

# Rationalization in the Pejorative Sense and the Aim of Belief

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## Long Abstract

According to David Velleman and Nishi Shah, the essential difference between propositional attitudes such as *assuming* or *imagining* and the attitude of *belief* is that the latter is regulated for truth. Beliefs are unique in that they are designed to be responsive to evidence and reasoning in a way that is truth-conducive. Furthermore, Shah and Velleman argue that, “to conceive of an attitude as belief is to conceive of it as a cognition regulated for truth [...]” (2005, 498). In characterizing belief, Shah (2003) appeals to the an essential feature of doxastic deliberation that he terms *transparency*, the fact that “the question *whether to believe p* seems to collapse into the question *whether p is true.*” (447)

For many conversational and deliberative contexts, this characterization of belief seems perfectly natural. Belief is indeed formed, revised, and extinguished according to the subject’s estimation of what is true. However, it is not uncommon that our reasons for belief issue from *rationalization*, in the pejorative sense of biased self-justification. *I don’t need to declare my extra income this year because I paid too much tax last year. I’m just a social smoker, so I won’t get lung cancer. Everyone else is cheating, so my own cheating simply makes things fair. That kid I beat up deserved it – he was egging me on.* This kind of biased and epistemically irrational belief-formation is all too familiar.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary psychological science indicates that this pattern belief-formation is underwritten by the powerful and systematic mental mechanism of cognitive dissonance. Subjects will experience dissonance whenever some aspect of their self-concept comes into conflict with something they have done. Rather than adjusting their self-concept, the typical response to dissonance is to rationalize away the evidence. We are, in the words of behavioral economist Dan Ariely, “predictably irrational”. Indeed, with respect to beliefs that bear on our self-understanding, it would seem that belief aims at stability and self-preservation rather than at truth.

Of course, Shah and Velleman acknowledge that belief is sometimes influenced by non-alethic factors such as wishful thinking (2005, 501). In fact, they take it as a virtue of their explanation of

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<sup>1</sup> At this juncture I will withhold judgment regarding whether this pattern of belief formation is all-things-considered irrational.

transparency that it “leaves room for the possibility that beliefs can be influenced by non-evidential considerations, because it entails that one is forced to apply the standard of correctness only in situations in which one exercises the concept of belief.” (501) It is only when we deploy the concept of belief that the norm of truth controls doxastic deliberation. However, it is clear that deliberation about what to believe is sometimes influenced by non-evidential factors. Consider the following conversation between two bank robbers:

A: I can’t believe I shot that teller. I never wanted to kill anyone. I just wanted the money. Are we killers now, B?

B: That guy was asking for it.

A: What do you mean?

B: What was he doing reaching down for the panic button? He knew that was a stupid thing to do.

A: I guess so.

B: He must have known he was giving us no choice.

A: If the alarm had gone off and the cops had arrived and seen us with the guns, we’d have been goners.

B: It was him or us.

A: So it was just self-defense then, right?

B: Right. We didn’t kill nobody.

A and B here deliberate about whether to believe that they are killers. They reach the conclusion that they should adopt the belief that they are not killers. Their explanation for why they are not killers – i.e., that they acted in self-defense – is unmistakably the product of rationalization. They exhibit what Nomy Arpaly (2003) has termed “motivated irrationality”. Their beliefs aim at self-justification rather than at truth. So, how should a philosopher who thinks that belief aims at truth characterize their deliberation? Should he claim that the bank robbers fail to deploy the concept of belief? This would be an odd result, especially since wishful thinking seems as likely to occur in deliberative contexts as in non-deliberative ones. In a footnote, Shah and Velleman clarify their position: “Our claim here is not that deliberation about what to believe cannot be influenced by non-evidential considerations; it is that such deliberation cannot explicitly treat such considerations as relevant to the question what to believe [sic]. Any influence that such considerations exert must be unacknowledged.” (footnote 16)

So, it would seem that much hangs on whether or not the non-epistemic considerations of A and B

are “acknowledged” or “unacknowledged”. It does seem clear that the kind of biased deliberation present in the example above is of a different kind than the person who tries to cause himself to believe in God using Pascal’s Wager. In this paper I explore what it might mean to claim that non-epistemic considerations in biased deliberation are unacknowledged. After a consideration of the nature of rationalization in the pejorative sense, I claim that self-justifiers must be aware of the disparity between their stated reason for action and their motivating reason. Although their underlying motivation is unasserted, they are not unaware of it. In the final section of the paper I describe what it might mean to be aware of an influence on deliberation without acknowledging it.