

No Exception for Belief

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This paper defends a principle I call Equal Treatment, according to which the rationality of a belief is determined in precisely the same way as the rationality of any other state. For example, if wearing a raincoat is rational just in case doing so maximizes expected value, then believing some proposition P is rational just in case doing so maximizes expected value. This contrasts with the popular view that the rationality of belief is determined by evidential support. It also contrasts with the common idea that in the case of belief, there are two different incommensurable senses of rationality, one of which is distinctively epistemic. I present considerations that favor Equal Treatment over these two alternatives, reply to objections, and criticize some arguments for Evidentialism. I also show how Equal Treatment opens the door to a distinctive kind of response to skepticism.

Introduction

Suppose you open a birthday present and find two things: a book reporting empirical work on happiness, and a machine with three buttons. According to the book, each of the following is strongly correlated with happiness: spending time in nature, listening to music, and believing in an afterlife. You learn that pressing the leftmost button on the machine would instantly transport you to a rainforest in Costa Rica. Pressing the middle button plays a Leo Kottke CD (one of your favorites). And if you press the rightmost button, you will instantly acquire belief in an afterlife—even though your evidence tells strongly against it.

You want to enjoy your upcoming vacation week, so, on the basis of the information in the book, you decide to listen to Leo Kottke at home for awhile, spend the rest of the week in Costa Rica, and believe in an afterlife. You accomplish these things by pressing the three buttons.

We might ask: is it *rational* for you to listen to Leo Kottke, to spend time in Costa Rica, and to believe in an afterlife?¹ In the first two cases,

¹ Here and throughout, by “rational” I mean rationally permissible, not rationally required.

assuming we fill in the details in the right way, the answer is clearly *yes*. In the third case, however, it might seem obvious that the answer is *no*. Given that your evidence tells strongly against it, it might seem obvious that believing in an afterlife couldn't possibly be rational, no matter how happy it makes you.

This paper explores a view on which this seemingly obvious claim is false—a view on which believing against the evidence can be perfectly rational.² I have four overall aims. The first is to give a statement of the view, which I call Equal Treatment. I do this in section 1. The second is to provide positive considerations in favor of Equal Treatment, which I do in sections 2, 3, and 9. In sections 2 and 3 I compare the view with two alternatives; in section 9 I show how Equal Treatment opens the door to a distinctive and elegant response to skepticism. My third aim is to respond to objections, which I do in sections 4, 5, and 6. In section 4 I explore the possible relevance of doxastic involuntarism; in section 5 I investigate the role of the agent's perspective in assessments of rationality; and in section 6 I reply to a number of other objections. My fourth aim is to criticize some existing arguments for alternative views, which I do in sections 7 and 8. In section 7 I criticize an argument from the basis of belief; in section 8 I criticize an argument from the transparency of belief.

1. Equal Treatment

Consider states like the following:

- (A) Wearing a raincoat
- (B) Listening to a Leo Kottke CD
- (C) Playing with one's dog
- (D) Mowing the lawn
- (E) Being a member of the APA

What determines the rationality of being in some such state S? Possible answers include:

- (1) It is rational for one to be in S just in case S has (or ties for) highest expected value.
- (2) It is rational for one to be in S just in case doing so would be an effective means to one's ends.
- (3) It is rational for one to be in S just in case doing so would be an effective means to the ends one *ought* to have.

² Given some plausible assumptions discussed later.

It is not my aim here to adjudicate between these and other possible views on this issue. My aim, rather, is to defend the following:

Equal Treatment: However the rationality of states like (A)–(E) is determined, the rationality of any other state—in particular, any state—is determined in precisely the same way.^{3,4}

For example, according to Equal Treatment, if (1) is the correct view about the rationality of states like (A)–(E), then the rationality of belief is determined as follows: it is rational for one to believe P just in case doing so has (or ties for) highest expected value. So, if believing in an afterlife has highest expected value, then it is rational to so believe, even if the evidence tells against it. If, on the other hand, (2) is correct for (A)–(E), then, according to Equal Treatment, a rational belief is one that would be an effective means to one’s ends (even if the evidence tells against it). And so on.

The alternative to Equal Treatment is Exceptionalism, according to which, when it comes to determining the rationality of different possible states one might be in, we need to make an exception for belief, and determine the rationality of belief states in a way that is different from how we determine the rationality of other states, such as (A)–(E). One prominent form of Exceptionalism is Evidentialism, which says (roughly) that it is rational for one to believe P just in case P is supported by one’s evidence.⁵

Evidentialism (on this formulation) assumes that there is a single sense of rationality that can apply to belief states. But there is an important alternative form of Exceptionalism that denies this. According to a view I’ll call Different Senses, there are two different, incommensurable senses of rationality relative to which we can evaluate the very same belief. One is the sense of rationality that applies to states like (A)–(E). The other is a distinctively *epistemic* sense of rationality that applies only to beliefs.

In the next two sections I’ll point out several disadvantages of Evidentialism and Different Senses that Equal Treatment avoids. Here, though, I’ll emphasize one particular benefit of Equal Treatment. Most philosophers

³ Here, “precisely the same way” should be understood as a robust, substantive requirement, not a thin, minimal requirement. For example, the following view does not treat all states in precisely the same way, even though there is a superficial sense in which it applies the same rule to each state: For all states S, S is rational just in case either (1) S is a belief state in which the proposition believed is supported by the evidence; or (2) S is not a belief state, and S has (or ties for) highest expected value.

⁴ A view in the general vicinity of this one is defended in Booth (2012).

⁵ Proponents of Exceptionalism about belief may also defend exceptionalist views about other mental states, like intention, fear, regret, hope, etc. In this paper, however, I will focus on belief.

agree that we should aim for simplicity and elegance in our theorizing. These considerations tell in favor of Equal Treatment.⁶ After all, Equal Treatment demands a theory of rationality on which all states are treated alike. Any version of Exceptionalism, on the other hand, presents us with a fractured and thereby more complicated theory of rationality which says one thing about states like (A)–(E) and something entirely different about belief states.

Although I have thus far focused on Equal Treatment, I am also interested in a more general claim—which I will call “Equal Treatment_G”—of which Equal Treatment is merely an instance. First, notice that there are normative notions which some might consider distinct from rationality, e.g. justification, moral permissibility, reason, the all-things considered should, etc. Equal Treatment_G says that, with respect to *any* such normative notion, however it is determined whether it applies to states like (A)–(E), this determination is made for belief states in precisely the same way. For example, consider the view that, for states like (A)–(E), it’s morally permissible to be in that state just in case doing so maximizes overall global utility. If this is right, then according to Equal Treatment_G, it’s morally permissible to believe some proposition P just in case doing so maximizes overall global utility.

Equal Treatment_G itself is entirely neutral on how, if at all, these different normative notions are related to each other. For example, it is compatible with Equal Treatment_G that rationality is essentially connected with self-interest, but that morality is essentially *not* connected with self-interest. Equal Treatment_G simply says that, if this is so for the rationality and morality of states like (A)–(E), then it is so for the rationality and morality of belief states. Equal Treatment_G is also compatible with views on which rationality and morality are much more closely connected (or even the same). On one view, for example, it is impossible for a state like (A)–(E) to be both permitted by rationality but prohibited by morality. Equal Treatment_G, when combined with this view, would then entail that it is impossible for a *belief* state to be both rationally permitted but morally prohibited.

In short, Equal Treatment_G does not take a stand on how (or whether) different normative notions are connected to each other. It simply requires that, for each such notion, however it is determined whether it applies to states like (A)–(E), this determination is made for belief states in exactly the same way.

One thing that does follow from Equal Treatment_G is that, for every normative notion, whether the evidence supports some proposition P has no constitutive connection to whether that notion applies to the state of believing P—that is, to whether belief in P is justified; or rational; or

⁶ A similar sentiment is voiced in Papineau (2013).

morally permissible; or prescribed by the all-things-considered should; or whether there is a reason in favor of it; etc. Of course, like any fact, facts about evidential support may become relevant if certain contingent facts hold. Whether a chair is blue has no constitutive connection to whether sitting in it is rational, but it may gain relevance to this question if, say, sitting in a blue chair is the best means to your ends. Similarly, P's being supported by the evidence may gain relevance to the rationality of believing P if, say, believing what the evidence supports concerning P is the best means to your ends. But, on its own, evidential support has no automatic relevance to the evaluation of belief along any genuinely normative dimension.⁷

2. Comparing Equal Treatment and Evidentialism

We have already seen that Equal Treatment has one advantage over Evidentialism: greater theoretical simplicity. However, there is a benefit of Evidentialism which Equal Treatment may seem to lack. Evidentialism can explain why, pre-theoretically, there seems to be an important connection between the rationality of belief and truth-conduciveness. I will argue, however, that Equal Treatment can explain this as well. Moreover, there are some cases in which factors that are not truth-conducive seem to matter to the rationality of a belief. Equal Treatment has the flexibility to handle these cases with ease, whereas Evidentialism cannot accommodate them at all.

As a matter of contingent fact, in most ordinary cases we benefit more, and are better able to pursue our goals, if we have true beliefs rather than false beliefs (or no beliefs at all). For example, I'm best able to pursue my goal of attending the colloquium talk if I have true beliefs about when and where it is. I'm best able to care for my children, plan for retirement, and buy a suitable house if I have true beliefs about which foods are most nutritious, how the inflation rate compares with the rate of return on an investment, and what a crack in the basement indicates about the condition of the foundation. This generalizes beyond practical matters. I'm best able to pursue my intellectual goals and projects if I have true beliefs about whether the existence of a perfect God is compatible with the existence of evil, whether ontological nihilism is true, and whether there are infinitesimal numbers.

Given this, and given that the nature of evidence is to indicate truth, Equal Treatment says that most of the time—in a wide variety of circumstances, and with respect to a wide variety of propositions—a rational belief is one that matches the evidence. So Equal Treatment can perfectly well explain why, pre-theoretically, we take there to be an important connection between the rationality of belief and truth-conduciveness.

⁷ A view in this general vicinity is also defended in Wrenn (2007).

Moreover, Equal Treatment has a certain flexibility on this point—which Evidentialism lacks—which allows it to better explain unusual cases in which factors that are not truth-conducive seem relevant to the rationality of a belief. For example, consider someone suffering from a potentially fatal illness. Her prognosis is uncertain, but she knows her chances of surviving are higher if she believes she'll make it. There's something compelling about the idea that it's rational for her to be optimistic and believe she'll recover, even if the evidence on the matter is equivocal. Similarly, consider an athlete who knows her performance will be enhanced if she's confident she'll win. Again, such confidence can seem rational, even if it goes beyond the available evidence. Equal Treatment has no trouble explaining this. But Evidentialism does.

Another class of cases involves promising or resolving to do something when the available evidence does not clearly support the proposition that one will keep one's promise or resolution. For example, suppose that roughly half of those who marry and sincerely promise to stay together end up divorced; and that roughly half of those who sincerely resolve to quit smoking don't succeed. Plausibly, it can nonetheless be rational for one familiar with these statistics to sincerely promise to stay married, or to sincerely resolve to quit smoking. Berislav Marušić (2012) has argued that sincerely promising or resolving to ϕ requires believing that one will ϕ . If so, it seems one can rationally believe one will ϕ even if this goes beyond the available evidence. Once again, Equal Treatment easily accommodates such cases, but Evidentialism does not.

Ryan Preston-Roedder (2013) draws attention to a phenomenon he calls "faith in humanity," which he attributes to Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Preston-Roedder characterizes faith in humanity as, roughly, a confidence in the goodness of others and their ability to rise to the occasion that may go beyond available evidence on the matter. This confidence, argues Preston-Roedder, was essential to the success of non-violent resistance movements led by King and Gandhi, and is part of what we admire about them. The Evidentialist is forced to view this as a rational defect; the defender of Equal Treatment is not.

Or, imagine a scenario in which one's evidence is insufficient to support any substantive view one way or the other about the relative intelligence or abilities of members of different racial or gender groups. If one were to believe nonetheless that there are no such differences, would that be irrational? Evidentialism entails that it is, but it is open to a defender of Equal Treatment to take a different view of the matter.

There is another type of case that is also relevant to the comparison of Evidentialism and Equal Treatment, although in a slightly different way. Consider a scientist who is choosing between two empirically equivalent hypotheses, one of which is simpler than the other. (Example:

special relativity vs neo-Lorentzianism.) Most philosophers agree that it's rational for the scientist to believe the simpler hypothesis. A defender of Equal Treatment can easily account for this. However, the Evidentialist who seeks to accommodate this judgment faces the notoriously difficult challenge of trying to defend the view that simplicity is a guide to truth.

Finally, I'll present an analogy which helps illustrate the role played by evidence, according to Equal Treatment, in the rationality of belief. Let a *musical perfectionist* be someone who always sings on key, under all circumstances. Usually, this is just what rationality requires, since singing on key is generally more pleasing to both audience and singer. But there are possible atypical situations in which singing on key would actually have low expected value. (Suppose an evil and capricious tyrant has threatened to torture the singer unless he sings out of key.) In such a situation, musical perfectionism, although usually rational, would actually be irrational. According to Equal Treatment, the situation is perfectly analogous for the *evidential perfectionist*, who always apportioned their beliefs exactly to the evidence. Like musical perfectionism, evidential perfectionism is rational most of the time. But it would be a mistake, according to Equal Treatment, to think that it's *always* rational. In some atypical situations, evidential perfectionism actually has lower expected value. In such circumstances, according to Equal Treatment, evidential perfectionism is, in fact, irrational.

The upshot of this section is that Equal Treatment compares favorably with Evidentialism. Each can explain the central importance of truth-conduciveness to the rationality of belief, but Equal Treatment, unlike Evidentialism, can also explain why, sometimes, non-evidential factors seem relevant to the rationality of a belief. (I make similar points in Rinard (forthcoming), in which I put forward the view that only pragmatic or moral considerations constitute genuine reasons for belief.) Moreover, as emphasized earlier, Equal Treatment constitutes a more unified approach to rationality: it treats all states alike, whereas Evidentialism requires a fractured theory of rationality involving different criteria for different states.

Finally, it is worth mentioning a few other views that also conflict with Equal Treatment. One might hold that the rationality of a belief is a matter of the reliability of the process by which it was formed, or a matter of its satisfying various safety and/or sensitivity conditions. Analogous points to the ones made here about Evidentialism apply to such views.⁸

⁸ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for suggesting that I include a comparison of Equal Treatment and Evidentialism.

3. Comparing Equal Treatment and Different Senses

According to Different Senses there are two distinct, incommensurable senses of rationality that both apply to belief states. One is the same as the sense of rationality that applies to states like (A)–(E). The other is a distinctively *epistemic* sense of rationality that applies only to belief states.⁹

Philosophers who use the phrase “epistemic rationality” do not all have the same idea in mind. Some take it to be a sort of rationality essentially connected with truth (perhaps via the notion of evidence, or the notion of a reliable belief-forming process); others take it to be essentially connected with knowledge; and so forth. What is important here is just that, whatever epistemic rationality is, according to Different Senses a single belief state can be rational in this epistemic sense while being irrational in the other (non-epistemic) sense, and vice versa. According to Equal Treatment, on the other hand, every belief state is univocally either rational or not.¹⁰ I will argue that this is an important advantage that Equal Treatment has over Different Senses.

It is natural to think of rationality as constituting an ideal to which one might aspire, and by which one might be guided. But rationality is poorly suited to play this role if it consists of two different voices urging us in incompatible directions. It is metaphysically impossible to believe P while also failing to believe P. And yet according to Different Senses, there are cases in which, unless one does so, one is bound to be irrational in at least one sense. How could one coherently aspire to satisfy the demands of rationality when doing so (in both of its senses) would be metaphysically impossible?

According to Equal Treatment, on the other hand, rationality speaks in a single voice. Insofar as we look to rationality for guidance, and conceive of it as an ideal to which one might coherently aspire, this tells in favor of Equal Treatment and against Different Senses. Moreover, as we saw above, Equal Treatment is a more unified approach to rationality: it treats all states, including belief states, alike, whereas Different Senses postulates special complexities in the case of belief that do not arise for states like (A)–(E).¹¹

4. Doxastic Involuntarism and Equal Treatment

Many people, much of the time, have voluntary control over whether they are in states (A)–(E). But it’s not the case that many people, much of the

⁹ A view along these lights concerning different senses of “ought” is defended in Feldman (2000).

¹⁰ Given the plausible assumption that only one sense of rationality applies to states like (A)–(E).

¹¹ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for suggesting that I include a discussion of Different Senses.

time, have voluntary control over their beliefs.¹² An objector might claim that this difference tells against Equal Treatment, by appealing to a principle—let’s call it (*)—according to which only states over which one has voluntary control are assessable for rationality.¹³

I take no stand here on whether (*) is correct. What I will argue, rather, is that (*) and Equal Treatment are orthogonal. In particular, they are perfectly compatible with each other. What *is* incompatible with (*), however, is each of (1)–(3) (the candidate theories, described in section 1, for the rationality of states like (A)–(E)). As we will see, though, they can easily be modified to avoid this.

First, let’s investigate further the supposed involuntariness of belief, and the supposed voluntariness of states (A)–(E). This much is true: If I sit still, close my eyes, and try really hard to believe, say, that pigs fly, I will likely fail. But the same is true of states (A)–(E). One can’t change one’s membership status in the APA, for example, by sitting still, closing one’s eyes, and trying really hard.

Of course, this doesn’t mean we lack voluntary control over (A)–(E). It just means that the control we have is indirect. To exercise my control over whether I am an APA member, for example, I would visit various websites, fill out certain forms, etc.

However, there still seems to be an asymmetry between states (A)–(E) and belief. In the case of belief, we often lack even indirect control.¹⁴ However, the important thing to notice is that this is not a deep, in-principle difference, but merely an accidental one. The machine described in the introduction is perfectly possible, and it makes belief change as easy as pressing a button.¹⁵ Moreover, that many of us, much of the time, have voluntary control over states (A)–(E) is purely accidental. Someone who lacks access to a CD player does not have voluntary control over whether they listen to a Leo Kottke CD; similarly for someone who is deaf.

The picture that emerges, then, is that belief states, and states like (A)–(E), are fundamentally similar: for any such state, there are possible circumstances in which one has voluntary control over whether one is in it, and

¹² This is contested by some (e.g. Steup (2000) and Ryan (2003)). My position in this paper is neutral on this claim, but here I grant it to the objector for the sake of argument.

¹³ William Alston (1988) endorses a principle along these lines, but he focuses on deontological notions like “ought,” rather than rationality. The dialectic concerning such notions is perfectly parallel to the one in the main text concerning rationality. See Smith (2005) for an argument against (*).

¹⁴ Similar points appear in Alston (1988) and others.

¹⁵ Others have also pointed out that there is no in-principle barrier to indirect control over belief; see, for example, Alston (1988), Huss (2009), and Jordan (2006, chapter 2).

possible circumstances in which one does not, depending on a variety of external factors.

For a defender of (*), who holds that rational assessment is possible only in cases of voluntary control, what this reveals is not that there is any problem with Equal Treatment. The upshot, rather, is that (1)–(3) require modification. For example, as it stands, (1) makes no mention of voluntariness, so it has the consequence that if listening to a Leo Kottke CD has greater expected value than not listening, then listening is rationally required, even for someone who is deaf, or lacks access to CDs. To gain compatibility with (*), (1) could be modified as follows:

(1*) It is rational for one to be in state S at t just in case one has voluntary control over whether one is in S at t, and, compared to alternatives over which one has voluntary control, S has (or ties for) greatest expected value.

(2) and (3) can be modified similarly, to yield (2*) and (3*). The upshot, then, is that Equal Treatment is in no way committed to the view that rationally requires one to believe propositions one is unable to believe. Rather, what follows is only that if, say, (1*) is correct for states like (A)–(E), then, if one has voluntary control over whether one believes P (perhaps by pressing a button), and if so believing has highest expected value among one's genuine options, then it is rationally permissible to so believe—regardless of what the evidence supports.

One consequence of this is that if (*) is correct, then since, as a matter of fact, we typically do not have voluntary control over our beliefs, our beliefs are in fact typically not assessable for rationality. This consequence should be embraced by one who is moved both by the considerations in favor of Equal Treatment and also by the considerations in favor of (*). Suppose that, as a matter of fact, we typically lack voluntary control over whether we listened to music. We can imagine, for example, that we are trapped in a location where music is played, or not, at the discretion of some being we cannot influence. In such a situation, (*) has it that states like listening to music would not be assessable for rationality. Why should things be any different for belief?

Thus far I have emphasized the fundamental similarity between states like (A)–(E) and belief. Some philosophers have argued, however, that there is one respect in which these states are fundamentally different: it is possible for us to have direct control over states (A)–(E), but impossible to have direct control over belief. In response, I will first point out that, even if true, this does not undermine Equal Treatment. Second, I'll briefly register my doubts concerning the most prominent argument for this claim, from Williams (1970).

It would be quite implausible to suppose that, just because direct control over some state S^* is impossible, while direct control over S is possible, different theories of the rationality of states S and S^* are called for, even in cases in which one's actual control over both is indirect. To see this, consider the state of listening* to a Leo Kottke CD, where one listens* just in case one listens and one's listening was not the result of direct control. Since, as a matter of fact, we have no direct control over listening to a Leo Kottke CD, whenever we listen to one, we also listen* to it. Clearly, the same standards of rationality should apply to listening and listening*. For example, if (1) is true of listening, then it should also be true of listening*. This is in no way undermined by the observation that, given the way it was defined, direct control over listening* is impossible, while direct control over listening is possible. The takeaway message is that, even if direct control over belief is impossible, this does not undermine Equal Treatment.

However, I also doubt the supposed impossibility of direct control over belief. The most prominent argument for this appears in Williams (1970). Says he, "I could not, in full consciousness, regard this as a belief of mine, i.e. as something that I take to be true, and also know that I acquired it at will." (p. 148) This is because acquiring a belief at will, he says, amounts to acquiring it regardless of its truth—but to believe it is to take it to be true.

However, the fact is that although this may be difficult for actual human beings, given contingent features of our psychology, it does not seem in-principle impossible.¹⁶ There is no reason why there could not be a creature who, at one instant, fails to believe P but holds that doing so would be good, and wills to believe it regardless of its truth; and then, at the next instant, has a genuine belief that P —takes it to be true—while acknowledging that the method by which they acquired this belief was insensitive to its truth.¹⁷ Direct control over belief is not, it seems, in-principle impossible.

I conclude this section with two miscellaneous remarks.

First, given my concern in this section to argue that (*) is compatible with Equal Treatment, it is worth noting that (*) is, at least *prima facie*, incompatible with both Evidentialism and Different Senses, the two most prominent alternatives to Equal Treatment. Sometimes one is unable to believe in accordance with the evidence. This is judged irrational by the evidentialist, and irrational in at least one important sense, by the defender of Different Senses.¹⁸

¹⁶ Similar points appear in Johnston (1995), Winters (1979), and Scott-Kakures (2000), among others.

¹⁷ Instances of this are described in Schoenfield (2014).

¹⁸ This point is also made in Reisner (2009).

Second, the reader may have wondered why, at the outset, I set things up in terms of the rational assessment of states, rather than actions. That is, why am I focusing on the question whether belief states should be evaluated in the same way as other states, rather than the question whether beliefs should be evaluated in the same way as actions? The reason is that actions are by nature voluntary, whereas being in a state is not. This means that, since belief is not by nature voluntary, there *is* a fundamental difference between belief and action. However, it would be a mistake to infer from this that we need an entirely different set of standards for the rational assessment of beliefs. What belief is relevantly like, for purposes of rational assessment, is other, non-belief states—such as (A)–(E)—over which one may or may not have voluntary control, depending on various accidents of circumstance. This is why I set things up in terms of states, rather than actions—so that the parity of rational (and other) normative evaluation of belief and non-belief postulated by Equal Treatment would not be obscured by the fact that we sometimes lack voluntary control over our beliefs.¹⁹

5. Taking the Agent's Perspective into Account

As we have seen, Equal Treatment is completely neutral concerning the theory of rationality for states like (A)–(E). All it says is that the true theory, whatever it is, should also extend to belief. Nonetheless, assessing the plausibility of various competing theories of rationality for states like (A)–(E) is not entirely irrelevant to Equal Treatment. It is important to consider the most plausible theories, in order to make sure we don't encounter any problems in generalizing them to belief. We saw in the previous section that taking into account a possible way in which voluntariness may be relevant to rationality did not pose any special problems in the case of belief. In this section, I'll consider a variety of ways of taking into account the agent's perspective, and argue that all of them are compatible with Equal Treatment.

First, recall (2), which says that a state is rational just in case being in that state is an effective means to the agent's ends. As we have seen, this can be unproblematically applied to belief states, as follows: it is rational for an agent to believe P just in case believing P is an effective means to their ends. However, some might worry that (2) fails as a theory of rationality because it is too objective; it ignores the agent's perspective.

To see the putative problem, consider a case in which, although I have no inkling of this, the world happens to be arranged in such a way that cutting off my left hand is the most effective means to my ends. According to

¹⁹ One might hold that only actions are assessable for rationality. This view is discussed in section 4; it is shown there to be compatible with Equal Treatment.

(2), this means that it would be rational for me to cut off my left hand. But that may seem implausible.

I won't take a stand here on whether this shows that (2) is false. My aim is merely to argue that those who are moved by this thought can still accept Equal Treatment. One possible way to modify (2) in response to this worry would be to propose that a state is rational just in case the agent *believes* that no alternative state is a more effective means to their ends. However, when applied to belief, this would require the agent to have infinitely many beliefs. Moreover, this proposed requirement for rationality is implausible in other respects: it is overly intellectualized and highly demanding. Therefore, a better way to respond is to modify (2) as follows: (2'): a state is rational unless the agent believes that some alternative state is a more effective means to their ends. We can extend this to belief states, as follows: it is rational for an agent to believe a proposition P unless the agent believes that some alternative to believing P would be a more effective means to their ends. This does not require infinitely many beliefs, because a belief that P is rational on (2') if the agent has *no* beliefs about the relative efficacy of alternatives to that belief. It is also worth pointing out that, although (2') makes the presence or absence of other beliefs relevant to the rationality of a belief, it does not trivialize the notion of rational belief. It is not uncommon to believe P, but to believe that not believing P would be a more effective means to one's ends. In such cases, (2') would deem belief in P irrational.

However, one might worry that (2') goes too far in the other direction: it is too subjective. According to (2'), if I have the belief that some state is the most effective means to my ends, then—whether or not that belief is rational—being in that state is rational for me. For example, suppose I irrationally believe that cutting off my left hand is the most effective means to my ends. Then, according to (2'), it is rational for me to cut off my hand. But that may seem implausible.

Again, I remain neutral on whether this criticism is correct; my aim is just to argue that even those moved by it can accept Equal Treatment. One response is to propose (2''): a state is rational just in case it would be rational for the agent to believe that no alternative state is a more effective means to their ends. (We don't require that the agent actually have this belief, just that it would be rational for her to have it.) However, (2'') may seem to be problematic for Equal Treatment. Applying it to belief states yields the following: it is rational for an agent to believe P just in case it would be rational for that agent to believe that no alternative is a more effective means to their ends. But this is circular.

One way to avoid this circularity would be to give a different account of the rationality of the meta-belief (i.e. the belief that no alternative to believing P is a more effective means to their ends). For example, one might

propose that this meta-belief is rational just in case it's supported by the agent's evidence. However, this strategy should not be pursued by a defender of Equal Treatment. The idea that some beliefs are assessed for rationality in one way, while other beliefs are assessed for rationality in a different way, is incompatible with the core idea of Equal Treatment that all states are to be treated alike by one's theory of rationality.

A different proposal in this vicinity is that it's rational to believe P just in case the agent's evidence supports the proposition that no alternative to believing P is a more effective means to their ends. This is compatible with the letter of Equal Treatment, since it results from applying to belief the following general proposal: for any state, it is rational for an agent to be in that state just in case their evidence supports the proposition that no alternative would be a more effective means to their ends. However, this proposal may seem to be in tension with the spirit of Equal Treatment in that it involves a constitutive connection between rationality and evidence. Granted, it's not the case, on this view, that the rationality of a belief is a matter of the evidence for *that belief*; but given that a defender of Equal Treatment denies this, it would be odd for them to then propose that the rationality of a belief is a matter of the evidence for some *other* belief.²⁰

My suggestion is that, rather than viewing the circularity of (2'') as a problem and looking for ways to avoid it, the defender of Equal Treatment should simply embrace it. Note that in general, it is not the case that circular claims are thereby false. For example, the claim that it's rational to believe P just in case it's rational to believe P is both circular and true. What can make some circular claims frustrating, though, is not necessarily that they are false, but rather that in some cases (such as the one just mentioned), they are completely uninformative. However, not all circular claims have this feature. In particular, the application of (2'') to belief states does not. For example, (2'') entails that if you believe P, but you also believe that not believing P would be a more effective means to your ends, then at least one of your beliefs is irrational. So (2''), though circular, is not thereby shown to be false; and it is not without real substance. So it is open to a defender of Equal Treatment to simply embrace the circularity in this case.

Finally, it is worth noting in this context that phenomena of regress and circularity have long been discussed in the context of more traditional views such as coherentism, foundationalism, infinitism, etc. These sorts of issues arise for many different approaches to the rationality of belief and are not unique to Equal Treatment.

²⁰ Thanks to Maria Lasonen-Aarnio and Miriam Schoenfeld for emphasizing this to me.

In this section I have considered a variety of ways in which the agent's perspective might (or might not) be taken into account, and I have argued that all of them are compatible with Equal Treatment.²¹

6. Other Objections and Replies

This section responds to four objections. The first holds that rational assessment applies only in cases of direct control; the second, that rational assessment applies only to actions; the third, that Equal Treatment endorses wishful thinking; and the fourth, that it countenances belief in contradictions.

Let (***) be the following principle: states over which one has merely indirect control are not assessable for rationality; rational assessment applies only to states over which one has direct control.²² My discussion of (***) will in some ways parallel that of (*) (the principle, discussed in section 2, that only states over which we have voluntary control are assessable for rationality). As with (*), I will remain neutral on (***), and will be concerned rather to argue that it is perfectly compatible with Equal Treatment. What a defender of (***) must deny is not Equal Treatment, but rather (1)–(3)—the candidate conceptions of rationality from section 1—and all variations on them so far discussed.

(***) is radically at odds with our commonsense conception of the rational assessment of (A)–(E). According to (***), none of these states is assessable for rationality at all, since our control over each is indirect. For example, on this view, there is no actual situation in which listening to a Leo Kottke CD is rational. The only states in the vicinity which are assessable for rationality are those over which we have direct control, such as intending to press the play button. Clearly, (***) is incompatible with (1)–(3) (as well as the modified versions discussed in previous sections).

(***) is, however, perfectly compatible with Equal Treatment, which says only that, when it comes to the potential rational assessment of belief states, it should parallel that of (A)–(E). If the truth is that (A)–(E), when our control over them is indirect, are never rationally assessable, then, according to Equal Treatment, the same is true of belief states. One upshot, then, is that even if we did have a belief-changing machine, according to (***), the resulting beliefs would not be assessable for rationality. Only states like that of intending to press the believe-in-an-afterlife button would be.

²¹ My thoughts in this section has been influenced by Richard Foley's books The Theory of Epistemic Rationality (1987) and Working Without a Net (1992). I have not, however, discussed Foley's own view. Whether his view is compatible with Equal Treatment depends on certain subtle matters of interpretation.

²² Brian Hedden (2015) defends a view along these lines.

One thing this illustrates is that, strictly speaking, Equal Treatment by itself does not entail that it can be rational to believe against the evidence, since, by itself, it does not entail that belief states are ever assessable for rationality. The combination of Equal Treatment with any commonsense conception of the rationality of (A)–(E)—any view roughly along the lines of (1)–(3)—does entail this, however. For simplicity, I will sometimes presuppose, in the remainder of the paper, that some view in the vicinity of (1)–(3) is correct for states like (A)–(E). However, nothing important rests on this, and strictly speaking it is not among the commitments of Equal Treatment.

The second objection is structurally similar to the first: it holds that only actions are assessable for rationality; states never are. Once again, this view is incompatible with the commonsense idea that states like (A)–(E) are assessable for rationality; but, once again, it is compatible with Equal Treatment. If this view is right, then, on the assumption that beliefs are states, not actions, it follows from Equal Treatment that beliefs are never assessable for rationality.

The third objection to Equal Treatment alleges that according to Equal Treatment, any belief that results from wishful thinking is thereby rational. However, Equal Treatment does not have this consequence. Wishful thinking is a matter of believing a proposition because one wishes it were true. Equal Treatment says (roughly) that the following is rational: believing a proposition such that it would be good if one believed it. These are importantly different: what one wishes were true, and what would be good for one to believe is true, often come apart. For example, I wish it were true that, if I jumped off of my roof, I would sprout wings and fly. However, it would be very bad for me to believe that this is true. Believing this would not be an effective means to my ends; it has very low expected value.

There is another feature of Equal Treatment worth noting in this context. On some views, if one desires to do something just for its own sake, then, other things equal, it is rational to do it. For example, if I desire to jump off a bridge just for its own sake, then, other things equal, it is rational for me to do so. If so, then, according to Equal Treatment, if I desire to believe *P* for its own sake, then, other things equal, doing so is rational for me. This may initially sound odd. But I think its oddity can be largely explained by pointing out two things. First, in the case of belief (as in the case of jumping off a bridge), other things are rarely equal. What we believe is likely to impact our ability to pursue our other projects in significant ways. Second, it is unusual for creatures like us to desire to have a particular belief just for its own sake. That said, a defender of Equal Treatment should embrace the consequence that, if other things really are equal, and if one really does desire to believe *P* for its own sake, then, believing

P is rational (if, that is, they want to say the same thing about jumping off a bridge).²³

Finally, one might object to Equal Treatment by pointing out that there are possible situations in which, according to Equal Treatment, it would be rational to believe contradictions, to violate modus ponens, to believe Moore-paradoxical propositions, etc. (Imagine, for example, that a trustworthy powerful being promises lives of pure bliss for you and all other beings if you believe a contradiction.)

The objector is correct that Equal Treatment has this consequence. The appropriate response for a defender of Equal Treatment, however, is simply to embrace it. The idea that there is anything inherently wrong with believing contradictions is just a symptom of evidentialist thinking.

It is worth noting here that Equal Treatment *would* issue an absolute prohibition against belief in contradictions if, say, (2) is true, and your sole ultimate end is to avoid believing contradictions. But what kind of person values abstaining from belief in contradictions over infinite bliss for everyone? (Suppose the only alternative is infinite misery for all.)

Now, as pointed out earlier in the paper, in most ordinary cases Equal Treatment will recommend believing in accordance with your evidence. In those cases, Equal Treatment will recommend against believing contradictions. But there is no blanket prohibition against doing so—and, for a defender of Equal Treatment, this is quite as it should be.

7. The Argument from the Basis of Belief

In “The Rationality of Belief and Other Propositional Attitudes,” Thomas Kelly argues that practical considerations (such as expected consequences or expected value) can never rationalize belief. This is incompatible with Equal Treatment, insofar as one thinks, as Kelly does, that practical considerations can rationalize states like (A)–(E).

Kelly begins by claiming that, in general, the rationality of one’s ϕ -ing is determined by the *basis* of one’s ϕ -ing. I will grant this claim for the sake of argument. (A potential worry concerns the notorious obscurity of the basing relation, but I won’t press the point here.) Kelly then argues that beliefs cannot be based on practical considerations. He allows that practical considerations may prompt one to embark on a project of acquiring evidence for a proposition, which one may then end up believing. However, he claims that in such a case, although the practical considerations did cause one (indirectly) to have the belief, they are not the basis for one’s belief; rather, one’s basis for the belief is the evidence acquired.

²³ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for suggesting that I discuss this consequence of Equal Treatment.

A defender of Equal Treatment can respond by pointing to a number of different cases in which beliefs *can*, it seems, be based directly on practical considerations. For example, it is not uncommon for theists to cite as the basis for their religious beliefs that those beliefs give meaning to their lives. Inga Nayding (2011) references specific instances of this. Also, recall the optimistic patient who believes she'll recover, and the confident athlete who believes she'll win, even though they realize that the evidence is equivocal. Similarly, someone might believe that they will quit smoking, or stay married, because they resolved or promised that they would, even though they know that the success rate for those relevantly like them is not high. Another class of cases involves beliefs based on loyalty to friends or family, or beliefs (such as those of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.) based on a general faith in humanity. Worsnip (ms) develops cases like these, and some others, in more detail.

I'll also note that Roger White (2010) reports that, for a brief time as a young child, he was troubled by the possibility of monsters under the bed. But then, he says, he chose to believe that there weren't any—not on the basis of any evidence to this effect, but rather “because it would make my life easier to believe” that there were not.

Finally, consider the following possible reaction to skeptical arguments. We can imagine someone who is convinced by the skeptic that their evidence does not support, say, that they have hands, or that the sun will rise tomorrow, but who chooses to believe these propositions nonetheless, on the basis of practical reasons for doing so. (Some ways of interpreting David Hume and the Pyrrhonists might place them in this category.)

8. The Argument from Transparency

In “A New Argument for Evidentialism,” Nishi Shah claims that Evidentialism follows from two premises, which he calls Transparency and The Deliberative Constraint on Reasons (DCR henceforth). Shah takes Transparency to be obvious; he does not argue for it, but simply presupposes it. He anticipates that his opponent will agree with Transparency, but will reject DCR. Thus, much of his paper is devoted to arguing that anyone who accepts Transparency should also accept DCR; this is because, according to Shah, DCR is the best explanation for Transparency.

My reaction to Shah's argument is different from the reaction he anticipates. I am happy to grant DCR (at least for the sake of argument). My concerns center on Transparency. Shah's definition of Transparency is as follows:

Transparency: The deliberative question *whether to believe that P* inevitably gives way to the factual question *whether p*, because the answer to the latter question will determine the answer to the former.

In order to evaluate Transparency, we need to know what “the deliberative question whether to believe that P” is. On the most natural interpretation, this is the question “Should I believe P?”. If so, what Transparency says is that the question “Should I believe P?” inevitably gives way to the question “Is P true?” because the answer to the latter will determine the answer to the former. However, this claim is question-begging in the context of a disagreement with a proponent of Equal Treatment. Imagine someone with the three-button machine who is trying to answer the question “Should I believe in an after-life?” They may know the answer to the question “Is the proposition that there is an afterlife true?,” but, if they are a proponent of Equal Treatment, this need not settle for them the question of whether they should believe it. Suppose they know that there is no afterlife, but they hold that whether they should believe that there is is determined by the expected value of so believing. That P is false doesn’t settle the expected value of believing it. It may be that the expected value is nonetheless high, and so they *should* believe it (which they would accomplish by pressing the button). In short, if by “the deliberative question whether to believe that P” Shah means the question “Should I believe P?,” then to begin an argument against Equal Treatment by asserting Transparency, without any further argument for it, is question-begging.

9. Equal Treatment and Skepticism

Perhaps the central challenge for a philosophical treatment of skepticism is to identify, on the one hand, the ways in which skeptical arguments are plausible and perhaps even correct; and, on the other, how they nonetheless go wrong. Different responses to skepticism seek this balance in ways that are more or less concessive to the skeptic. Some, such as Lewis (1996) and Stroud (2002), are rather concessive; others, such as Moore (1962), Pryor (2000), and Williamson (2000) are not. In this section I’ll describe how Equal Treatment could be used to give an elegant and distinctive response to skepticism that, while squarely on the concessive end of the spectrum, nonetheless identifies a clear sense in which the skeptic is mistaken.

Those who are impressed by skeptical arguments feel the pull of the thought that our evidence does not support our ordinary external world beliefs over the hypothesis that we are brains in vats with deceptive perceptual experiences. Other skeptical arguments, targeting other subsets of our ordinary beliefs, may render it similarly plausible that our evidence does not support those beliefs.

What I'd like to emphasize here is that Equal Treatment makes it possible for us to grant the skeptic's claims about what our evidence supports while nonetheless denying that we *should* give up our ordinary beliefs, or that having those beliefs is *irrational*.

This general form of response can be developed in many different ways. Here I will confine myself to a few key points. First, if we are assessing the rationality of ordinary beliefs from the perspective of someone who still has them, it is not difficult to make the case that, on Equal Treatment, such beliefs are generally rational, even if they are not supported by the evidence. Given how I think the world is—e.g. that I have hands, that moving them in certain ways enables me to eat and survive, etc.—it is plausible that I do better, generally speaking, to believe that the world is that way than to suspend judgment (or to believe that the world is some other way).

What about someone who suspends judgment on ordinary external world beliefs? (Perhaps this person encountered the argument for external world skepticism before adopting Equal Treatment.) There are various considerations that might convince such a person that external world beliefs are rational. For example, they might reflect on the fact that those who suspend judgment are guaranteed to *not* have true beliefs about the world, whereas those who believe at least have a chance of believing truly. If one places sufficiently high value on true belief, and sufficiently low value on lack of true belief, then, as pointed out by William James (1979), it can be worth it to take the risk and believe.

Alternatively, one might reflect on certain projects one would like to complete and discover that (as Crispin Wright (2004) suggests) a necessary condition for pursuing those projects is having certain external world beliefs. If having a shot at completing one's projects is sufficiently valuable, then attempting to do so—and adopting the requisite beliefs—can be worth the risk.

Now, it is worth noting that these and other such lines of reasoning may have no purchase on a completely global skeptic who suspends judgment on everything and so has no beliefs whatsoever. However, Equal Treatment may allow that believing would be rational even for such a person. For example, suppose that simply *wanting* to do something gives one a reason to do it. Even those who lack all beliefs may still have some desires. If, when they have a visual experience, or an intellectual experience, or a memory experience, they feel *drawn* to having certain beliefs—if they *want* to have those beliefs—then, on Equal Treatment, it can be rational for them to do so.

In sum, Equal Treatment opens the door to a distinctive form of response to skepticism: one in which we can concede to the skeptic that we lack evidential support for the beliefs she targets, while insisting that it is nonetheless perfectly rational for us to have them.²⁴

²⁴ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for suggesting that I include a discussion of Equal Treatment and skepticism.

10. Conclusion

The rationality of a belief state, I have claimed, is determined not by evidential support, but rather by applying whatever general principle is properly used in assessing the rationality of any other state. This principle of equal treatment is not undermined by considerations of voluntariness: like many other states, such as listening to music or wearing a raincoat, whether belief is voluntary is a contingent matter, and varies from case to case; the possible relevance of voluntariness to rationality can apply to all states equally. Equal Treatment is also unaffected by the extent and the way in which rationality may be relative to the agent's perspective. A spectrum of options, from subjective to objective, exists, and each is consistent with the call for a unified theory of rationality. Moreover, Equal Treatment opens the door to a distinctive and elegant response to skepticism.

One popular alternative view holds that there is a special rule for determining the rationality of a belief state: it is rational insofar as the proposition believed is supported by one's evidence. A putative advantage of this evidentialist view is its ability to explain why we ordinarily take truth-conduciveness to be important to the rationality of belief. But Equal Treatment can explain this equally well, as we generally do better to believe the truth. Moreover, Equal Treatment has the flexibility, which Evidentialism lacks, to accommodate unusual cases in which non-evidential factors seem relevant to the rationality of belief.

A variety of arguments for Evidentialism have been put forward, relying, for example, on claims about the basis of belief, or the transparent nature of belief. In each case I claimed that the argument does not go through. Beliefs, just like other states, can be based on non-evidential considerations in their favor, and non-evidential reasons can figure as premises in deliberation whether to believe.

Another alternative to Equal Treatment has it that a belief can be simultaneously rational in one sense and irrational in another, incommensurable sense. But this view is ill-suited to accommodate the natural thought that rationality constitutes an ideal to which one might coherently aspire, and by which one might be guided.

In short, when it comes to the rational assessment of states, we can embrace Equal Treatment: there is no need to make an exception for belief.²⁵

²⁵ Many thanks, for helpful comments and suggestions, to Selim Berker, Andrew Graham, Ned Hall, Sophie Horowitz, Maria Lasonen-Aarnio, Jeff McDonough, Sarah Moss, Parimal Patil, Miriam Schoenfield, Susanna Siegel, Jonathan Way, an anonymous reviewer for this journal, an audience at the 2014 Midwest Epistemology Workshop at the University of Michigan—Ann Arbor, an audience at MIT's Epistemology Reading Group, and participants in a fall 2014 graduate seminar at Harvard on the ethics of belief.

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