

Distrusting Reason

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The activity of reason-giving is an important part of our intellectual lives. At times, we offer reasons to justify our actions or our beliefs, both to others and to ourselves. Moreover, most of us take reason-giving to have normative force: if we are presented with good reasons in favor of a belief or a course of action, we take this to provide us with a presumption in favor of forming that belief or performing that action. This is, after all, why reason is so important: it serves, and rightly so, as a guide to both belief and action.

But there are some who are distrustful of reason, who do not take the activity of reason-giving at face value. Reason-giving may be viewed with suspicion as yet one more instrument for wielding power over the oppressed. Views of this sort have been articulated and defended by some feminists, Freudians, Marxists, and deconstructionists, and some such inchoate view may be behind a certain climate of anti-intellectualism that is currently a potent force in public debate on many issues of real import.¹

This distrust of reason needs to be taken more seriously than it has, to my mind, not only as a political force, but as an intellectual position. In this paper, I try to show that a certain skepticism about reason-giving deserves a hearing. In coming to understand why someone might rationally be suspicious of the practice of reason-giving, those of us who place our trust in this practice may come to understand better what its presuppositions are and what it would take to ground that trust. This paper thus attempts to make a contribution to the field of social epistemology: it attempts to spell out some of the social prerequisites for the proper function of the activity of reason giving.²

I

Let us begin by examining a case of rationalization. Andrew has beliefs about the effectiveness of the death penalty in reducing the murder rate which are, at bottom, a

product of wishful thinking. Andrew has certain views about the morality of the death penalty, views which he holds on grounds independent of his views about its deterrent effect. His views about the effectiveness of the death penalty as a deterrent are not a product of his understanding of the relevant data. Instead, it is his view about the morality of the death penalty that is driving his view about its effects. Conveniently, he has come to believe that the policy he judges to be morally correct also happens to have the best consequences. Andrew's reason for his belief about the deterrent effect of the death penalty is not a good reason. It would not withstand public, or even private, scrutiny. But Andrew is unaware that this is why he believes as he does. He sincerely believes that his reasons for belief are quite different.

Andrew is not entirely uninformed about the various empirical studies that have been done on the deterrent effect of the death penalty. Indeed, when such studies are reported in the newspapers, Andrew is extremely attentive to the details of the news story. The studies that Andrew has seen reported are mixed: some present *prima facie* evidence of the effectiveness of the death penalty in reducing the murder rate, whereas others present *prima facie* evidence of its ineffectiveness. Andrew has latched on to the stories that fit with his antecedent view. He remembers them better than the others, and when asked about the death penalty, he is often able to cite relevant statistics from them. He has less vivid memories of the other studies, those that run counter to his belief about the death penalty's effectiveness, and when he reads about these studies he is typically able to mount some perfectly plausible methodological challenge to them: some important variable was not controlled for, the number of cases involved is not statistically significant, and so on. Andrew is intelligent and articulate. He is very good at constructing reasons for his belief from the mixed evidence with which he is confronted, and he is very good at presenting these reasons to others in discussion about the issue. He believes that the reasons that he presents are the reasons for which he holds his belief. But he is wrong about this. The reasons for his belief are quite different. Thus, when Andrew offers reasons for his belief, he is offering a rationalization.³

Andrew's intelligence and articulateness are aids to the process of rationalization. Andrew's ability to construct and deploy arguments can be extremely convincing, both to others and to himself. Someone less sophisticated than Andrew would not be able to construct such convincing rationalizations, and opinions of such a person that were the product of wishful thinking would be more easily exposed, both to others and to the person himself. When Andrew offers rationalizations for his badly grounded opinions, his intelligence works against him.

Ordinarily, when we reflect on our reasons for one of our beliefs, we are motivated by a desire to have our beliefs conform to the truth. By scrutinizing our reasons, we hope to be able to recognize cases where our beliefs have outstripped our reasons and thus, where we should not be confident that our beliefs do indeed conform to the truth. When we consider what to believe in prospect, we reflect on our evidence, and this process of reflection is designed to guide belief fixation so as to make it likely that the beliefs we come to have also conform to the truth. Both in the case of reflection on already existing beliefs and in the case of reflection on beliefs we might come to have, our motivation for thinking about reasons is to get at the truth.

Now in the case of rationalization, our motivation for reflecting on reasons is different. Our motivation in these cases may be to make ourselves feel better, to avoid cognitive dissonance, or the like. But if our motivations in these cases are different from those in the typical case, such motivations are not transparent to us. When we rationalize, at least when we do it sincerely, we are not aware of doing so; we are not aware of being motivated by anything other than a desire to get at the truth. And it is precisely because of this that the process of scrutinizing our reasons for belief may, at times, be terribly counterproductive from an epistemological point of view. Scrutinizing our reasons, when we are engaged in sincere rationalizing, will get in the way of the goal of believing truths.

Let us return to Andrew. When Andrew reflects on his reasons for believing as he does about the effects of the death penalty, he is able to devise reasons for his belief that give the appearance of supporting it. Indeed, the reasons he is able to offer are *prima facie* good reasons for believing as he does. Thus, when Andrew offers these reasons to others, if they are not independently well informed on this matter, they may come, quite reasonably, to believe as Andrew does; and when others do this, their believings, unlike Andrew's, may be motivated by nothing more than a desire to believe the truth. They, unlike Andrew, are being fully responsive to the evidence, it seems. The only problem for Andrew's interlocutors is that Andrew has selectively presented the evidence; but this, of course, is not something that they are in a position to know or even have any reason to suspect. The reasons Andrew presents are, on their face, good reasons. Rational interlocutors who lack independent evidence on the questions about which Andrew speaks should come to believe as he does.

This fact about the interpersonal case of reason-giving is particularly important because it helps to explain why it is that the process of rationalization is so easy to engage in. When we scrutinize our own reasons for belief, we, like Andrew's interlocutors, take the evidence that is available to us at face value.⁴ Because the biasing processes that selectively filter our evidence take place behind the scenes, as it were, unavailable to introspection, we are able to produce perfectly good reasons for belief, reasons that not only survive our private scrutiny, but would survive public scrutiny as well. The process of scrutinizing our reasons, in the case of sincere rationalization, gives the illusion of being responsive to available evidence. And the more intelligent one is and the better one is at the skills of presenting and defending arguments, the more powerful the illusion will be, if one engages in rationalizing, that one is forming beliefs in ways that are appropriately responsive to evidence.

These facts about rationalization, I believe, go some distance toward making sense of the phenomenon of distrusting reason. There are certain people who have a deep skepticism about the significance of rational argument. These people are often unmoved by rational argument, and, indeed, seem to find the activity of reason-giving less persuasive the more careful and detailed the argument given. Such people often say things like this: "I know that's a perfectly good argument for *p*, but I don't know whether I should believe *p*"; and this, on its face, seems deeply irrational. What should determine whether one should believe *p*, after all, if not the arguments available for and against it?⁵

But I don't think that this attitude need be irrational at all. First, the ability to form one's beliefs in a way that is responsive to evidence is not at all the same as the ability to present reasons for one's beliefs, either to others or to oneself. Reason-giving requires a wide range of skills that need not be present in the reasons-responsive person. One thing the skeptic about reason-giving may be responding to is the recognition that some people are terrifically adept at providing *prima facie* reasonable arguments for their beliefs, quite apart from whether those beliefs are correct. Just as a reasonable person might willfully ignore the appeals of a gifted speaker in order to avoid being misled, an intelligent person who recognizes his own weakness in distinguishing apparently good but mistaken reasoning from the genuine item might also willfully ignore detailed and subtle appeals to reason.⁶

But the second reason for thinking that skepticism about reason-giving may often be quite reasonable ties in directly with the points we have made about rationalization.⁷ People who are especially intelligent and articulate and who are adept at providing reasons for their beliefs are also, in virtue of that very fact, especially well equipped at providing rationalizations for their beliefs, rationalizations that possess all of the hallmarks of good reasoning. It is not that devising a convincing rationalization for a belief is easy, even for those gifted at argument. But rationalization is often the product of very powerful motivating forces, and thus a great deal of intellectual energy may be brought to the task; the result of this is often a subtle and *prima facie* rational argument. This provides fuel for skepticism about rational argument, and it is precisely for this reason that the skeptic is especially wary of detailed and elaborate argument. Intricacy of argument, on this view, raises a red flag, for it raises the possibility of rationalization as the underlying source of the argument given rather than truth-responsive reason-giving. Inspection of the details of the argument would be pointless in trying to distinguish these two, for the subtle rationalizer is in a fine position to offer arguments that, on their face, are impeccable. The difference between truth-responsive reason-giving and subtle rationalization does not lie in features intrinsic to the arguments given. A reasonable person who is worried about the possibility of rationalization as a source of a particular act of reason-giving will thus not allow herself to be pulled into the intellectual task of examining the quality of reasoning offered, for this is the wrong place to look to see whether the conclusion is to be trusted. What needs to be examined is the source of the argument—its motivation—rather than its logical credentials. One needs to know whether the person offering the argument is motivated by a desire to believe truths or by something else instead.

One might object at this point that the motivation of the person offering the argument is simply irrelevant when we are trying to figure out what to believe. If the argument offered is a good one, then it doesn't matter whether it reflects the reasons for which the person offering it believes the conclusion. We shouldn't care whether the argument offered is a reflection of the arguer's reasons for belief; all we should care about is whether the argument offered is a reflection of good reasons for us to believe.

There is something right about this objection. The mere fact that an argument offered does not reflect the reasons for which the arguer believes a conclusion does not by itself undermine the value of the reasons offered. Nevertheless, as a matter of empirical fact, the phenomenon of rationalization is typically accompanied by a

number of factors that do tend to undermine the value of the reasons offered by the rationalizer. As the case of Andrew illustrates, there is a tremendous selectivity in the way in which rationalizers deal with evidence: they do not present the evidence fairly, either to themselves, in memory, or to others. This point, by itself, is sufficient to show that we must be on the lookout for rationalization.

In addition, many arguments involve subtle appeals to plausibility. There can be little doubt that the rationalizer's sense of plausibility is affected in important ways by the motivation he has for rationalizing, and this does not aid in the project of coming to believe truths. Thus, if an agent suspects that he himself is rationalizing, he has reason to worry about his overall evaluations of plausibility. That an argument is born of rationalization is importantly relevant in determining what one should believe.

More than this, the extent to which inchoate judgments of plausibility come into play in evaluating arguments should be a source of concern even apart from concerns about rationalization. Our sense of plausibility is a fragile reed. There can be little doubt that it is socially conditioned. Being surrounded by people who take a particular view seriously, or, alternatively, simply dismiss a view as unworthy of serious consideration, is likely to have some effect on one's own assessments of plausibility. If those around one are well attuned to the truth, this may be a fine thing. But in less optimal circumstances, where one's epistemic community is badly misguided, one's own sense of plausibility may be distorted as a result. What passes for good reasoning in such communities may have very little connection to the truth.

In the end, the difference between the person who places his full confidence in rational argument and the person who is skeptical of it may come down, in part, to a disagreement about the frequency with which rationalization occurs and the extent to which our sense of plausibility can be distorted. If one believes that rationalization is extremely widespread and that plausibility judgments are extremely malleable, then one may be well advised to be skeptical of rational argument. Under these conditions, attending to the logical niceties of argument would be no more useful in attaining one's epistemic goals than attending to the eye color of the person offering the argument. If, on the other hand, rationalization is rare, and plausibility judgments are firmly fixed in ways that track the truth, then focusing on the logical features of reason-giving may serve as an effective guide to true belief. What divides these two views, to the extent that each is rationally held, is a disagreement about human psychology.

Let me spell out this disagreement in greater detail. The skeptic about reason-giving may view the very activity of giving reasons as far more disconnected from the truth, and indeed, in some cases, from the activity of belief fixation, than we are ordinarily accustomed to thinking. I take the traditional view to be as follows. Human beings often form their beliefs as a result of self-consciously considering reasons. When they do this, they are typically led to beliefs that are likely to be true, at least relative to the evidence available to them. Even when self-conscious consideration of reasons does not occur prior to forming a belief, we often scrutinize our reasons for belief after the fact. When we do this, we begin by determining what our reasons for holding a belief come to, and we then consider the logical credentials of our reasons. When they are good reasons, we continue to hold the belief, and when they are not

good reasons, we come to give up the belief. Our reasons are, for the most part, easily available to introspection, and the activity of considering our reasons is thus deeply implicated in the fixation of belief in a way that guides it toward the truth.

But the skeptic about reason-giving may have a very different picture about the relationship among the giving of reasons, belief fixation, and the truth. On this view, belief fixation often occurs independent of self-conscious consideration of reasons. This need not make belief fixation irrational or unrelated to the truth, for we may in many cases be responsive to good reasons even without self-consciously considering them. When we do turn to self-conscious consideration of reasons, on the skeptic's view, the activity of reason-giving may often have little effect on belief fixation. Far from reasons determining which beliefs are formed, as on the traditional view, it is the beliefs we antecedently hold that largely determine the reasons we will come to find. Reason-giving, on this view, is often a matter of rationalization. From the point of view of belief fixation, reason-giving is frequently epiphenomenal.⁸

Even when reason giving is not epiphenomenal, on the skeptic's view, it may have little connection with the truth. Since our sense of plausibility is so easily affected by the standards of our community, a community whose standards have been distorted by external factors will come to taint even the judgments of those otherwise unaffected by those distorting factors prevalent elsewhere in the community. When what passes for good reason really does play a role in belief fixation, then, it does not guide the self-conscious believer toward the truth, but instead serves only to further distort that person's judgment.

The issue between the skeptic about reason-giving and the person who places his trust in it is, I believe, an important one, and I would like to examine it in more detail. But before we try to figure out who is in the right here, we need to consider an objection to the skeptic's position, an objection that challenges its internal coherence. The skeptic's position is worthy of serious consideration only if it can avoid this particular challenge.

II

The challenge I have in mind is that the skeptic's view is self-undermining, for the skeptic on the one hand proclaims that the activity of reason-giving is not connected to the truth and that we should therefore be unmoved by it, and yet, on the other hand, in order to convince us of this particular view, the skeptic offers us reasons. If the skeptic is right about the activity of reason-giving, then her argument would not, and should not, convince us. According to the challenger, skepticism about reason-giving is thus self-undermining.⁹

This challenge fails, I believe, and it fails in two different ways. First, the skeptic's argument may be seen as a simple *reductio*.¹⁰ The skeptic about reason-giving need not be seen as endorsing the argument she gives; instead she may be seen as merely showing that the position of the person who puts his trust in reason-giving is internally inconsistent; that is, it fails to meet that person's own standards. The skeptic, on this view, demonstrates an internal tension in the view of the person who places his trust in rational argument, a tension which that person is in no position to resolve. This is sufficient to undermine the trust in rational argument.

Although this particular way of construing the skeptic's argument absolves her of the charge of undermining her own position, I think that there is a better way to represent what the skeptic is up to. I thus turn to a second response to our challenger.

As I see it, the skeptic does not mean merely to offer a *reductio* in the manner just explained. Instead, the skeptic wishes to endorse the position that reason-giving is so frequently a matter of mere rationalization, and our plausibility judgments so frequently off the mark, that reason should not be taken at face value. Indeed, this particular view of reason-giving is offered as the best available explanation of the social phenomenon of inquiring about and presenting reasons for belief. On this account of the skeptic's position, the charge of internal inconsistency, of self-defeat, is more acute. For on this account, the skeptic is presenting a rational argument *that she endorses* for the view that rational arguments should not produce conviction. How could such a position fail to be self-defeating?

The answer to this question lies in the recognition that our skeptic about reason giving is not a *total* skeptic; indeed, she is very far from it. She is not a skeptic about the possibility of rational belief. She merely denies that a certain activity, an activity that many see as paradigmatically rational, is, indeed, genuinely rational, at least in the typical case. On the skeptic's view, rational belief is not only possible, it is often actual. Beliefs that are not self-consciously arrived at are frequently responsive to reason. Moreover, although the skeptic does not accept the practice of reason-giving at face value, this does not mean that the skeptic is forced to reject every case of reason-giving as bogus. Rather, her view about the frequency of reason-giving as reason-responsive, and reason-giving as mere rationalization, is just the reverse of the person who places his trust in the practice of giving reasons.

Consider the attitude of a rational and cautious person when buying a used car. Such a person will be faced with a good deal of reason-giving on the part of the used car salesman, and it may well be that, if taken at face value, the reasons offered for various purchases are wholly convincing. From the point of view of logic alone, the used car salesman's reasoning is impeccable. But the rational and cautious person does not take the used car salesman's arguments at face value.¹¹ Rather, in this situation, although one does not simply ignore everything which is said, one does not simply evaluate the logical cogency of the arguments offered either. One may certainly approach argument in this way at the used car lot, while forming beliefs on the basis of argument on other occasions.

Now the skeptic about reason-giving sees the practice of reason-giving generally in much the way that we all regard the arguments of the used car salesman. The skeptic is not concerned about dishonesty or insincerity; rather, she is concerned about sincere rationalization and a distorted sense of plausibility. But just as we all regard the used car salesman's utterances and arguments with a great deal of suspicion, the skeptic sees the default situation almost everywhere as one in which rational argument should not be taken at face value. By the same token, there are situations in which we will come to believe at least some of what the used car salesman tells us because we have independent grounds for overcoming our *prima facie* distrust. Similarly, the skeptic will insist that the *prima facie* concern about rationalization and distorted judgment is one that is not only in principle but in practice surmountable, and that when these concerns are properly defeated, we should follow the arguments

where they lead. Reason-giving is not automatically irrelevant epistemically, on the skeptic's view; it should simply be regarded as irrelevant until proven otherwise.

Now it is important to recognize that the skeptic does not simply apply this approach to others, assuming that she herself is immune to rationalization or distorted judgment. Rather, she approaches her own explicit reasoning with the same degree of suspicion with which she approaches that of others. After all, her reason for concern about others has to do with rationalization and misguided judgment, not lack of sincerity, and the person who offers sincere rationalizations or whose judgment is somehow misguided is not only a purveyor of misleading arguments but a consumer of them as well. Thus, on the skeptic's view, we should approach all argument, even our own, with the default understanding that it reflects rationalization or misguided judgment, a mere cover for reasons that could not pass rational scrutiny if fully exposed. If an argument is to be taken at face value, then, there must be reason for supposing that the default condition does not apply.

There is no question that it is more difficult to do this in the first-person case than it is in the third-person case. If I can take my own reasoning at face value, then when I consider the reasoning of others of whom I have reason to be suspicious, I have considerable resources on which to draw. In particular, I may reason self-consciously and explicitly about their motivations, their interests and so on, in order to try to figure out when they are most likely to offer mere rationalizations and when it is that their reasoning can be accepted on its face. But if I cannot yet trust myself, or at least cannot yet trust my own explicit reasoning, then my resources are considerably thinner. Nevertheless, I believe that we can make perfectly good sense of the project to which the skeptic is committed.

After all, even those who are not skeptics about reason-giving in general will, on occasion, have reason to treat their own reason-giving with a certain measure of skepticism. We are all familiar with factors that may frequently interfere with the operation of good reasoning, and in ways that are typically invisible to the agent who is subject to them. We not only worry that judges who have a financial stake in the outcome of a certain decision might be biased by recognition of that fact; we worry that we ourselves might also be biased when put in such a situation. Now it just won't do in such a case to introspect and ask oneself whether one is subject to any untoward influence, and then, if one passes the test, go ahead and offer a decision. This won't do simply because we know that such biases work in ways that are not typically available to introspection. No doubt the best thing to do in this kind of case is simply to opt out; one should insist that one is not in a position to make the decision. But this is not to say that the only two options here are either to opt out or to follow the casual deliverances of introspection. And if opting out is not a possibility, then one may attempt systematically to eliminate, to the best of one's ability, the various factors that might serve as a source of bias.

Any such attempt will leave open the possibility of failure. One may, in spite of sincere and responsible attempts to eliminate all possible bias, nevertheless fall victim to it. But to say that there are no guarantees of getting things right here is not to distinguish this situation, epistemically, from any other. Evidence may be gathered here that is relevant to the question of one's own bias, and one may, in some cases, gain sufficient reason to believe that one is not biased in the particular case. At least I

see no reason in principle or in practice why this should not be so.¹² But if in this sort of case one may reasonably eliminate the hypothesis that one is moved by rationalization, then the skeptic may do the same. And once the skeptic can eliminate the likelihood of her own bias, in some particular case, then she may approach others in the way we all approach used car dealers. The task of evaluating reasoning for the skeptic is thus much more elaborate than it is for the person who takes reason-giving at face value, but it is not in principle impossible.¹³

In addition, it is important to point out that the skeptic about reason-giving is likely to be, as I mentioned briefly above, suspicious about pieces of reasoning in direct proportion to their logical perspicuity: the more detailed and carefully crafted the argument, the greater the suspicion that rationalization is at work.¹⁴ Reason-giving of a more discursive sort will thus evoke little suspicion. The late Supreme Court Justice William Brennan Jr. described his own style of judicial decision making, very much in this spirit, as seeking a “range of emotional and intuitive responses” rather than “lumbering syllogisms of reason.”¹⁵ The skeptic about reason-giving will thus have substantial resources with which to address and resolve, in many cases, her concerns about rationalization. Where she cannot turn back these concerns, she will simply ignore the arguments given.

The skeptic’s view is not self-undermining. More than this, I believe, it is a view that needs to be taken quite seriously. So let us do that.

III

The skeptic’s view may at first sound like the mirror image of some well-known epistemic principles, principles that, though controversial, have a long history. I have in mind, for example, Thomas Reid’s Principle of Credulity,¹⁶ the idea that one should take other people’s utterances to be true unless one has specific reason to believe otherwise, and Roderick Chisholm’s various principles of evidence,¹⁷ which involve accepting the “testimony of the senses” at face value, unless one has specific counterevidence. These principles are often explained by way of an analogy with the legal doctrine that one should assume a defendant innocent until proven guilty. In the case of Reid and of Chisholm, various sources of evidence are taken at face value unless there is some reason on the other side. Special reason is required to dismiss these sources of evidence; none is required if we are to follow where they seem to lead. The skeptic seems to have exactly the opposite presumption: reason-giving is to be distrusted until there is special reason to believe otherwise.

Chisholm defends his principles of evidence, however, as justified *a priori*, and it is important to recognize that the skeptic about reason-giving does not see her approach to reason-giving as having any such status. Rather, her presumption about reasoning is seen as an empirical hypothesis that, on her view, is well supported by available evidence. We may understand the skeptic’s position only if we see it in that light.

We all recognize that sincere rationalization sometimes occurs, and that on such occasions, we would do well not to take the rationalizer’s arguments, however logically impeccable, at face value. What the skeptic believes is that there is a fairly strong correlation between the logical perspicuity with which arguments tend to be offered

and the amount of rationalization that underlies them. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with logic or good reasoning itself on this view; any such view would be absurd. Rather, as a matter of empirical fact, it is argued, those who tend to present their arguments with the greatest logical perspicuity are also, on those occasions, most frequently offering rationalizations, or at least so frequently offering rationalizations as to make the best epistemic policy the one of adopting the skeptic's presumption.

Consider the contemporary practice of philosophy, in which a very high premium is attached to giving detailed and logically perspicuous arguments. Surely philosophy is one of the natural homes of logical perspicuity. Is there reason to think that philosophers ought to be especially concerned about the possibility of rationalization? I think that there is. In ethics, for example, there is more than a little reason to think that a philosopher's views about right and wrong may often derive from features of that philosopher's upbringing that would do nothing at all to confer any justification on the views that result. For example, in many cases, a person's views about right and wrong are deeply influenced by that person's religious upbringing, even when that person would not appeal to any religious doctrine in support of those views. Now I do not mean to suggest that a religious origin for a view is automatically a source of distortion; but we all believe that some religious origins of moral views are an important source of distortion. When a person's view is due to some such distorting influence, and that person is able to offer detailed and logically perspicuous arguments that somehow sidestep the real source of the person's view, the worry about rationalization and its influence is particularly acute.

Nor is this peculiar to ethics. In social and political philosophy, there is also special reason to worry about the influence of distorting factors. We each have financial and personal interests that are at stake in any social and political arrangement. The idea that we might be subject to rationalization when considering which arrangements are most just is hardly a paranoid fantasy. It would, indeed, be quite remarkable if such factors rarely came to influence our views about justice, equality, and the like.

Nor do I think that this concern is rightly limited to moral philosophy broadly construed. Although the potential sources of distortion and subsequent rationalization are, I think, both most obvious and most pressing in the moral sphere, I would not wholly exempt other areas of philosophy from these concerns. Moreover, when we consider the extent to which our philosophical views are ripe for biasing influences and subsequent rationalization, it seems that, at a minimum, the responsible philosopher ought to be especially concerned about the possibility of rationalization's playing a large role in the adoption and defense of philosophical views. Here, as elsewhere, merely introspecting to see whether one's own views might have such a source is not a responsible reaction to the problem. Something much more nearly akin to the difficult project the skeptic about reason-giving is forced into may be forced on responsible philosophers as well.

Many will find this suggestion distasteful and, more to the point, epistemically counterproductive. It seems distasteful because in place of the rational discussion of substantive issues in ethics, for example, the skeptic seems to be endorsing the suggestion that when someone offers an argument for some moral view, the first thing we should think about, rather than the issue in moral philosophy that our interlocutor has attempted to raise, is the psychology of our discussant. Only by first analyzing

our interlocutor's motivations may we determine whether the argument offered, and indeed, the person offering it, are to be taken seriously. It is surely distasteful to entertain such a suggestion, and it would surely be rude to behave in such a way. A person's motivations for offering an argument do sometimes need to be considered, but surely we entertain such thoughts only when the arguments offered fall very far short of logical standards. Entertaining questions about a person's motivations in offering an argument should be a last resort, not the first.

Leaving issues of etiquette aside, this strategy will also surely strike many as epistemically counterproductive, and for more than one reason. First, it will erode the quality of debate by distracting people from the issues we care most about—the moral issues, say—and focusing discussion on issues that are irrelevant to our real concerns: our interlocutors' motivations. In addition, raising these kinds of issues about people is not likely to be met with equanimity. Raising such personal issues as a subject's motivation in offering an argument, and, in effect, challenging that person's intellectual integrity, are not likely to allow for any issues at all to be discussed in ways that will allow for their resolution. But finally, and most importantly, the issue of a person's motivation in offering arguments is likely to be far more difficult to resolve than the substantive issue under investigation in, say, ethics. We have little access to the information we would need to understand fully a person's motivations, at least unless we know the individual extremely well. Moreover, there is more reason to be concerned about the possibility of rationalization in discussion of these personal issues of character than there is most any of the issues that might be under discussion in the first place. Someone who is genuinely worried about the effects of rationalization in others and in himself should recognize that even so much as entertaining the issue of a person's motivation in offering an argument dramatically increases the likelihood that rationalization will come into play. Focusing on arguments themselves does not assure that rationalization will not play a role, but it is a better strategy than our skeptic is offering, the strategy of examining people's motivations directly.

There is, I believe, a great deal of good sense in this response to the skeptic's suggestions, but before I reply on behalf of the skeptic, I wish to point out how much of the skeptic's position is already granted in this response. This response grants that the concern about rationalization and misguided judgment is a legitimate one and, indeed, does not even insist that the skeptic's assessment of the situation is terribly wide of the mark. There is a need to get around the problem with which a tendency to rationalization and bad judgment presents us, and whereas the skeptic proposes one solution to that—involving an assessment of people's motivations—our respondent has in mind a different solution: simply focusing on argument unless, in the final resort, the arguments themselves are so bad that some view about a person's motivations is rationally forced on us. Focusing on the quality of argument here is seen as a pragmatic strategy for dealing with the very problem the skeptic raises, and the skeptic's strategy, it is argued, merely exacerbates the very real problem about which she is herself concerned.

In considering this response to the skeptic, we may therefore, at least temporarily, accept the skeptic's account of the problem—that apparently rational argument is often deeply infected by rationalization—and focus on the merits of the two

solutions being offered. What I wish to suggest is that neither of these two solutions is correct across the board; any reasonable response to the problem will, I believe, require a mixture of these two strategies. How much of each strategy should be used will depend, to a very large extent, on one's assessment of the ultimate source of the problem about rationalization.

Consider our respondent's suggestion that issues about a person's motivation in offering an argument are more difficult, epistemically, than the issues addressed by the argument itself; better then to focus on the issue at hand than to try to clear up questions about the person's motivation before turning to the issue he attempted to raise. This is simply not true in all cases. There are, without a doubt, cases in which a person's motivation in offering an argument is entirely transparent, and what is transparent is that the person is offering a rationalization for something believed on other grounds. Moreover, in some cases of this sort, we are in no position to address the issue that the rationalizer attempted to raise; we simply do not know enough about the issue to enter into discussion with him. In such cases, we should not take the arguments offered by the rationalizer at face value. We should adopt the skeptic's strategy and opt out of the discussion. So we do not want to adopt the respondent's strategy across the board.

But how often do situations like this occur? How often are we in a position to attribute a rationalization to someone, or at least have a strong *prima facie* concern about it? How often is the question about an interlocutor's motivation more easily resolved than the question the interlocutor wishes to raise? This is where, I believe, a particularly interesting difference between the skeptic and her respondent comes out.

Here is one possibility. Rationalization may well occur quite frequently, but the sources of rationalization may be many and idiosyncratic. Thus, when I offer arguments, they are distorted by my peculiar concerns and irrationalities; when others offer arguments, concerns and irrationalities peculiar to them go to work. If this is the case, then figuring out the kind of rationalization that is operative in a particular argument, or whether rationalization is operative, will require a great deal of knowledge of the particular individual involved. We will rarely have such knowledge, and thus the epistemic task of determining the extent and kind of rationalizations involved in particular arguments will typically be quite difficult. This will make the skeptic's project of examining the motivations behind individual arguments practically infeasible. At the same time, it may also make the skeptic's project unnecessary. For if the sources of distortion vary a great deal, then merely focusing on the arguments themselves may be a very good strategy. My biased recall of relevant information may be salient to others who lack my particular bias, and they will bring this into the open, not by attending to the possible sources of my bias, but simply by focusing on the issue under discussion. The public discussion of reasons here, although it brackets discussion of sources of distortion, will thereby help to overcome the problem that the distorting influences present. This, of course, is just what the respondent to the skeptic suggested.¹⁸

But there is another possibility, and this involves a very different picture of the sources of distortion and rationalization. Thus, suppose that instead of these sources' being varied and idiosyncratic, there are a very small number of sources of significant distortion and rationalization. Let us suppose, indeed, that there is a single major

source of distortion and rationalization that is very widespread. Thus, for example, Marxists have suggested that class interests form just such a source of distortion and rationalization; some feminists have suggested that the interests of male domination play such a role.¹⁹ If some such hypothesis is correct, then the situation is exactly the reverse of the one described above. First, we need not know much about the particular individual offering an argument to have some sense of the extent or source of rationalization likely to be playing a role; our epistemic task here, once we have come to understand the social factors at work in society at large, is easy. And second, the idea that merely focusing on argument will allow the sources of distortion to come out into the open would, on this view, be mistaken. Because the ideas that tend to be discussed, on this scenario, are all shaped by a common bias, the hope that idiosyncratic biases will cancel one another out misses the point.²⁰ On this view, the skeptic's strategy is not only epistemically feasible, it is the only strategy that is likely to address the problem of bias and rationalization adequately.

Note too that if the skeptic is right in thinking that public debate is largely shaped by a single source of bias, and that this bias is extremely likely to come into play and overwhelm discussion when certain members of the epistemic community are part of the debate, then a policy of isolation or exclusion will be appropriate. This is just the opposite of the policy of including as many members of the community as possible in discussion in the hope of having the various biases cancel one another out. The policy of isolation or exclusion comes with dangers of its own, of course. But which of these policies best gets at the truth is very much dependent on features of the epistemic community, and the skeptic about reason and the person confident about reason simply have differing views about the nature of that community.

Those who have placed their trust in reason and public discussion of argument are thus betting that the second of these possibilities governing the nature and distribution of bias—a small number of distorting influences affecting the entire tenor of debate—is not the case. The skeptic, on the other hand, suspects that it is precisely this problem that is responsible for our current situation. The skeptic's hypothesis, I believe, is one that we need to take seriously, and the bet that we make when we place our trust in the public discussion of reason is one of which we need to be aware. It is only by taking the skeptic's hypothesis seriously and, if possible, laying it to rest, that our trust in public reason may be fully rational. Moreover, insofar as the rational commitment to the public discussion of reasons presupposes a certain social structure—one in which the effects of bias and rationalization are canceled out—those who are committed to the public discussion of reason should also be committed to ensuring that such a social structure is more than just an ideal; we should be committed to making sure that it is realized and sustained.²¹

NOTES

1. A different, though complementary, source of distrust in reason comes from some evolutionary psychologists, who suggest that the kinds of circumstances with which our reasoning faculties are designed to deal are far narrower than the ones to which they are currently applied. For a

particularly interesting application of such a view, see Colin McGinn, *Problems in Philosophy: The Limits of Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

2. I approach the practice of reason-giving as one contingent social practice among many that, like any other, may be called into question. In this, I contrast with those who see reason-giving as different, somehow constitutive of rationality. Thus, for example, Thomas Nagel claims that the practice of reason-giving is not “merely another socially conditioned practice” (“Kolakowski: Modernity and the Devil,” in his *Other Minds: Critical Essays 1969–1994* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995], 212). And he goes on:

A defender of the Kantian method must claim that it is legitimate to ask for justifying reasons for a contingent social practice in a way in which it is not legitimate to turn the tables and call reason itself into question by appealing to such a practice. The asymmetry arises because any claim to the rightness of what one is doing is automatically an appeal to its justifiability, and therefore subject to rational criticism. All roads lead to the same court of appeal, a court to which all of us are assumed to have access. Reason is universal because no attempted challenge to its results can avoid appealing to reason in the end—by claiming, for example, that what was presented as an argument is really a rationalization. This can undermine our confidence in the original method or practice only by giving us reasons to believe something else, so that finally we have to think about the arguments to make up our minds. (Ibid., 212–13. A large part of this passage is quoted, with hearty approval, by Daniel Dennett in his review of *Other Minds* in *Journal of Philosophy*, 93 [1996]: 428.)

I will not respond to this argument point by point. Instead, this paper may be viewed as presenting an alternative to Nagel’s Kantian defense of reason-giving, a position that Nagel has further developed in *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). As will become clear presently, I believe that the point about rationalization that Nagel mentions in passing has a much deeper significance than he attaches to it and that it may be used to challenge the entire practice of reason-giving. By the same token, if this challenge can be adequately responded to, as I believe it can, then we are presented with a substantive, rather than a transcendental, defense of the practice of reason-giving. For those who are suspicious of transcendental arguments, this is an important result.

3. Andrew’s resourcefulness in handling data and the convenient asymmetries in his forgetfulness are not unusual. Indeed, this example is simply adapted from the results of a study on the effects of mixed data on prior opinion: C. Lord, L. Ross, and M. R. Lepper, “Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37 (1979), 2098–2110.

4. See the discussion of the availability heuristic in Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross, *Inductive Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980).

5. Consider, for example, these comments of Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore: “It seems to us that what there is no argument for, there is no reason to believe. And what there *is* no reason to believe, one *has* no reason to believe.” *Holism: A Shopper’s Guide* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), xiii.

6. By the same token, a person who is particularly good at presenting arguments and recognizes the high regard in which such detailed reason-giving is typically held may use his ability to present detailed arguments in a coercive or oppressive manner. In such cases, it is not the logical features of the argument that are at fault, nor is it irrational that many should fail to attend to such logical features and simply dismiss arguments of this sort out of hand. This kind of concern has been raised in some of the feminist literature.

7. This concern as well has been a focus of some feminist discussions of reason-giving and the objection to what some have called “logocentrism.” Although I am quite unsympathetic with most of what has been said under this label, the skeptic about reason-giving of this paper may be seen as my own reconstruction of what I take to be the most reasonable objection to so-called logocentrism. But I would not attribute the details of the position developed here to any particular feminist philosopher. For feminist philosophers who have developed such views, see, e.g., Lorraine Code, *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations* (New York: Routledge, 1995)

and Andrea Nye, *Words of Power: A Feminist Reading of the History of Logic* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

8. I defend a qualified version of this view in "Introspection and Misdirection," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 67 (1989), 410–22.

9. The objection is similar to an objection frequently presented to total skepticism: that the total skeptic undermines his own position in arguing for it because the presentation of any such argument implicitly commits the skeptic to the existence some sort of knowledge whose existence he explicitly denies.

10. This follows the standard response to the claim that total skepticism is self-defeating. See, e.g., Robert Fogelin, *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Michael Frede, "The Skeptic's Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge," in *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); and Michael Williams, "Skepticism without Theory," *Review of Metaphysics*, 41 (1988), 547–88.

11. When I speak of taking an argument at face value, I do not mean to exclude all critical evaluation; taking an argument at face value is not to be identified with gullibility. There is, however, an important difference between focusing on the subject matter of the argument given, however critically, and turning one's attention to the motivations of the person giving it. I see the first as taking the argument at face value, whereas the second is what the skeptic has in mind instead.

12. This is not to deny that individual cases may arrive in which one is not in a position to resolve the question of one's own bias. Cases must, however, be dealt with individually. There is no all-purpose argument to show either that one cannot have good evidence that one is bias-free or that one must always be able to determine whether one is influenced by bias.

13. I do not believe that this is the only way in which one might extricate oneself from the concern about rationalization. In particular, I believe that there may well be cases in which one might rationally eliminate concern about rationalization in particular others while still harboring reasonable concern about one's own propensity to rationalize. But I need not insist on this in order to extricate the skeptic about rational argument from the charge of undermining herself.

14. Even as great a champion of rational argument as W. V. Quine has expressed a sentiment that is similar in important ways to that of the skeptic. Consider Quine's account of attending the American Philosophical Association convention with Carnap:

We moved with Carnap as henchmen through the metaphysicians' camp. We beamed with partisan pride when he countered a diatribe of Arthur Lovejoy's in his characteristically reasonable way, explaining that if Lovejoy means *A* then *p*, and if he means *B* then *q*. I had yet to learn how unsatisfying this way of Carnap's could sometimes be. ("Homage to Carnap," in *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*, revised and enlarged edition [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976], 42.)

See also Robert Nozick's remarks about what he calls "coercive philosophy" in *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 4–8, in which he rejects the method of doing philosophy by way of "knock-down arguments" in favor of the more discursive "philosophical explanations."

15. Quoted by Alex Kozinski in "The Great Dissenter," *New York Times Book Review*, July 6, 1997, 15.

16. *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969).

17. *Theory of Knowledge*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989).

18. This is just a special case of the point that by using different measuring instruments to detect a given phenomenon, we may dramatically decrease the likelihood that our results are mere artifacts of the instruments themselves. The person who places his trust in argument sees individuals as roughly reliable detectors; their individual biases are features of the detectors that lead to experimental artifacts; and these artifacts are revealed as such by using other individuals, that is, other roughly good detectors, who are likely to exhibit a different pattern of experimental artifacts. The extent to which this method works in practice depends on the extent to which the different

detectors used are both roughly reliable and exhibit the presupposed difference in experimental artifacts.

19. Notice that these are, in effect, socialized versions of the kinds of problems suggested in the “heuristics and biases” literature of Tversky and Kahneman and Nisbett and Ross. (See Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, eds., *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982]; and Nisbett and Ross, op. cit.) The social fixation of the reasoning strategies that concern the skeptic is of special concern because such a process works far faster than Darwinian methods for fixing inferential strategies. Social fixation of reasoning strategies is Lamarckian.

20. Note that Nagel’s assumption in the passage quoted in note 2 that there is “equal access to the court of reason” is thus denied by many Marxists and certain feminists. Consider also Frank Sulloway’s claim (*Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1996]) that firstborns are strongly disposed to resist conceptually innovative ideas and that later-borns are strongly disposed to accept them. Add to this Sulloway’s contention that firstborns tend to be disproportionately successful in their careers. Sulloway notes:

[This] has practical implications for the selection of scientific commissions and the evaluation of their conclusions. Because commission[s] tend to be packed with eminent individuals (and hence firstborns), their votes should perhaps be “weighted” to adjust for individual biases in attitudes toward innovation. (537, n. 43)

This suggestion of Sulloway’s, which I take to be eminently sensible, is just an instance of the strategy recommended by the skeptic about reason-giving.

21. I want to thank Louise Antony, David Christensen, Mark Kaplan, William Mann, Derk Pereboom, Joel Pust, Nishi Shah, Miriam Solomon, and William Talbott for especially helpful comments on drafts of this paper, often by way of vigorous disagreement. Versions of the paper were read at Middlebury College, Brigham Young University, Rutgers University, the University of Michigan, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, and Dalhousie University, where helpful discussions resulted in numerous changes.