumption that it *just is* belief rationality closes one's mind the relevance of other aspects of our epistemic lives. Without that assumption, the question *when is an agent epistemically rational?* is not reducible to the question *when is an individual's belief rational?*, and without that reduction we have fresh options for fleshing out an agential dimension of epistemic rationality. This third act is an exploration of the agent-focused dimension and the theoretical benefits of broadening our understanding of epistemic rationality. After some brief comments on the nature of agent-focused evaluations, I show how

¹⁷ While the device attracting lightning seems to accomplish this, we may further ensure it by stipulating that Leo has a complex device, implanted by Mikey, in his heart that is set to explode (guaranteeing Leo's death) right before the doxastic delay period ends.

¹⁸ I mean this second 'do' in the functional, biological sense, not necessarily in the sense that we do intentional actions. (Though I do think that we can believe intentionally, i.e., that we can intentionally form beliefs, at least some times.)

acknowledging an agential dimension of epistemic rationality explains away some tensions and puzzles infecting epistemology. I conclude with an outline of a positive theory of agent-centered epistemic rationality that grounds an agent's epistemic rationality in the possession of *good epistemic policies*.

Without recourse to (R1) or (R2), we may ask anew: how do we assess an agent's epistemic rationality? At first blush, it appears that an agent-focused assessment of epistemic rationality is interested in whether an individual meets some *standard* in the manifestation of her epistemic agency. So, when we ask of April whether *she* is epistemically rational for judging that members of all races are equally deserving of respect, we want to know not just about the action itself, but about April and what underlies that judgment. We are asking whether those features of April meet the standards of rationality, and—in keeping with the language of 'standards'—we can take a cue from Michael Bratman, who describes assessments of agential rationality as follows:

In assessing the rationality of an agent for some intention or intentional action our concern is to determine the extent to which the agent has come up to the relevant standards of rational agency... In reaching such assessments our concern is with the actual processes that lead to the intention or action and with the underlying habits, dispositions, and patterns of thinking and reasoning which are manifested in those processes. Our concern is with the extent to which these processes—and the underlying habits, dispositions, and patterns they manifest—come up to appropriate standards of rationality. (p. 189)

Following suit and formatting Bratman's idea for epistemology, an agent-centered theory for epistemic rationality provides a way to capture the sort of praise and criticism we give to agents: they are praiseworthy/criticizable according to how well *their actual epistemic practices meet relevant standards of epistemic rationality*. Our original cases of April and Timmy exemplify this observation: what mattered for the positive evaluations of April and Timmy was their respective judgments.¹⁹

This schematic description of agent-centered epistemic rationality is fertile soil for clarifications and details—it demands articulating, amongst other things, the practices that count as epistemic, what relevant features underlie those practices, and the epistemic standards themselves. To help fill in these details, I want to explore how this kind of agent-focused thinking helps explain some puzzles and debates in contemporary epistemology: first, how this helps with arguments between evidentialists and virtue theorists; second, how agent-centered thinking is useful for theorizing about norms of inquiry; third, how we can capture important insights about the ethics of belief. In each case, agent rationality offers a *viamedia* to help navigate present debates in epistemology while also respecting existing views and diagnosing the heart of the disagreements. I then use these results to help sketch a positive theory.

¹⁹ Note that this distinction between belief-centered and agent-centered resembles the oft-noticed distinction between synchronic and diachronic rationality. Indeed, a belief-centered view is a theory of synchronic rationality, for it reduces assessments of rationality to assessments of current doxastic attitudes. But an agent-centered view is not quite a theory of diachronic rationality. To see this, note that introducing diachronic considerations is insufficient to make a view agent-centered, though some assessments of agent rationality will be diachronic.

3.1 Elucidating evidentialism vs. virtue epistemology

Since we are theorizing about agent-centered epistemic rationality, strong candidates for the relevant processes (and what underlies them) are those which manifest our epistemic agency. One way to understand the kind of criticism at issue with rationality is as a failure to meet some standard that applies to individuals in virtue of possessing those capacities constitutive of epistemic agency.²⁰ To be sure, simply noting the richness of our epistemic agency gives way to a number of concerns regarding epistemic rationality. When we attend to the fact that, in addition to being believers, we are belief influencers, inquirers, and judges, we see that we have an active role in what we believe and know in virtue of the things we can do to influence our beliefs and knowledge. This observation seems to ground some persistent objections to evidentialist views in contemporary epistemology. A survey of those objections reveals a trend: many epistemologists have the intuition that there are factors relevant to epistemic rationality other than how well a belief fits an agent's possessed evidence, and evidentialists tend to reply by insisting that the considerations frequently used to buttress the objections simply are not relevant to what is at issue (which is whether a given belief fits the evidence). While these objections tend to come from those making virtue-based critiques (e.g., Axtell, Lisa Miracchi, and Jason Baehr),²¹ we need not assume that virtue background to entertain their relevance to epistemic rationality.

An agent-centered dimension of epistemic rationality provides resources to explain this trend in a way that respects both evidentialist and anti-evidentialist intuitions, for it is only on the assumption that epistemic rationality is nothing over and above belief rationality that we face tension accommodating the apparent strength of the evidentialist's steadfastness and the intuitive force guiding the objections. We can see this by noting that the persistence of these objections seems to provide evidence for the following:

- (1) the evidentialist is correct to insist that diachronic- and inquiry-based considerations are not relevant to whether a belief fits the possessed evidence, and
- (2) the objector is correct to insist that diachronic- and inquiry-based considerations are relevant to epistemic rationality.

But only if we assume a further claim, viz., (R1) or (R2), do we face an uneasy tension and have a puzzle for epistemic rationality. Once we reject the belief-focused reduction, we can explain their compatibility by reference to that fact that (2) highlights the dimension of epistemic rationality that is uniquely agent centered (and so doesn't conflict with the belief-centered dimension). There are some standards an agent can fail to meet in her epistemic endeavors or in the manifestation of her epistemic agency that warrant this agent-focused criticism.

²⁰ For a related discussion, see Kiesewetter, especially 2 fn. 3.

²¹ Indeed: there is a dedicated section titled "Virtue Critiques: Evidence and Inquiry" in Dougherty's *Evidentialism and its Discontents*.

3.2 Incorporating inquiry

We needn't focus on the debate over evidentialism; there is undeniable appeal to the relevance of inquiry in epistemology generally and the theory of epistemic rationality particularly. We know that agents can be assessed for epistemic rationality, and we know that one clearly epistemic dimension of our agency is our ability to engage in inquiry. It is also clear that we can evaluate an agent as rational or not vis-à-vis a given instance of inquiry, whether completed or ongoing. Furthermore, inquiry itself is very plausibly epistemic²²: it is aimed at knowledge (or at least putting the inquirer in a good position to know), it plays an ineliminable role in what we know, and so on. Rejecting the reduction of epistemic rationality to belief rationality thus has the further benefit of expanding conceptual space to place an epistemic roof over inquiry's head in agent-centered rationality's home.

The tension just discussed between evidentialists and virtue epistemologists has a close sibling in recent work on norms of inquiry which reveals an additional nexus for the theoretical benefits of agent-centered rationality. It is widely held that inquiry is (partially) constituted by a particular kind of interrogative attitude—a special way of suspending judgment, perhaps²³—that amounts to being *neutral* with respect to a proposition, and that candidate zetetic norms (i.e., norms of inquiry) conflict with traditional epistemic norms. The so-called zetetic turn highlights this, as some of the main issues in that thriving literature concern how to think about the relations between zetetic norms and traditional, doxastic norms (see, e.g., Friedman, 2020; Thorstad, 2021, 2022).

To best see the work done here by agent-centered epistemic rationality, we shall focus on an instance of zetetic-epistemic tension occurring between norms of inquiry concerning the interrogative attitudes thought to ground inquiry and traditional doxastic norms.²⁴ To see this tension, grant that inquiry into a question (Q) seems to demand suspending judgment on propositions that answer Q , denoted ' p^Q '. (Friedman, 2017) While inquiring into Q , an agent S may acquire adequate evidence to trigger the requirements of a familiar evidentialist norm: S may obtain enough new evidence such that believing p^Q fits their evidence *before* their inquiry is complete. If according to evidentialism rationality demands that S believe that p^Q rather than suspend judgment on it, then rationality appears threatened, since inquiry into Q demands suspending judgment on p^Q , and continuing her inquiry into Q may be rational (especially if her goal is *knowledge* rather than just an evidence-fitting belief). This tension needs resolving.

²² Friedman (2020) provides a more thorough defense of the claim that inquiry *is* epistemic; David Thorstad (2022) offers a thorough defense of the claim that inquiry *is not* epistemic.

²³ See Friedman (2017, 2019) and Lord (2020) for examples of this kind of view.

²⁴ This is related to but not quite identical with the tension explained in Friedman (2020) and discussed by Thorstad (2021). That tension focuses on a traditional belief norm (evidentialist or reliabilist, e.g.) conflicting with an instrumental norm for inquiry, which Friedman names 'ZIP': if S wants to figure out Q , then S ought to take the necessary means to figuring out Q . (Friedman 2020; Thorstad 2021) In a situation where ZIP requires not forming a particular belief because doing so would prevent completing the given inquiry (limited time, distraction, etc.) but where forming that belief would be permissible according to evidentialism or reliabilism, we have a theoretical tension between norms. The resources employed in my argument here can be applied to this related tension.

A resolution that avoids rethinking traditional evidentialist norms begins with treating questions about inquiry and epistemic rationality as questions about agent rationality and continues by reconsidering the role occupied by suspension of judgment under an agential picture. Friedman describes suspension's role when she writes that "inquiring... involves a certain kind of epistemic stance or commitment or attitude that is in conflict with or fails to cohere with knowing [an answer to] Q , and that the most straightforward candidate for this stance or commitment or attitude just is suspension of judgment." (2017, p. 311) The relevant kind of stance is a committed neutrality vis-à-vis answers to Q (which explains the apparent conflict between inquiring and knowing), and Friedman is right that suspension of judgment is the most straightforward candidate, especially given the following assumptions: suspension is a neutral doxastic attitude that competes with belief (and thus rules out knowing, on the plausible assumption that knowing p implies believing p), inquiring demands a commitment to *answering* Q , and one cannot genuinely commit to answering Q if one believes an answer to Q , for believing p^Q seems to entail being settled on an answer to Q .

Despite this plausibility, suspension is not the best candidate. Not only are there convincing arguments for the existence of modes of inquiry which do not require suspension of judgment and are consistent with knowing (n.b. Arianna Falbo's recent paper on confirmation), but the abovementioned grounds for favoring suspension are not particularly sturdy. What matters for inquiry is a resolution to answer Q , where that resolution demands not being *settled* on answers to Q , and contrary to the commonsense picture of belief, believing p^Q is insufficient for being settled on whether p^Q . This plainly follows from the involuntariness of belief: S may be committed to resolving Q while (unbeknownst to her) she has an involuntarily-formed belief that p^Q . In this sort of case, believing and inquiring are compossible, for if S is unaware that she believes that p^Q , she can meaningfully consider p^Q , and if S can meaningfully investigate whether p^Q , then it seems wrong to say that S is settled on p^Q . Additionally, during an inquiry into Q , S may end up with a belief that p^Q as a provisional conclusion (e.g., seeing who appears guilty given the evidence gathered *so far*, halfway through our game of *Clue*). Because S is not intending to draw a final conclusion on Q , S does not intend to believe that p^Q , but her beliefs may be on a loose leash. S does not appear irrational for continuing to inquire while having this belief, nor must S lose her inquiring mood in virtue of forming this belief. Judging receives parallel treatment. S may be fully rational in *judging that* p^Q while inquiring (again, perhaps as a provisional conclusion). Once more, what is irrational is the combination of (i) a commitment to investigating Q and (ii) being settled on an answer to Q . But judging something to be the case given a particular body of evidence does not imply being settled on its truth—*especially* if you are currently investigating it.

The determination to answer Q is found not in any particular doxastic attitude, but in the overall behavior and commitments of the inquirer. (Indeed, the language of 'suspending judgment' that is sometimes used to describe the inquiry-grounding attitude fits more naturally as referring to something an agent does rather than some state they are in.) As a tentative suggestion, when S inquires into Q , she does at least some of

the following: treats Q as an open question, refrains from using p^Q in practical reasoning, and avoids sincere, unqualified assertions of p^Q .²⁵ When S is inquiring, what is rationally forbidden is *behaving* in ways that contravene a resolution to answer Q as embodied in these behaviors, and one can meet these rational demands while having an evidence-fitting belief that p^Q or making an evidence-supported (provisional) judgment that p^Q is true. Put generally, one can (and surely should) *follow the argument where it leads* throughout one's inquiring endeavor. By grounding the inquiring attitude in a conglomerate of behaviors and dispositions in this way, the rational considerations at issue rest squarely on the agent rather than her doxastic attitudes, and we avoid the tension between meeting these conditions and the rational obligations issued by evidentialism.

This is precisely the treatment we expect with agent rationality—where our emphasis, once again borrowing Bratman's phrasing, is on the agent, her actions (inquiring), and the dispositions and behaviors underlying that action (the commitment to treat Q as open). Accordingly, an agent-centered dimension of epistemic rationality helps clarify and resolve these issues by offering the resources to explain the rationality of inquiry (by treating it as a question of agent rationality) in a way that avoids conflict with our familiar evidentialist norms.

This dovetails an additional reason (gestured to earlier) for supporting an agent-centered dimension: it adds room for thinking further about inquiry in the theory of epistemic rationality. For not only do we evaluate whether it is rational *for* an agent to inquire (that is, whether it is rational for an agent to engage in a given process of inquiring), but we also evaluate whether that agent is inquiring rationally and whether she is herself a rational inquirer. This involves doing the right kinds of things in one's epistemic endeavors—where this isn't merely doing the appropriate thing on different occasions. Being a rational *inquirer* seems to demand possessing some kind of understanding of what it takes to inquire well such that it isn't an accident or a matter of luck that the inquirer is successful.²⁶ To accurately assess S for being a rational inquirer, we need to know facts about S that are not given by a list of her previous inquiries and investigations. All we would learn from such a list would be what particular things S did and how successful the inquiries were. This wouldn't provide what we desire: information about *how* S conducts herself and what it is *about* S that underlies conducting herself as she does.

Again, this is what we expect with agent-centered epistemic rationality. Our assessments of an agent as a rational inquirer are assessments of the dispositions underlying her inquiries. We focus on dispositions not only because the inquiry-constituting behaviors introduced above dispose the inquirer to certain actions, but because we sometimes wish to evaluate the inquirer when she is not actively inquiring. Incorporating agent rationality (of the Bratman-inspired sort) thus does significant work with inquiry in the theory of epistemic rationality.

²⁵ This is a tentative, non-exhaustive list. All I intend to flag here is that there are behaviors that typically seem incompatible with genuinely investigating Q . This is in line with the main claim of this paper: that—as epistemologists—we should move beyond belief-focused theorizing.

²⁶ By 'successful' here I don't merely mean success at achieving the end of a token inquiry, but success at doing the right sort of things during a token inquiry.

3.3 The ethics of belief and prescription in epistemology

Another area where agent-focused thinking bears consequences is the debate on the ethics of belief. One might use a view of this kind to capture the sense in which we have epistemic obligations to conduct inquiry, gather evidence, and perform other belief-influencing activities. Indeed, we have seen that our view maintains that an agent can be epistemically assessed for performing certain activities (and for failing to do them well) in cases of judgment, reasoning, and inquiry, and this squares particularly well with belief-influencing views of epistemic responsibility (e.g., those espoused by Rik Peels, Anne Meylan, and others).²⁷ This section argues that adopting an agent-centered approach allows us to capture the appeal of the claim that we have epistemic obligations to perform belief-influencing actions as well as a strong argument for the rejection of this claim, based on work from Pamela Hieronymi.

Consider first an argument found in Hieronymi's work on reasons. In sorting out what the *right* kind of reasons for belief are, she writes that these are *constitutive* reasons: i.e., "those that (are taken to) bear on whether p —that is, those that (are taken to) bear on the question." (pp. 447–448) On this view, genuine reasons for belief are those that bear on the question *whether p* and thus on the content of the belief (as opposed to whether the belief is in some way good to have); reasons to believe p (i.e., pieces of evidence) are considerations that count for or against the *truth* of the proposition p . This appears to rule out these considerations counting as reasons for *actions* and thus rules out the existence of epistemic obligations to act. As Peels writes in his discussion of the argument, "evidence cannot count in favor of or against performing an action, for actions do not have a truth value. It would follow that there cannot be epistemic reasons for actions, and, hence, that there cannot be *epistemic* intellectual obligations." (p. 110).

But this formulation alone indicates at least one crucial thing that has gone awry. Hieronymi's position concerns reasons for belief, and while it has typically been an unproblematic assumption to identify epistemic reasons and reasons for belief, our arguments push away from this identification. This was presaged in the quote from Singer and Aronowitz from the prologue, where a belief-centered view can be understood as one that treats epistemic reasons and reasons for belief as one and the same. Resisting a belief-centered picture and incorporating an agent-focused dimension to epistemic rationality helps make this explicit, for we have the resources to accommodate epistemic reasons for both belief and actions or activities. The proper objects of epistemic evaluation have expanded to include agents and their actions *in addition* to beliefs. In this way, we can have epistemic reasons for actions and Hieronymi's arguments on the right reasons for belief remain intact.

Agent-centered thinking also helps belief-influencing views by highlighting the prescriptive role played by epistemic evaluations. Lisa Miracchi emphasizes this prescriptive feature in a recent paper on evidentialism:

By assessing others as believing properly or not (rationally or not, justifiedly or not), we are effectively either sanctioning their methods of epistemic comportment or we are urging them to change. Because we do, over time, have control

²⁷ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting a discussion of this topic in the paper.

over the quality of our bodies of evidence, it is often important that we not sanction poor practices of gathering evidence, even if the person was not in control over the development of such poor practices. In making epistemic assessments, we should encourage each other to believe and suspend in better ways going forward. (p. 20)

We can broaden the lesson here,²⁸ for we can assess ourselves and others in an epistemic way without restricting the objects of such assessment to beliefs. Because we have control over our evidence, and because we have control over things like reasoning, deliberation, etc., we should make epistemic assessments that promote good epistemic behaviors and discourage poor epistemic behaviors *even when those behaviors are not believings*. By calling some agent epistemically rational or responsible we are, as Miracchi says, *sanctioning* what they did as *good epistemic behavior*, and there are some ways of comporting oneself that should be discouraged—from a distinctly epistemic perspective—even when those ways of comportment did not result in an occurrent belief. With agent-centered theorizing, the richness, scope, and depth of our epistemic evaluations are better captured, and this flags a reason to accept epistemic obligations to perform belief-influencing actions: in assessing an agent as epistemically responsible by appeal to such obligations, we endorse such behaviors as epistemically desirable, and epistemically desirable they surely are.

4 Epilogue: a positive view

This all suggests that we want more out of our theory of epistemic rationality than the theory of rational belief, and that an agent-focused dimension is a prime candidate to satiate that want. But we also want to know what an agent-centered theory of epistemic rationality might look like. Here I briefly outline a fresh view that grounds an agent's epistemic rationality in their epistemic policies: being epistemically rational is a matter of having *good epistemic policies*. While a full explication and defense of the view is reserved for a paper of its own, this outline presents potential for future investigation.

To begin, first recall that I agree with Bratman that when we assess an agent's rationality, we look at their actual processes and importantly what underlies those processes. Our original examples of April and Timmy highlight this observation: what matters for the positive evaluations of April and Timmy was their respective judgments—where judging is a process we use to form beliefs, draw (sometimes tentative) conclusions, or simply make up our minds. Similar considerations assisted in explaining virtue-theoretic critiques of evidentialism. Accordingly, our positive picture of agent-focused epistemic rationality should be oriented towards our *cognitive* processes and those processes that are manifestations of our epistemic agency.

That said, our interest with agent rationality is not solely about particular instances of these processes. Generally, our concern with an agent's epistemic rationality is

²⁸ I think Miracchi's adverbial use of 'rationally' is revealing. As I have been urging, when we start without the assumption that epistemic rationality is equivalent to belief rationality, we are not required to only describe *believings* with 'rationally'. Without that assumption, the class of things that can be substituted for ' ' in statements of the form "S rationally s" or "S is ing rationally" is broader than the class of beliefs.

twofold. On the one hand, we might want to know something narrow: given some particular action or state, whether S is epistemically rational for performing that action or being in that state. For example, we may want to know whether Steve is rational when inquiring into who (or what)²⁹ keeps stealing his newspaper in the morning, and whether Steve is rational for judging or believing a particular answer to the question of the stolen newspapers. On the other hand, we might care about something broad: whether S is herself epistemically rational.³⁰ For example, we may care about whether Steve is a rational inquirer or judge, whether he is *generally* epistemically rational (perhaps since we are searching for an unbiased ear and brain to arbitrate a disagreement). We want our positive view to provide the resources to address both hands.

To adequately do so, I diverge from Bratman when it comes to what relevant features of the agent underlie such processes. I propose fleshing out this picture by appeal to *epistemic policies*. On this view, an agent is epistemically rational for performing a particular act when she has a *good epistemic policy* underlying that action, and an agent is broadly epistemically rational when she possesses good epistemic policies. While these are short and sweet descriptions, they raise a number of vital questions: what are policies? What makes a policy *good*? How does one come to possess a policy? Here I focus on what policies are and why they matter to epistemic rationality. Answering other policy questions will need to wait for a discussion of their own.³¹

Policies replace the role of dispositions and habits in Bratman's view. Being a rational agent *at all* seems to require the formation and conscious following of rules as opposed to the mere having of habits. We may borrow here some insight from Wilfred Sellars. His comments on rules highlight the importance of conscious pattern following over mere habit:

To say that man is a rational animal, is to say that man is a creature not of *habits*, but of *rules*. When God created Adam, he whispered in his ear, "In all contexts of action you will recognize rules, if only the rule to grope for rules to recognize. When you cease to recognize rules, you will walk on four feet." (p. 296)

I conceive policies as similar to rules inasmuch as they are guidelines for conduct. In general, adopting a policy provides a way to guide one's conduct with the aim of succeeding in the activities relevant to that policy. For example, one might have a policy to always initiate their turn signal three car lengths in advance of an anticipated turn, where the policy is had to ensure both success and safety in their driving. A writer may have a policy to write for at least 15 min a day to ensure he finishes writing his latest novel (or, perhaps, his dissertation) in a timely manner.

Epistemic policies in particular are adopted for the sake of success in one's epistemic endeavors (e.g., a good epistemic policy may be: do not make an inquiry-closing

²⁹ Because it needn't be a who. As my mother (who delivers newspapers for a living) explained to me: foxes have been dragging newspapers from her customers's homes and into the woods.

³⁰ As an anonymous reviewer wisely pointed out, one might be skeptical of this idea of epistemic rationality *simpliciter*. I share some sympathy with this skepticism, but I think there is something meaningful and contentful here.

³¹ One may begin to find a partial answer by consulting Paul Helm's *Belief-Policies*. While that work differs in some fundamental ways from mine, they also align in many ways that make it a useful resource.

judgment before gathering enough relevant evidence), and we can employ policies to help explain why some practices are objectionable. For instance, Michael Veber's solution to the dogmatism paradox enlists policies to explain what is objectionable about being dogmatic vis-à-vis what one thinks one knows: it is bad epistemic policy, for "our long-term epistemic goals are better served by adopting an epistemic policy that requires us to accept rather than ignore the available evidence." (p. 568) Epistemic policies thus help explain why a dogmatic individual is irrational.

We can formulate policies, or understand policies as guiding us, in two ways. The first way is general and applies to any inquiry whatsoever. There are features of inquiry simpliciter that are policy-generating; these are content-independent policies and norms that apply to us simply in virtue of being inquirers (such as Veber's anti-dogmatism policy). Inquiry has certain constitutive aims, and there are more and less effective ways of achieving those aims. Good policies for inquiry are those that reflect the physiology of fact seeking and the anatomy of inquiry. These are the policies one would adopt upon understanding what activity they are doing, and the rational inquirer is surely one who understands her inquiring activities.

The second way is particular, and understands inquiry as being guided by policies according to the content of that inquiry. Details about the agent's goals and the contents of their mental states also generate rational policies. When my inquiry is directed at resolving a particular question Q the appropriate policies to follow may depend on the content of Q . When I am trying to figure out what kind of creature the recently-unearthed fossil once belonged, there are particular policies that make my fossil inquiry more rational (perhaps policies for handling the fossil to best retain its integrity).

Three main features of policies suffice for categorization here: (i) policies are general commitments to behave in accordance with the policy's content, (ii) policies are held in response to reasons, (iii) policies are voluntary. These conditions are important for assessments of rationality. When we want to know whether S is an epistemically rational agent, we want to know both whether S does the right sorts of things in her epistemic endeavors and whether she does them accidentally (call these the *rightness* condition and the *non-accidentality* condition respectively). To be sure, if all we know is that S 's current inquiry is tending towards successful (i.e., S is collecting relevant evidence, not closing inquiry too soon), we have not yet provided adequate evidence of S 's epistemic rationality, for we need to know whether to attribute S 's doing the right thing to S herself. If S 's acting *correctly* can be chalked up to something other than S , it looks inappropriate to judge that S herself is epistemically rational.

We capture both the rightness condition and the non-accidentality condition by employing policies in our theory construction. On the rightness condition: when S possesses an epistemic policy, we know that S will generally act in certain ways, and when those ways are indeed generally successful, we can say that the practice embodied in the policy is *right*. On the non-accidentality condition: first, when S possesses an epistemic policy to A , that S 's doing A in a concrete situation is the right thing is not an accident, since it is attributed to a voluntarily-held commitment to A ; second, policies are held in response to reasons, so it is not an accident that the agent possesses a particular policy. These latter two points flag a reason to think that policies, rather than dispositions or habits, are the stuff rationality is made of: habits and dispositions can be developed accidentally; an agent can *find herself* with

a particular habit or disposed to act in a particular way. And we want an agent to be rational *despite* certain habits or dispositions (perhaps even on the way to correcting her habitual behavior). Policies, as outlined here, are able to play these roles.

This explains features (i) and (ii) of policies. But what of (iii)? Why should voluntariness matter to this discussion at all? One primary consideration, connecting with the non-accidentality condition, is that this condition preserves the intuitive connection between rationality, praise and blame, and voluntariness. This is the sort of connection undergirding William Alston's classic objection to deontological conceptions of epistemic evaluation. While the connection is not universally acknowledged, that our theory has the resources to incorporate it is a plus. Without committing to the claim that it is necessary for all sorts of rationality, voluntariness does seem to matter for agent rationality in particular. Agent-centered rationality concerns the rationality one exhibits in manifestations of their epistemic agency. In this way, we want the features that determine an agent's rationality to be voluntary in at least the same sense that we treat ordinary actions as voluntary.

5 Conclusion

Epistemic rationality is not just belief rationality. There are important evaluations we make of an agent's epistemic rationality that are not reducible to the rationality of beliefs. Recognizing this and seeing that at least part of the theory of epistemic rationality is agent centered has important benefits not just for the account of agent rationality, but also for helping to resolve existing debates in epistemology concerning evidentialism, inquiry, and the prescriptive role of rational assessments. Accordingly, agent-centered epistemic rationality is a fruitful topic for future thinking, and the policy-based account sketched above is a particularly ripe pick of that fruit, capturing what we want out of a theory of epistemic rationality while pushing the discussion in a new direction. While this fruit may not yet be certified fresh, they're hardly rotten. By painting a broadened epistemic landscape and filling in details with policies, we portray a new way for theorizing about epistemic rationality with a bright horizon.

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