

Unification without Pragmatism

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Forthcoming in *Philosophical Issues*

Introduction¹

Both actions and beliefs are subject to normative evaluation as rational or irrational. As such, we might expect there to be some general, unified story about what makes them rational. However, common views about the rationality of action and belief, respectively, seem to suggest that rationality is not unified in this way.² On an orthodox approach, the rationality of action is determined by practical considerations, such as the expected value of an action, or whether it would be an effective means to one's ends. By contrast, the rationality of belief is determined by properly epistemic considerations, such as the evidence one has that the proposition under consideration is true.³

This orthodox approach to understanding the rationality of both action and belief faces a powerful objection. According to this objection, such an approach is less theoretically virtuous because it leads to a fracturing of rationality. There are multiple, related reasons why we might find the resulting disunity in our theory of rationality problematic. For one, we might think that unification is in general a theoretical virtue⁴, perhaps because theories that furnish unifying explanations of some phenomena provide greater understanding. For another, we might worry that, without some story about what

¹ Thanks to Aliosha Barranco Lopez, Chris Blake-Turner, Lindsay Brainard, Amy Flowerree, Jaakko Hirvelä, and participants at the 2023 Midwest Epistemology Workshop for helpful feedback on earlier versions of this material.

² By 'rationality' here, I mean what has come to be called 'substantive rationality,' in contrast with 'structural rationality.' This distinction has its roots in Scanlon (2003) and has now been widely adopted. For recent discussion of the distinction, see, e.g., Worsnip (2021a), Fogal and Worsnip (2021), and Singh (forthcoming). See also the literature on putative conflicts between evidence and coherence: e.g., Worsnip (2018), Neta (2018), and Lasonen-Aarnio (2020). I also discuss the distinction further in §3.3 of this paper.

³ By calling this the 'orthodox' approach to the rationality of belief, I don't mean to suggest that it is uncontroversial, or even the majority view. All I mean to suggest is that it has a storied history that grants it a sort of default status.

⁴ On the widespread acceptance of unification as a theoretical virtue, see Schindler (2022). See also Kuhn (1977) on "scope" as a theoretical virtue.

the rationality of action and the rationality of belief have in common, it is unclear what makes them both members of the same general kind *rationality*.

If we take the above sorts of considerations seriously, we should worry about the apparent disunity between the rationality of action and belief. There are three possible ways to avoid this disunity. One is to reject the orthodox approach to the rationality of belief, and instead assimilate it to the rationality of action. This is the preferred strategy of pragmatists, and is perhaps the most common way of explicitly attempting to unify rationality in recent work.^{5,6} The second option is to reject the orthodox approach to the rationality of action, and instead assimilate it to the rationality of belief. The third option is to search for some general, underlying theory of rationality that can be applied to both action and belief, without assimilating the rationality of either to that of the other.

My aim in this paper is to develop a unified account of rationality that is a version of the third option, but in the spirit of the second option. On the account I will develop, rationality is about doing our best to get things correct, given our epistemic limitations. As I will argue, this general account of rationality can be applied to both action and belief to vindicate orthodox accounts thereof. Thus, rationality can be unified without departing from the orthodox approach. I will argue further that this theory of rationality has several theoretical advantages over pragmatism.

The plan for the paper is as follows. In §1, I'll explain the objection from unification to the orthodox approach, and why it might be taken to motivate pragmatism. In §2, I'll

⁵ Here I take pragmatism about some normative property to be the view that that property is directly determined by practical considerations. Thus, I set aside theories of the rationality of belief, like pragmatic encroachment, that are pragmatist in some other, related sense. See Worsnip (2021b) for a discussion of the relationship between these broadly pragmatist views.

⁶ Pragmatism has also become popular as a strategy for pursuing unity elsewhere in normative theory –e.g., Maguire and Woods's (2020) account of authoritatively normative reasons.

sketch my correctness-based alternative, and argue that it is just as unifying as pragmatism. In §3, I'll draw out three advantages of the correctness-based view over pragmatism. Finally, in §4, I'll respond to two objections and offer concluding remarks.

1. Unification and the Case for Pragmatism

In recent work, Susanna Rinard (2017, 2019) has forcefully pressed the objection from unification against what I've called the orthodox approach to the rationality of belief. On such an approach, the rationality of belief is determined solely by considerations that are in some sense properly epistemic, rather than practical.⁷ The paradigm example is evidentialism, according to which it is rational to believe that p just in case p is adequately supported by one's evidence.⁸ For Rinard, the objectionable disunity in the theory of rationality is due to orthodox theories of the rationality of belief, like evidentialism. Rinard's arguments are quite powerful in motivating both the problem of disunity and the pragmatist solution I wish to argue against. As such, I will take her view as my foil throughout this paper – in particular, the version presented in Rinard (2019).

1.1. *Equal Treatment*

In the aforementioned paper, Rinard defends a view she calls *Equal Treatment*. This is the view that “whatever general principles govern what one should do, these same

⁷ There are interesting questions about what exactly it means to say some considerations are properly epistemic, rather than practical. Here I avoid offering a definition and merely ostend paradigm cases on either side of the distinction. Ultimately, I think that properly epistemic considerations are ones that are related to truth, at least in the context of belief and when contrasted with practical considerations. But this is a substantive view, rather than a definition of the term ‘epistemic.’

⁸ For an overview of evidentialism about the rationality of belief, see Fratantonio (forthcoming).

general principles also govern what one should believe, and vice versa” (Rinard, 2019, 1925). She quickly clarifies the sense of ‘should’ she has in mind:

I’ll call the sense of “should” relevant to ET the guidance-giving sense...I’ll call a sense of should guidance-giving just in case, if one settles that they should, in this sense, ϕ , that properly settles for them the answer to the question whether or not to ϕ (namely, it settles it in favor of ϕ -ing). (2019, 1925)

Moreover, Rinard clarifies that one could understand this guidance-giving ‘should’ in an objective or subjective sense, where the objective sense is “what one should do, given all the facts,” and the subjective sense is in some way constrained by one’s epistemic position. The sense of ‘should’ relevant to Equal Treatment is the *subjective, guidance-giving sense*.

As Rinard makes clear later in the paper, it is precisely this subjective, guidance-giving ‘should’ that is at issue in normative evaluations of actions and beliefs as rational or irrational: “ ϕ -ing is rational...just in case ϕ -ing is permissible, in the guidance-giving sense” (1946). Indeed, she writes that the subjective, guidance-giving ‘should’ and rationality in the normative sense are “basically the same.” Thus, though Rinard initially presents Equal Treatment as a principle about what one should do and what one should believe, it is intertranslatable with a thesis about rationality:

Equal Treatment: Whatever general principles govern what is rational to do, those same general principles also govern what is rational to believe, and vice versa.

Since this is a paper about rationality, I will stick with this formulation going forward, for ease of explication.

As I see it, the primary motivation behind Equal Treatment is that it entails that the rationality of action and the rationality of belief are unified, because they are governed by the same general principles. This gives Equal Treatment “a kind of theoretical

simplicity, or uniformity,” as Rinard puts it (1931). If Equal Treatment is true, then we only need one set of general principles for rationality, rather than separate sets of principles for action and belief. These principles will be informative about rationality in general, shedding light on how rationality can be the very same dimension of normative evaluation whether it is applied to action or belief. Thus, I agree with Rinard that Equal Treatment is a highly attractive view, one that theorists of rationality should accept.

Where I disagree with Rinard, however, is in her assumption that accepting Equal Treatment entails accepting pragmatism and rejecting orthodox approaches to the rationality of belief, like evidentialism. Rinard claims not just that Equal Treatment has theoretical simplicity or uniformity, but that evidentialism *lacks* this theoretical virtue: “On the evidentialist view, fundamentally different theories are required to account for what one should believe, on the one hand, and what one should do, on the other” (1931). Before explaining why I disagree, it will be helpful to reiterate *why* it might seem that evidentialism entails a fundamentally disunified theory of rationality.

Evidentialism says that the rationality of believing p is determined by considerations that provide evidential support for the truth of p . Call these evidential considerations. Meanwhile, it seems undeniable that the rationality of action is determined by paradigmatically practical considerations, such as the expected value of an action, or whether it would be an effective means to one’s ends. If the rationality of belief is determined by evidential considerations, and the rationality of action is determined by practical considerations, then it seems the two are determined by different sorts of considerations. Thus, it cannot be the case that the rationality of action and the rationality of belief are governed by the same general principles because such principles would be ones relating the relevant type of consideration to the rationality of action or belief. This

is basically the same point as in my initial presentation of the objection to the orthodox approach to the rationality of action and belief.

1.2. Equal Treatment and Evidentialism

The above makes it clear why it might seem that evidentialism (and any other version of the orthodox approach) is incompatible with Equal Treatment. However, the reality is more complicated. Rinard's contention that evidentialism is a competitor to Equal Treatment relies on two assumptions. The first is that evidentialism presents a fundamental principle of rationality. The second is that whatever principle relates practical considerations to the rationality of action is also a fundamental principle of rationality. If these two assumptions are true, then evidentialism would indeed be incompatible with Equal Treatment, because there would be two different fundamental principles governing the rationality of action and the rationality of belief, respectively.⁹

These two assumptions rule out an important theoretical possibility, which is that neither principle is fundamental, and there is a single, more fundamental principle that unifies both of them. This theoretical possibility is precisely what I will explore for the remainder of this paper. If I am right that orthodox theories can be unified in this way, then evidentialism is fully compatible with the kind of unification spelled out in Equal

⁹ A minor complication here is that Rinard sometimes writes in terms of whether there are different "general principles" and sometimes in terms of whether there are "fundamentally different theories" of the rationality of action and belief. I assume here that fundamental theories lay out fundamental principles, and that these principles are the most general principles of rationality. I also assume that what is really important for Equal Treatment is that the same *fundamental* principles govern the rationality of action and the rationality of belief. If Equal Treatment were meant to cover derivative general principles, it would be obscure why a view that violates Equal Treatment is importantly disunified. So, I think these are fair assumptions to make. Thanks to Jaakko Hirvelä for suggesting that I make them explicit.

Treatment. Moreover, it would follow that Rinard is mistaken in taking Equal Treatment to entail pragmatism.

Before developing my own view, I want to flag a complication for pragmatism about the rationality of belief that will become important later. It is standardly taken as a datum that rationality is constrained by one's epistemic position.¹⁰ This is recognized by Rinard in her identification of rationality with the *subjective* guidance-giving 'should'. As Rinard notes, there are various different ways of cashing out this epistemic constraint:

It is natural to characterize this subjective should as what you should do, given what you believe. Some, however, prefer to characterize it as what you should do, given what your evidence supports; or, what you should do, given what you know; or, in some other way. I take no stand on this issue here. Equal Treatment should be understood as applying to whichever way of understanding the subjective should is best. (1926)

The complication here is that in identifying rationality with the subjective 'should,' and recognizing that this is to be understood in terms of epistemic constraint, Rinard's view is put in an unstable position with regard to the normative significance of properly epistemic considerations to rationality.

This puts pragmatism about rationality of belief in a strange position, because its central move is precisely to *deny* that the rationality of belief is determined by properly epistemic considerations like evidence. If the subjective 'should' is itself understood in terms of evidence, then pragmatists must grant that evidence has normative significance, but deny that it has the normative significance evidentialists think it does. Rinard and other pragmatists must make sure they are not trading disunity for ad-hocness. I will return to this issue in §3.1.

¹⁰ See, e.g. Worsnip (2021a, 36).

2. Unification without Pragmatism

I will now present an anti-pragmatist theory of rationality. As I'll argue, this theory of rationality is not only fully unified, but avoids the revisionary implications and ad-hocness of pragmatism. It is compatible with Rinard's Equal Treatment thesis, and thus will serve as proof of concept that those who take unification seriously can accept Equal Treatment while neither accepting pragmatism nor rejecting evidentialism (or nearby views).

2.1. *The Correctness-Based View*

A unified theory of rationality must tell us what rationality, as a distinctive dimension of normative evaluation, is about. For example, pragmatism says that rationality in general is about something like advancing or goals, or promoting value, as best we can. This gets us the familiar story about the rationality of action, but yields a highly revisionary story about the rationality of belief. By contrast, I think rationality in general is about trying to *get things correct* as best we can, given our epistemic limitations.¹¹ Call this the correctness-based view of rationality.¹²

According to the correctness-based view, rationality arises as a distinctive dimension of normative evaluation due to our condition of epistemic limitedness. In acting or believing, we can succeed or fail at getting things correct. However, we generally can't directly ensure that we get things correct in acting or believing. This is because whether our actions or beliefs are correct often depends on facts about the world outside

¹¹ I argue for this general way of conceiving of rationality on separate grounds in Singh (forthcoming).

¹² This view also builds on a proposal sketched in Singh (2021), which is in part a response to the earlier version of Rinard's view defended in her 2017 paper.

of our own minds, facts to which we have imperfect access. Acting and believing rationally is about doing our best to get things correct, given these epistemic limitations.

This is simplest to illustrate in the case of belief. Beliefs aim at the truth.¹³ This metaphor can be unpacked in various ways, but it is often understood to capture, at the very least, that a belief is correct if and only if it is true. This is a normative standard that regulates our beliefs: a belief that's false has, in an important sense, failed as a belief. However, this is generally not a normative standard with which we can directly ensure compliance. Whenever our beliefs implicate a world to which we have imperfect access, we cannot directly ensure that these beliefs are true rather than false. We can only try to get at the truth by following *indicators* of the truth of a proposition – i.e., evidence. Thus, on the correctness-based view of rationality, the rationality of belief is about doing our best to believe the truth about a given proposition, which entails following the evidence as to whether that proposition is true.

This explanation of the rationality of belief fits with what many instances of the orthodox approach already tell us. For example, here is Wedgwood:

...it is essential to beliefs that they are causally regulated by certain standards of rational or justified belief, and...the ultimate purpose or point of conforming to these standards is not just to have rational or justified beliefs purely for their own sake, but to ensure that one believes the proposition in question if and only if that proposition is true. (2007, 154)

In this passage, Wedgwood seems to endorse the idea that the importance of rational belief is ultimately derived from the importance of believing the truth. This is a common view in epistemology.¹⁴ Moreover, as shown above, it is a short leap from this idea to

¹³ The *locus classicus* of this metaphor is in Williams (1973). For further discussion, see Velleman (2000), Wedgwood (2002), Shah (2003), Chan (2013), and Singh (2022).

¹⁴ Relatedly, many epistemologists argue that norms of rational credence are derived from the importance of accuracy – e.g., Schoenfield (2015).

something like evidentialism, if evidence is defined as that which indicates the truth of a proposition. Thus, the correctness-based view of rationality helps explain why the orthodox approach to the rationality of belief is so compelling to so many.

2.2. Correct Action and the Good

So much for belief. That's the easy case. In order to make good on the promise of unification, the correctness-based view must also yield a plausible theory of the rationality of action. Thus, we must ask: is there anything action stands to as belief stands to truth? Is there any property of an action such that it is correct if and only if it has that property? According to a long and storied tradition in the history of philosophy, the answer is yes: as belief stands to truth, action stands to *the good*. Given the venerable status of this thesis, it deserves serious consideration.

This kind of analogy between truth and the good is a component of what Sergio Tenenbaum calls the *scholastic view* of reason:

The scholastic view...conceives of our rational faculties as a unified whole. They are the same rational faculties employed in two different endeavors: theoretical inquiry and practical inquiry. The inquiries are distinguished not by different cognitive faculties but by their formal ends: the truth in the case of theoretical reason and the good in the case of practical reason. (Tenenbaum 2007, 6)

According to this sort of view, just as belief aims at the truth, action aims at the good. What it takes for a belief or action to be rational – that is, to be issued in by a successful exercise of our rational faculties – is determined by these constitutive aims, or “formal ends.”

Importantly, defenders of the scholastic view take it to provide a kind of unification of the rational faculties involved in action and belief that is otherwise absent.¹⁵ In the above passage, Tenenbaum contrasts the scholastic view with what he calls ‘subjectivism,’ according to which “our desires or appetites are beyond the reach of reason and yet provide the standard for the rationality of our actions” (6). Subjectivism, when paired with an orthodox understanding of theoretical reason, yields a disunified theory that “takes the ideal government of action and belief by means of our rational faculties to be radically different” (6). Tenenbaum’s description is particularly illustrative, because it brings out a point of agreement with Rinard. Like Rinard, Tenenbaum wants to defend a unified picture of rationality.

But unlike Rinard, Tenenbaum does not seek unification through pragmatism, which assimilates the rationality of belief to the rationality of action. If anything, the scholastic view of reason is more in the spirit of assimilating the rationality of action to the rationality of belief. As Tenenbaum puts it:

...we can learn quite a lot about the structure of practical reason by focusing on the idea that practical reason employs the same rational faculties as theoretical reason toward a distinct formal end. In fact, we should be able to draw from our understanding of theoretical reason resources that will help us clarify the structure of practical reason. (8)

Tenenbaum continues:

Understanding our rational faculties as unified in this way has both theoretical and heuristic advantages. As we said earlier, the “good” in the old formula of the schools can be interpreted as having a function in the practical realm similar to that of the true in the theoretical realm: The good and the true are abstract characterizations of the aim of action and belief, respectively. That is, in saying that we aim at the true and the good, we are saying that we aim to get things right in the theoretical and the practical

¹⁵ Tenenbaum (2007) is one of the most influential recent defenses of the guise of the good thesis. See Orsi (2015) for an overview of the recent literature.

realm, respectively, but this is not to say anything more particular about which actions and beliefs would constitute getting things right. (8)

The reader will undoubtedly see, now, how the scholastic view of reason outlined by Tenenbaum is grist for my mill. On the correctness-based view, rationality is about getting things correct as best we can, given our epistemic limitations. And just as Tenenbaum shows us, though what constitutes getting things correct differs between action and belief, this is still a unified story.

2.3. Unifying Action with Belief

With the above in mind, a promising way of proceeding for the correctness-based view is to embrace the idea that, just as a belief is correct if and only if it is true, an action is correct if and only if it is good. And like truth, goodness is world-implicating. This means that, just as we can't directly ensure that our beliefs are true, we can't directly ensure that our actions are good. Following the analogy one step further, just as doing our best to believe what's true consists in following evidence that a proposition is true, doing our best to do what's good consists in following evidence that an action is good. This yields the following fundamental principles of rationality for action and belief:

Rationality_{Action}: It is rational for A to φ iff, according to A's evidence, φ -ing is good.¹⁶

Rationality_{Belief}: It is rational for A to believe that p iff, according to A's evidence, p is true.

¹⁶ It might be that, strictly speaking, the correctness-based view should take this principle to apply in the first instance to intention, or intentional action. But it is plausible, especially if one accepts the correctness-based view, that it is rational to φ iff it is rational to intend to φ , or alternatively, to φ intentionally. See Scanlon (1998, Ch. 1) and McHugh and Way (2022) for related points about reasons for action and reasons for intention.

These two principles are simply applications of the following fundamental principle of rationality in general:

Rationality: For any rationally evaluable response R , it is rational for A to R iff, according to A 's evidence, R is correct.

Now, consider Equal Treatment once more:

Equal Treatment: Whatever general principles govern what is rational to do, those same general principles also govern what one is rational to believe, and vice versa.

Because Rationality_{Action} and Rationality_{Belief} are simply applications of the general, unsubscripted Rationality, the same general principle governs both what it is rational to do and what it is rational to believe.

It appears, then, that the correctness-based view of rationality is fully compatible with Equal Treatment. Moreover, the application of the correctness-based view to the rationality of belief looks an awful lot like evidentialism. This shows that the aforementioned contention by Rinard that “[o]n the evidentialist view, fundamentally different theories are required to account for what one should believe...and what one should do” is false. Evidentialism is fully compatible with Equal Treatment, as long as it is an application of the broader correctness-based view.

The application of the correctness-based view to the rationality of action can also respect the orthodox approach on which the rationality of action is determined by practical considerations. Consider the view that what's rational to do is a function of the expected value of one's options. A calculation of expected value essentially has two components: first, an appraisal of the good the action will realize, and second, an estimation of the probability that the action will realize that good. The point of the second component, of course, is to provide the epistemic constraint necessary in an account of

rationality. It takes us from evaluating the correctness of an action (in terms of actual value) to the rationality of that action (in terms of expected value). Moreover, if we understand the second component in terms of *evidential* probability that the action will realize the good, the expected value view can be understood as a probabilistic way of cashing out Rationality_{Action}.

The correctness-based view can also be made to fit with a view on which what's rational to do depends on what would promote your ends, given a very thin, subjectivist conception of the good on which for something to be good just is for it to promote your ends. This would yield the view that correct action is action that promotes your ends, and so rational action is action that promotes your ends, according to your evidence. Of course, this would be a further departure from the scholastic view, and it would require rejecting the idea that adopting something as an end itself requires seeing it as good. But the point is that more or less thin conceptions of the good can be slotted into the correctness-based view, in order to capture different conceptions of the practical considerations that determine the rationality of action on the orthodox approach. So, the correctness-based view doesn't have the kind of revisionary implications for the rationality of action that pragmatism has for the rationality of belief.

Let's take stock. In defending Equal Treatment as a unifying view of rationality, Rinard claims that it amounts to accepting pragmatism about the rationality of belief (and thus rejecting evidentialism). This is because she assumes that taking belief to be rationalized by practical considerations is the only viable way to have the same general principles govern what is rational to do and what is rational to believe. Against this assumption, I've offered the correctness-based view of rationality. On this view, rationality is a matter of doing the best we can to get things correct, given our epistemic

limitations. This yields a fundamental principle of rationality on which rational responses are those that are correct according to our evidence. Not only is this principle compatible with Equal Treatment, it also preserves the appearances when it comes to both the rationality of action and the rationality of belief.

On the correctness-based view, the apparent disunity between orthodox approaches to the rationality of action and belief is merely apparent. It stems from the fact that action and belief have different correctness conditions: while belief aims at the truth, action aims at the good.¹⁷ By understanding the rationality of all responses in terms of their correctness, my view dispels this apparent disunity. Thus, it proves that pragmatism about rationality doesn't have a monopoly on the theoretical virtue of unification. Furthermore, it isn't just that the correctness-based view is equally theoretically virtuous. As I alluded to earlier, it has significant theoretical advantages over pragmatism. I turn now to those.

3. Theoretical Advantages of the Correctness-Based View

The correctness-based view has at least three theoretical advantages over pragmatism. First, it avoids the problem pragmatism has with evidence potentially playing an unstable role in the theory. Second, it avoids pragmatism's revisionary

¹⁷ One might ask why, if we understand correct action in terms of the good, we should not also understand correct belief in terms of the *epistemic* good, and leave it open whether truth is the fundamental epistemic good. Here, it's important to clarify that on the sense of 'the good' I have in mind, inspired by the scholastic view, it is "merely... the most abstract characterization of the aim of any practical judgment," as Tenenbaum puts it (2007, 29). (See also my discussion of constitutive aims in §4.2.) I don't think this is quite the practical analogue of what epistemologists have in mind when they invoke epistemic value. However, if someone did have in mind 'the most abstract characterization of the aim of any *theoretical* judgment,' I suppose it could be seen as an open question whether truth is that aim, as opposed to, e.g., knowledge. I find it overwhelmingly plausible that truth is the aim of theoretical judgment, but those who think it's something else should be able to substitute that for truth in the correctness-based view. Thanks to Jaakko Hirvelä for suggesting that I clarify this.

implications, not just with regard to the rationality of belief, but also with regard to the rationality of other, non-belief attitudes. Third, the correctness-based view fits with recent accounts of substantive rationality in terms of right-kind, evidence-relative reasons. I'll discuss each of these advantages in turn.

3.1. The Normative Significance of Evidence

The first advantage of the correctness-based view over pragmatism has to do with the complication I raised for pragmatism in §1.2. For pragmatists' theory of the rationality of action to be plausible, they must recognize the normative significance of epistemic constraint. The worry is that any plausible way of doing this puts pragmatism in an unstable position. To bring this out, suppose that the rationality of action is ultimately to be understood in terms of an action's being an effective means to an agent's ends. How should this relationship be understood?

One possibility is to simply identify the two, such that what's rational to do is what is an effective means to my ends. The problem is that what is an effective means to my ends often depends on facts about the world that are outside of my epistemic ken. For example, imagine I have the end of getting rich, and the most effective means to this end would be to invest in a particular niche stock that, unbeknownst to anyone, will soon skyrocket. Assuming I have no way of knowing that this stock will soon skyrocket, it doesn't seem right to say that the rational thing for me to do is to invest in it. This way of understanding rationality fails to respect the way in which it is epistemically constrained.

The importance of epistemic constraint is recognized by pragmatists and their opponents alike; this is why Rinard identifies rationality with what she calls the subjective guidance-giving 'should.' However, as discussed earlier, Rinard wants to be neutral about

what this epistemic constraint consists in, between a completely subjective ‘should’ and an evidence-relative one. On the former way of going, we would identify what is rational to do with what I *believe* to be an effective means to my ends. But this is not a particularly plausible theory either, because it is too subjective.¹⁸ If I believe, without evidence, that some particular stock will skyrocket, it is just as implausible to suggest that it is rational for me to invest in this stock, given my end of getting rich.

The point here, which is not a new one, is that what’s rational to do depends neither on what is *actually* an effective means to my ends, nor on what I *happen to believe* is an effective means to my ends. The natural conclusion is that what is rational to do depends on which action is *rational to believe* is an effective means to my ends. That makes good sense of why it is only rational for me to invest in the stock if I have good evidence that the stock will go up. But the unifying pragmatist can’t accept this natural conclusion, on pain of circularity. For when applied to belief, this would yield the view that what is rational to believe depends on which belief is rational to believe is an effective means to my ends.¹⁹

To properly capture the way in which rationality is epistemically constrained, while avoiding circularity, pragmatists could appeal directly to the notion of evidence. That is, they could argue that what is rational to do depends on what is an effective means to my ends, according to my evidence. This would avoid circularity when applied to the rationality of belief, as it makes no reference to the rationality of belief in cashing out the

¹⁸ Rinard recognizes this too in earlier work – see Rinard (2017, 133-134).

¹⁹ Rinard also recognizes the worry about circularity in her 2017 paper. There, she says the unifying pragmatist should simply embrace the circularity. But this is an odd response given the goal of arguing for pragmatism on the grounds of theoretical virtue. For just as unification is generally recognized as a theoretical virtue, circularity is generally recognized as a theoretical vice.

epistemic constraint.²⁰ But this strategy would lead pragmatists out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Here's why. If pragmatists appeal directly to the notion of evidence in theorizing rationality, then they face a question: why does what is rational to do depend on what is an effective means to my ends, according to my evidence, as opposed to according to something else? In other words, why does evidence matter? One response would be that this is simply what is needed to get the right extension for the rationality of action. But this makes their inclusion of evidence constraints ad hoc. It becomes apparent at this point that the question faced by pragmatists is really a dilemma. For any other answer they give must grant that evidence itself has normative significance. But the whole point of pragmatism as a unifying strategy is to hold that only practical considerations have normative significance.

In short, if the pragmatist identifies what is rational to do with what is an effective means to my ends, according to my evidence, then they are forced to admit the normative significance of what is, in everything but name, an evidentialist conception of the rationality of belief. To rely on such an account of how rationality is epistemically constrained puts the pragmatist in an unstable position between denying and conceding the normative significance of evidence. Thus, the embrace of pragmatism as a unifying theory is precisely what denies pragmatists the resources to make sense of the way in which rationality is epistemically constrained. Moreover, this is the case given *any* plausible account of which practical considerations ultimately rationalize action.

²⁰ A version of this strategy is pursued by Skipper (2023).

The correctness-based view, by contrast, has a principled explanation of how rationality is epistemically constrained, and of the normative significance of evidence. According to the correctness-based view, rationality is about getting things correct, given our epistemic limitations. On the assumption that our evidence *just is* what indicates whether or not something is the case, the normative significance of evidence is no mystery. The epistemically constrained principles of rationality given by the correctness-based view are the only principles epistemically limited beings like us can follow as a way of trying to get things correct. Thus, the correctness-based view has a significant theoretical advantage over pragmatism in explaining how rationality is epistemically constrained.

3.2. The Rationality of Other Attitudes

Pragmatism, of the unifying sort Rinard defends, entails that *every* rationally evaluable response is rationalized by the very same sorts of practical considerations that paradigmatically rationalize action. This is explicitly endorsed in Rinard (2017), and in her 2019 paper, she writes that “is natural to suppose that the equal treatment thesis, if true, applies not only to options that are believings and doings, but to anything at all that is an option for one” (1929). Further, she notes that much of the dialectic about belief applies to other attitudes such as anger, shame, and guilt. This wide variety of non-belief attitudes seems to make up much of the realm of rationally evaluable responses. Thus, those engaged in the project of giving a unified theory of rationality are on the hook for what their theory says about this whole range of attitudes.

It is widely thought that taking the very same sorts of practical considerations that paradigmatically rationalize action to rationalize belief has revisionary implications for

the rationality of belief. For example, it seems uncontroversial that, if I am offered a million dollars with no strings attached to raise my left arm, it is rational for me to do so. Say I am instead offered a million dollars, with no strings attached, to believe that the earth is flat. It is at the very least highly controversial that this makes it rational to believe that the earth is flat. And to many, it is clearly false, because it can't be rational to believe a proposition that flies in the face of one's evidence. This is part of why the orthodox approach to the rationality of belief enjoys the kind of default status it does.

Pragmatists can respond by pointing out that such cases are far-fetched, and that practical considerations don't generally favor beliefs that fly in the face of our evidence, given that in most cases it won't be to our advantage to have such beliefs. But this response doesn't take account of the opposite sort of case, where I have decisive evidence for a belief, but no practical considerations favor it. To borrow an example from Kelly (2003), if I stumble upon decisive evidence that Bertrand Russell was left-handed, it seems it would be irrational for me to fail to believe that, regardless of whether that belief has any practical relevance. And this is not a far-fetched sort of case.

This is all well-trodden ground. But what has received less focus is that the pragmatist must deal with these apparent cases of revisionary implications not just when it comes to belief, but when it comes to all other rationally evaluable attitudes.²¹ At first, it may seem less revisionary to hold that attitudes like anger are rationalized by practical considerations than it does when it comes to belief. For example, we often try to quell our anger over things we have no control over, on the grounds that being angry won't get us

²¹ A similar point is made by Worsnip (2024) about epistemic *instrumentalism*, which is, of course, a closely related view to pragmatism.

anywhere. But on further inspection, it becomes clear that a view on which the rationality of anger depends solely on practical considerations is also highly revisionary. This becomes especially clear if we look at cases where anger seems to be a completely appropriate or fitting response to a situation, despite having no practical value.

Imagine a woman, Christine, who has been subjected to misogynistic treatment in the workplace. It is appropriate for her to be angry about such treatment. Now, imagine that being angry about it will get her nowhere: her anger will receive no uptake from her colleagues, and will lead to no improvement in the situation. In fact, imagine that her anger will only make things worse for her, as her colleagues will detect it and use it as a basis for further misogynistic treatment. We can grant that this makes it prudent for Christine to try to move past her anger, despite its being appropriate. But pragmatists must come to a much stronger conclusion: pragmatists must hold that, given the practical considerations, it is *irrational* for her to be angry in this situation. This strikes me as at least as revisionary a verdict about the rationality of anger as pragmatist verdicts about the rationality of belief.

Moreover, it seems morally suspect to hold that a woman who has been subjected to misogynistic treatment with no recourse is *irrational* for being angry about it, given the way women's anger is already often treated. If anything, Christine's lack of recourse makes her anger at the mistreatment even *more* appropriate. This brings out the serious costs of holding that an attitude like anger is rationalized solely by practical considerations. Pragmatism renders impossible the nuanced but overwhelmingly plausible judgment that Christine's anger is completely reasonable, even though it would be prudent for her to move past it. Indeed, the fact that what is reasonable to feel and

what is prudent to feel come apart in this case seems like part of why her situation is unjust.

Similar cases can be raised for other affective attitudes. Take grief, for example. It isn't difficult to imagine a case where there is little to no practical value in grieving over the death of a loved one, and where practical considerations tell overwhelmingly against feeling grief. It seems again revisionary, and perhaps even cruel, to judge that it would be *irrational* to grieve in such cases. But this seems to be precisely the implication of unifying pragmatism. Thus, pragmatism has revisionary implications not just for the rationality of belief, but for the rationality of all sorts of attitudes.

The correctness-based view avoids these revisionary implications, as it denies that the rationality of attitudes like anger and grief depends on practical considerations. Instead, it holds that the rationality of these attitudes depends on whether they are correct, according to one's evidence. Granted, it isn't a trivial task to identify what it is for anger or grief to be correct. Nevertheless, the correctness-based view is promising when it comes to such attitudes, because whatever pretheoretical conceptions we have of the correctness and appropriateness of such attitudes tend to line up. For example, it is plausible that anger is a correct response to injustice. It is also plausible that it's appropriate to be angry when one's evidence suggests that one has been treated unjustly. Thus, even in absence of a complete theory of the correctness of anger, the correctness-based view has a natural explanation of the fact that it is rational for Christine to be angry about being subjected to misogynistic treatment. Unlike pragmatism, the correctness-

based view is well-placed to avoid revisionary implications when it comes to the rationality of other attitudes besides belief.²²

3.3. *Reasons-Based Theories of Rationality*

The final advantage of the correctness-based view I will discuss is that it fits with a family of views that has become common in another corner of the theory of rationality. Largely separately from the debate over pragmatism about the rationality of belief, there is a burgeoning literature that distinguishes between *structural* and *substantive* rationality and tries to understand the relationship between them.²³ Roughly, structural rationality consists in holding attitudes that fit together in the right ways, whereas substantive rationality consists in holding attitudes that are substantively reasonable or justified.

For example, holding contradictory beliefs seems to be irrational in the sense that these attitudes fail to fit together, making a prohibition on contradictory beliefs a principle of structural rationality. By contrast, the evidentialist principle that prohibits believing without sufficient evidence is about what substantive normative support there is for an attitude, making it a (putative) principle of substantive rationality. This makes clear that the debate over pragmatism about the rationality of belief is a debate about *substantive* rationality, not structural rationality. For this debate is over what provides the kind of substantial normative support that rationalizes a belief. Is it properly

²² In Singh (2021), I argued that evidentialists can unify the rationality of belief with that of other attitudes. My arguments there were inspired by Kelly (2002, §3).

²³ One might think that if we really have the ambition of unifying rationality, we must not only unify the rationality of action and belief, but also unify structural and substantive rationality. I undertake the latter project in Singh (forthcoming).

epistemic considerations, like evidence, or practical considerations, like promoting one's ends?

With this in mind, we can look at recent views of substantive rationality, which have been developed in a very different context to that of the debate over pragmatism, and see how the views in that debate compare. In the literature on substantive rationality, it is almost ubiquitously understood in terms of normative reasons. The basic idea is that for some response to be substantively rational is for it to be sufficiently supported by one's normative reasons.²⁴ This conception of substantive rationality is so ubiquitous because normative reasons are generally understood as considerations that count in favor of responses, and thus as building blocks of substantive normative support.

The question then becomes, which normative reasons are relevant to substantive rationality? There is widespread agreement on two features of the answer to this question. The first is that the answer must respect the fact that rationality is epistemically constrained. So, the reasons relevant to rationality can't be objective, or *fact-relative* reasons, as these reasons take no account of the agent's epistemic situation. Such reasons are often distinguished from *subjective* reasons, which are supposed to be relativized to the agent's perspective. However, as Fogal and Worsnip (2021) point out, the notion of a subjective reason is ambiguous between *belief-relative* reasons and *evidence-relative* reasons.²⁵ The former provide normative support relative to whatever the agent happens to believe, whereas the latter provide normative support relative to the agent's evidence.

²⁴ There is also a distinction between *ex ante* rationality (a response being supported by one's reasons) and *ex post* rationality (actually responding to those reasons), which I'm setting aside here.

²⁵ See also Worsnip (2021a, 33-36).

These two notions come apart in any case where an agent's beliefs diverge from their evidence.

As Fogal and Worsnip go on to argue, belief-relative reasons are a poor candidate for understanding substantive rationality, because they make rationality *too* subjective. Their arguments mirror the points made in §3.1 about rationality and the 'subjective should.' In order to get a plausible extension for substantive rationality, we must think of it as determined by evidence-relative reasons. This general view of substantive rationality is endorsed by Fogal, Worsnip, and others (see, e.g., Kiesewetter 2017). Though this is not the same view as the correctness-based view, the role played by evidence here makes the two views not only compatible, but congenial. The correctness-based view says that the rationality of a response is determined by indicators of its correctness. Insofar as these indicators of correctness provide substantive normative support for responses, it is natural to think that they *just are* evidence-relative reasons for those responses.

This brings us to the second feature of the reasons relevant to substantive rationality on which there is considerable agreement. Recent accounts of substantive rationality in terms of normative reasons tend to assume that it is only 'right-kind' reasons for responses that determine rationality, not 'wrong-kind' reasons."²⁶ This distinction, now widespread, distinguishes roughly between the kinds of considerations that supposedly provide normative support for an attitude by making it fitting or appropriate, and those that supposedly provide normative support in the form of an incentive to hold that attitude.²⁷ It's controversial whether wrong-kind reasons really are genuine

²⁶ I think this is fair to ascribe to both Kiesewetter (2017) and Lord (2018).

²⁷ See, e.g., Hieronymi (2005). The distinction has its roots in discussions of fitting-attitude accounts of value (e.g. D'Arms and Jacobson 2000).

normative reasons for the relevant attitudes. Whether or not they are, it's at least usually assumed by theorists of substantive rationality that wrong-kind reasons don't bear on the rationality of these attitudes. This assumption is made explicit by Worsnip (2021a, 44-46) who suggests that "if there are wrong-kind reasons, then substantive rationality does not require us to respond to them" (45).

There is a decent amount of convergence, then, around the view that substantive rationality is determined by right-kind, evidence-relative reasons. This is a bad fit with pragmatism. Based on the standard characterization of the distinction, practical considerations are paradigmatic wrong-kind reasons for attitudes. Moreover, one prominent way of understanding right-kind reasons is in terms of correctness.²⁸ On this view, right-kind reasons bear on the correctness of an attitude, whereas wrong-kind reasons bear on the value of holding that attitude. Right-kind, evidence-relative reasons would then be considerations that bear on the correctness of an attitude, according to one's evidence.

Thus, the correctness-based view, unlike pragmatism, fits very well with the view that substantive rationality is determined by right-kind, evidence-relative reasons. Granted, pragmatists can simply reject this aspect of reasons-based accounts of substantive rationality. But it is still worth something that a distinction *not* developed for the purposes of settling the debate over pragmatism about the rationality of belief has not only been widely taken on, but seems to favor an anti-pragmatist view. At the very least, if we are comparing theoretical virtues, this makes the correctness-based view more

²⁸ See Danielsson and Olson (2007), Schroeder (2010) and Sharadin (2016).

ecumenical. It fits better with what those coming at rationality from other directions have found independently plausible.

4. Objections, Replies, and Concluding Remarks

In light of the three theoretical advantages just outlined, I think it's a mistake for pragmatists to argue for their view by adding up theoretical virtues. On grounds of unification, pragmatism and the correctness-based alternative I've proposed are roughly tied. Both put forth a single fundamental principle of rationality that governs action, belief, and other rationally evaluable responses. But on other grounds, the correctness-based view has the clear theoretical edge. It avoids ad-hocness when it comes to the normative significance of evidence. It avoids being revisionary about the rationality of belief and other attitudes like anger and grief. And it's ecumenical in fitting with a common approach in another corner of the theory of rationality.

Before concluding, I'll briefly address two objections that threaten to undermine my contention that the correctness-based view is more theoretically virtuous than pragmatism. According to the first, the correctness-based view isn't really as unifying as pragmatism, because it still takes different considerations to rationalize action and belief. According to the second, the correctness-based view's ability to unify rationality and belief requires taking on controversial commitments about the nature of action.

4.1. Different Considerations?

Rinard (2019) initially characterizes Equal Treatment as follows: "On this view... the question 'What should I believe?' is to be answered in the same way as the question 'What should I do?'" (1924). On the pragmatist view, these two questions are clearly

answered in the same way, as they are both properly answered by bringing to bear practical considerations, such as the expected value of the action, or its relation to the agent's ends. Pragmatists might object that this is not the case for the correctness-based view. On the correctness-based view, they might argue, there is an important sense in which one is to bring different considerations to bear in answering these two questions.

According to the correctness-based view, the question 'What should I believe?' is to be answered by consulting evidential considerations.²⁹ The question 'What should I do?' is to be answered by consulting practical considerations. Of course, as has been argued, there is an underlying unity here: evidential considerations are indicators of truth, and practical considerations are indicators of goodness. However, pragmatists might object that if it is the guidance-giving 'should' that is relevant to rationality, this 'should' still gives different guidance when it comes to action and belief. If we take the kind of unification desired to be about which considerations are brought to bear in deliberation, perhaps the correctness-based view has not delivered.

While this objection is worth considering, I think it misses the mark. Of course, given the view that rationality is fundamentally about promoting our ends, or promoting value, the correctness-based view will seem disunified. But on the correctness-based view, rationality is about getting things correct as best we can, given our epistemic limitations. In this sense, the considerations brought to bear in deliberation about action and belief are perfectly unified. They are the considerations that bear on what is correct to do or believe. Thus, in the sense that is important on the correctness-based view, the question

²⁹ This is if we understand evidence as anything that indicates truth. If evidence is understood differently, there may be non-evidential but still properly epistemic considerations relevant to the rationality of belief.

‘What should I believe?’ is to be answered in the same way as the question ‘What should I do?’ The answer is that one should do or believe what is correct, according to one’s evidence. If we think of deliberation as the process of trying to get things correct, given our evidence, there is no important sense in which the correctness-based view fails to deliver unified answers to questions about what to do and what to believe.³⁰

4.2. *Controversial Commitments?*

I’ve claimed that the correctness-based view has a variety of theoretical advantages over pragmatism, while being just as unified. Pragmatists might object that I’m ignoring a significant theoretical drawback of my view: that it depends on controversial theses about the nature of action, of the sort referenced in §2.2. If the correctness-based view is inspired by the scholastic view of reason defended by Tenenbaum, does it not take on its controversial commitments, such as that all action is done under the guise of the good? After all, in the philosophy of action, the detractors of the guise of the good thesis are just as prominent as its proponents.³¹

The correctness-based view need not take on the guise of the good thesis, nor other controversial commitments of the scholastic view. I took inspiration from the contention that, as truth stands to belief, the good stands to action, both because I find it plausible and because it has a venerated history. But the only thing that’s crucial for the correctness-based view’s ability to unify the rationality of action and belief is that there is *something* that stands to action as truth stands to belief. And this can be a purely descriptive

³⁰ Thanks to Miriam Schleifer McCormick for suggesting in Q&A that I address this kind of worry.

³¹ See, e.g., Stocker (1979), Velleman (1992), and Setiya (2010).

property, if the problem is skepticism about some normative or evaluative property standing to action as truth stands to belief.

For example, Alan Millar (2009) rejects the guise of the good thesis on the grounds that “there can, it seems, be actions so deeply perverse that the notion that they are aimed at any good loses all content” (142-143). Nevertheless, he thinks that action has a constitutive aim, which stands to action as truth stands to belief. Millar argues that what stands to action as truth stands to belief is having an “aim-dependent point” (157). By an aim-dependent point, Millar means that there must be some point to what one is doing, relative to one’s further ends (such as promoting or realizing them). This minimal constitutive aim, Millar thinks, is necessary to capture the idea that intentional action at the very least must be intelligible to the agent. Because having an aim-dependent point is a purely descriptive property, Millar’s view requires accepting neither the scholastic view of reason nor the guise of the good thesis.

Nevertheless, Millar has followed a similar procedure to Tenenbaum of looking for what stands to action as truth stands to belief. If having an aim-dependent point stands to action as truth stands to belief, then this too can be slotted into the correctness-based view, as an alternative to the version I proposed in §§2.2-2.3. This would yield the view that an action is rational iff it has an aim-dependent point, according to our evidence. Since the paradigm case of having an aim-dependent point is promoting or realizing our ends, this will not be significantly extensionally different from the view on which an action is rational iff it is good, according to our evidence, on the thin, subjectivist conception of the good discussed in §2.3.

The takeaway here is that *any* plausible candidate for what stands to action as truth stands to belief, whether evaluative or purely descriptive, will yield a view on which some

kind of paradigmatically practical considerations rationalize action. And that is all that is needed, on the correctness-based view, to unify the rationality of action with the rationality of belief. How thick or thin we want the notion of correct action to be will depend in part on what more particular extension we are trying to deliver for the rationality of action. Just as pragmatists can defend their view while remaining flexible about what the relevant practical considerations are, the correctness-based view can be defended while remaining flexible about what makes action correct. This is why there is no real worry that the correctness-based view is committed to controversial theses about the nature of action.

4.3. Concluding Remarks

The primary goal of this paper has been to offer proof of concept for a unified alternative to pragmatism about rationality. According to pragmatists like Rinard, the only viable way to unify rationality is to understand the rationality of action, belief, and all other rationally evaluable responses in terms of practical considerations. According to the alternative I've offered, it is correctness-based considerations, not practical considerations, that unify rationality. Practical considerations, rather than being fundamental, arise from the application of correctness-based considerations to the case of action. The foundational mistake of unifying pragmatism, then, is its failure to recognize the derivative nature of practical considerations.

On this basis, I conclude that the correctness-based view is just as unifying as pragmatism. Moreover, it looks to have theoretical advantages over pragmatism in several other regards. Of course, I have only offered a schematic version of the correctness-based view. But Rinard's unifying pragmatism is also only offered in schema. To fully defend

either view, more detail would be required. But insofar as we are assessing the two approaches with regard to unification and other theoretical virtues, I believe what I have presented is sufficient to show that pragmatism is not the only game in town. In fact, it is not even the best one.

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