

## Epistemic Instrumentalism and Reasons for Belief:

a reply to Tom Kelly's "Epistemic Rationality As Instrumental Rationality: A Critique"

### *Abstract*

Tom Kelly argues that instrumentalist accounts of epistemic rationality fail because what a person has reason to believe does not depend upon the content of his or her goals.

However, his argument fails to distinguish questions about *what the evidence supports* from questions about *what a person ought to believe*. Once these are distinguished, the instrumentalist can avoid Kelly's objections. The paper concludes by sketching what I take to be the most defensible version of the instrumentalist view.

## Epistemic Instrumentalism and Reasons for Belief:

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How should we account for the nature of epistemic rationality? What explains why certain beliefs are irrational, or why it would be irrational for someone to believe a given thing? And why are certain considerations reasons for a certain person to believe something or not, as the case may be?

According to one popular account, epistemic rationality is a species of instrumental rationality: a belief is epistemically rational when (and because) holding it is instrumentally rational given one's cognitive or epistemic goals; and one has an epistemic reason to believe something when (and because) doing so would be instrumentally rational given those same goals.

In "Epistemic Rationality as Instrumental Rationality: A Critique", Tom Kelly offers a series of powerful objections to this instrumentalist account.<sup>1</sup> I am not myself a committed instrumentalist. However, I think there is an important response which is open to the instrumentalist, and I would like to develop it in some detail. At the end, I will say something about what I take to be the strongest form of the instrumentalist view and where I think its weakness lies.

First, a small point. Kelly characterizes "epistemic rationality" as "the kind of rationality which one displays when one believes propositions that are strongly supported by one's evidence and refrains from believing propositions that are improbable given one's evidence" (p. 612). This characterization is question-begging in a certain respect. The instrumentalist need not accept that this is a kind of rationality at all – except insofar

as one has the goals (whatever they might be) which would make such behavior instrumentally rational. A more neutral characterization would be this. Consider the question, “What ought I to believe?” The instrumentalist holds that this question can be answered only given a specification of one’s goals. To provide an all things considered answer, one would have to specify one’s other goals and one’s preference rankings, as Kelly points out (p. 619-20); to provide a purely epistemic answer, one would have to specify one’s cognitive goals, if any.

So understood, instrumentalist accounts of epistemic rationality are compatible with a wide variety of *non-instrumentalist* accounts of the evidential support relation between propositions. For example, one could combine an instrumentalist account of what one ought to believe with a reliabilist theory of evidence, according to which  $p$  is good evidence for  $q$  just in case it is a reliable indicator of the truth of  $q$  (or something like that; the particular details of the theory of evidence don’t matter here). By combining views in some such way, the instrumentalist can offer an explanatory story roughly along the following lines: given that one has such-and-such cognitive goals, the rational thing for one to do is to believe (only) propositions that are strongly supported by one’s evidence — since that’s the best way for one to achieve one’s cognitive goals. I take it that this is what most instrumentalists have in mind.

Given this framework, let us now look at Kelly’s objections. Kelly focuses on how the instrumentalist is forced to treat *reasons for belief*. If instrumentalism is true, then epistemic reasons are hypothetical reasons: that I have a reason to believe a certain proposition is contingent on my possessing certain goals. But this, Kelly says, goes badly wrong. For one thing, it conflicts with the fact that we ordinarily treat epistemic reasons

as categorical, particularly in interpersonal contexts (621). Moreover, it makes hash of certain common sorts of cases; “one can have epistemic reasons to believe propositions even in cases in which it is clear that one’s believing those propositions holds no promise of advancing any goal which one actually possesses” (630). However, as I will argue, both objections conflate questions about evidence with questions about what one ought to believe. Consequently, both can be resisted by the instrumentalist.

Kelly argues for the first point by appealing to the way in which we make use of evidence in interpersonal contexts. In such contexts, Kelly claims, we think of ourselves as providing reasons for *anyone* to believe the conclusion – regardless of their goals.<sup>2</sup> And he argues that there is no cognitive goal which could both be plausibly attributed to all or most people and which would account for this phenomenon in the necessary way. In particular, individuals often do not have the goal of believing the truth in a particular case; they do not have the general goal of believing the truth with regard to *every* issue they consider in *every* context or even of acquiring the truth *most of the time*. So talk of “the truth goal” does not explain the phenomenon (p. 623 –5).

The instrumentalist should grant that there aren’t appropriate shared goals in every case, but deny the supposed datum. If you and I both know that all of the many previously-observed emeralds have been green, then both of us know something which provides *strong evidence* that the next emerald to be observed will be green, and the instrumentalist can hold that this is so regardless of any differences which might exist in our respective goals. But the instrumentalist can plausibly hold that this shared evidence provides me with *a reason to believe* that the next emerald will be green *only insofar as I have a goal which would be served by believing what the evidence supports about this*

*matter*. Imagine, for example, someone who simply has no project whatsoever to which the color of the next emerald would be relevant. Is he being irrational — not doing what he has most reason to do — if in the face of the evidence he simply fails to form the belief that the next observed emerald will be green? Surely not. Compare: I'm standing next to a door at a convention center. I idly notice that all of the many people I've seen come out of the door have been accompanied by dogs. I am certainly not being irrational if I fail to form the belief that the next person to come out of the door is likely to be accompanied by a dog. Perhaps I'm busy thinking about things of greater interest or importance to me. More generally, as I go through my day, I gain all sorts of evidence supporting all sorts of beliefs. But I don't form most of them, and it hardly seems plausible that I have any reason to do so, given that they are about matters of complete indifference to me.

What of the claim that in arguing for our conclusions, we regard ourselves as providing reasons for *anyone*? In a sense this is obviously true. When I argue for a conclusion, I think that the reasons I offer are good ones for anyone concerned to form a true belief about the matter. But I don't think that just *anyone* must be concerned to form a belief about the matter. Suppose, for instance, that you and I are concerned about the color of emeralds. I adduce the evidence I have acquired on the topic. A third member of our emeralds research group is standing by idly listening. *His* research doesn't concern emeralds' color, but rather their specific gravity, and right now he is completely obsessed with his problem. Recognizing that he is overhearing what I am saying, I think that he has heard some good evidence. But I wouldn't think him irrational if it turned out

that he simply hadn't formed any belief on the matter. This is because I don't think that right now he has any particular reason to form a belief about the color of emeralds.

Kelly's second objection begins with the claim that I can have epistemic reasons for believing something "even though doing so holds no promise of better achieving any of my goals (cognitive or otherwise)" (p. 625). For instance, suppose I actively *don't* want a belief about a certain subject matter (or don't want one yet) and consequently aim to avoid coming across relevant evidence. (For instance, to take Kelly's memorable example, one might take measures in order to avoid finding out how a movie ends.) If I stumble across the relevant evidence, Kelly avers, I would have just as much reason to believe as I'd have if I now wanted to determine the truth about the matter. Moreover, Kelly claims, the instrumentalist cannot even coherently describe what is going on when, for example, one takes measures to avoid discovering how the movie ends. A natural description of one's project in such cases is that one is attempting to avoid acquiring reasons for believing the truth. But, Kelly writes,

if the possibility of acquiring reasons for believing the truth about *p* is contingent on one's having some goal which would be better promoted by believing the truth about *p*, then this project is incoherent: there is no need to deliberately avoid the acquisition of epistemic reasons to believe propositions about subjects with respect to which one has no desire to believe the truth, for one knows *a priori* that there are no such reasons. But in fact the envisaged project is not incoherent (p. 628).

However, once we distinguish questions of evidence from questions about a person's rationality, an instrumentalist can coherently describe such cases. What one is trying to

do is to avoid acquiring *evidence about* how the movie ends. Since the existence of evidence about this matter is not contingent upon one's having some goal which would be better promoted by believing the truth about *p*, there is no incoherence in this project. And the instrumentalist can argue that in fact, even though one has good evidence, one does not have reason to believe *p*, inasmuch as doing so would not serve one's goals, cognitive or otherwise.

This reply invites a certain question. If in such circumstances one has no reason to believe *p* (given one's lack of relevant goals), why does one have to get involved in avoiding evidence on the topic? I think the most plausible reply for the instrumentalist is to appeal to our psychology. The end of the movie is a matter of considerable personal interest or significance. We are so constituted that when we find ourselves with evidence regarding a matter of interest or significance, we (generally) form a belief in accordance with our evidence. From the instrumentalist's viewpoint this could be taken to indicate a way in which we are imperfectly rational, or the instrumentalist could tell a story about the rationality of certain cognitive habits, suggesting that given our nature and overall practical goals it is better (rationally preferable) that we are constituted in this way, even though it sometimes causes inconvenience in particular cases. Either way, knowing that one will likely form a belief in accordance with any evidence which one comes across, one strives to avoid the evidence.

Kelly objects, however, that in this sort of case we wouldn't naturally explain the belief formation as a matter of "psychological compulsion". Rather, he comments, "we might very well explain why I formed the unwanted belief by *citing* my epistemic rationality, along with the fact that I was presented with epistemic reasons of the relevant

sort” (p. 628), an explanation which (he claims) isn’t available to the instrumentalist. However, this reply carries very little weight. For an instrumentalist might hold that it is simply incorrect to cite the person’s rationality to explain why the unwanted belief was formed, since forming the belief was not the thing the person had most reason to do (even if we consider only his cognitive goals). Moreover, it is not true that an instrumentalist is precluded from appealing to our rationality to explain such a case. To see this, we have to look more carefully at the space of positions open to the instrumentalist. So far, I have focused on a view analogous to act-utilitarianism: just as the act-utilitarian thinks that in each case one ought to perform the action that will bring about the greatest good for the greatest number, so this instrumentalist holds that in each case one (epistemically) ought to form or hold the belief that will bring about the optimal satisfaction of one’s current cognitive goals. (This is the only form of instrumentalism which Kelly considers.) Consider, however, an instrumentalist who makes a move analogous to the move made by a rule-utilitarian. According to this instrumentalist, epistemic rationality is a matter of forming beliefs in accordance with a system of habits or procedures whose consistent application would bring about the optimal satisfaction of one’s cognitive goals over time.<sup>3</sup> It is at least arguable that forming the belief in the case in question *would* be an instance of forming a belief in accordance with such a system, even though doing so would not further one’s particular goals of the moment. (I’ll return to this form of instrumentalism shortly.)

Kelly’s case against the instrumentalist thus fails once we distinguish the question of what the evidence supports from the question of what one ought to believe. This

distinction is elided by Kelly's use of the phrase "reason for believing". Kelly's argument is driven by a thought which he expresses as follows:

Once I come into possession of evidence which strongly supports the claim that  $p$ , then I have epistemic reasons to believe that  $p$ , regardless of whether I presently have or previously had the goal of believing the truth about  $p$ , or any wider goal which would be better achieved in virtue of my believing the truth about  $p$  (p. 625).

But as I've argued, the instrumentalist can make a plausible case that this is false.

Having epistemic reasons to believe that  $p$  is having epistemic reasons to *do something*: to form a belief on a certain subject matter. But the mere possession of strong evidence doesn't give me a reason to form a belief. There are many propositions which it would be pointless for me to bother to take any attitude towards, even though I possess strong evidence in their favor. I can't justly be charged with irrationality — even with epistemic irrationality — for failing to do so. Even if I have evidence which could serve as an epistemic reason for believing  $p$ , I don't have any reason to believe that  $p$ .

What, then, are the prospects for instrumentalism? Let's consider the instrumentalist's explanatory tasks. One explanatory task facing the instrumentalist is to account for the *specific content* of the norms governing belief formation, norms such as "Don't believe without adequate evidence," "Don't believe in a way that flies in the face of the total evidence in your possession," and "Don't reach a conclusion without having gone to appropriate lengths to seek out countervailing evidence." Here, the explanatory onus on the instrumentalist is to articulate what goals, precisely, make it instrumentally rational for one to accept such norms (or a particular system of such norms). I don't see

anything *in principle* to prevent successful completion of this project; it seems that one should be able to cook up a set of goals which would instrumentally justify accepting a set of norms of the sort we do accept. Everything then will turn on whether we in fact have the appropriate goals.

Things get trickier, though, when it comes to the notion of epistemic reasons (reasons to believe). Consider again Kelly's claim that for anyone, no matter what their goals, good evidence that  $p$  (in the absence of countervailing evidence) constitutes a good reason to believe that  $p$ . *Something* in that claim seems right. But what? The instrumentalist is surely right that this claim is incorrect, if the notion of "reason to believe" is interpreted in purely evidentialist, non-instrumentalist terms. According to an attractive general principle about reasons, if one has a good reason to  $\emptyset$  and no reason not to  $\emptyset$ , then one should  $\emptyset$ .<sup>4</sup> Plugging in the purely evidentialist, non-instrumental conception of epistemic reasons, we get: if one has good evidence that  $p$  and one has no evidence against  $p$ , then one should believe  $p$ . But as I've argued, this is false. To take the simplest case, just consider the many possible beliefs which I quite reasonably don't form, even though I acquire good evidence in their favor in the course of my day and no evidence against them. It consequently seems that the instrumentalist is right about this much: in the sense of "having (a) reason" that directly connects with conclusions about whether a person *should* form a certain belief, a purely evidential account of epistemic reasons will be inadequate; instrumental considerations will have to figure in the account as well.

Still, if I did form a belief on the basis of good evidence while lacking instrumental reasons to do so, it would be perfectly acceptable for me to cite that

evidence *as a good reason for holding the belief*. (Kelly is right about this much.) The real challenge to the instrumentalist, then, is to explain this fact. Why is it perfectly acceptable for me to cite my evidence as a good reason for holding a belief, even in a case in which (from an instrumental point of view) there is no reason for me to form the belief?

One possible answer is that sometimes talk of “reasons to believe” just mirrors talk of relations of evidential support: in this sense of “reason to believe”,  $p$  is a reason to believe  $q$  just if the truth of  $p$  supports the truth of  $q$ .<sup>5</sup> If this is all that is going on, then the instrumentalist gets off scot free. For as I’ve argued, the instrumentalist need not be in the business of accounting for relations of evidential support, but rather of understanding claims about what propositional attitudes a person should take up.

However, while we sometimes use “reason to believe” in a way that is synonymous with talk of evidential support, in the above example the citation of the evidence as a good reason for holding the belief says or implies something *about the agent’s rationality*. When someone lacks appropriate instrumental reasons in the particular case but believes  $p$  on the basis of good evidence, it can still be epistemically rational for the person to believe  $p$ . Or, to put it another way, in such a case the person’s belief may not be open to any epistemic criticism. Why is this?

To answer this question, the instrumentalist should follow the rule-utilitarian, as described earlier. The idea here would be that it serves the overall satisfaction of one’s goals (cognitive and perhaps otherwise) to accept a system of norms according to which believing on good evidence is epistemically laudable even if one lacks good instrumental reasons for so believing in the particular case. However, one would not be *required* to

form a belief that  $p$  whenever one has good evidence that  $p$ ; the only requirement in this regard would be a prohibition on forming a belief without good evidence if one forms a belief on the matter at all.

On this view, the relevant talk of “epistemic reasons for belief” would not receive a direct instrumental explication; rather, its sense would be explicated in terms of the place of such talk within a larger system of norms. Thus on this view epistemic reasons for belief (in the relevant sense of “reasons for belief”) would not come out as hypothetical reasons: from within the system of epistemic norms, believing for good evidence *is* unobjectionable, in its own right and regardless of instrumental considerations, and that’s what this sense of “good reasons” captures. But on this view, the norms that govern our epistemic lives are *instrumental norms*, and so they are merely hypothetical in this sense: they have no rational force except for those agents whose goals (cognitive and otherwise) would best be served by accepting them. In the end, then, the instrumentalist would be offering an account of the binding force of the norms governing belief.

The problem for this version of instrumentalism, it seems to me, comes from the following thought: there are certain epistemic norms which govern us *regardless* of our goals, cognitive or otherwise. For instance, one (epistemically) should not believe that  $p$  in the face of what one regards as overwhelming evidence to the contrary, regardless of whether one has goals which would instrumentally justify accepting a norm to this effect. Or, to put it in the idiom of epistemic reasons, overwhelming evidence that not- $p$  is decisive epistemic reason not to believe that  $p$  – regardless of any instrumental considerations at all. So even if one could provide these norms with an instrumental

justification, doing so would miss something important: they have authority over us in a way that does not depend upon our goals. Rather, we are subject to them merely as believers. This is not to state an argument against the instrumentalist view, of course, but rather to give voice to an opposing viewpoint. Argument will come at a later stage. But it is here that many will want to get off the instrumentalist boat.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, May 2003; 66(3): 612-640.

<sup>2</sup> Kelly writes: “If both of us know that all of the many previously-observed emeralds have been green, then both of us have a strong reason to believe that the next emerald to be observed will be green, regardless of any differences which might exist in our respective goals. ... in arguing for my conclusions..., I think of myself as attempting to provide strong reasons for believing my conclusions, and *not* as attempting to provide strong reasons for believing my conclusions for those who happen to possess goals of the right sort” (p. 621).

<sup>3</sup> A view roughly along these lines is being developed by my colleague Jonathan Weinberg, though he offers a broadly social, contractarian account, which focuses upon considerations about what sorts of institutions and procedures of inquiry will serve our shared cognitive goals.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that this principle does not *by itself* entail an instrumental conception of reasons. For instance, suppose that one held that moral reasons are not instrumental. One could then accept that if one has a *moral* reason to  $\emptyset$  and no reason not to  $\emptyset$ , then one should  $\emptyset$ , even if one has no appropriate goals or desires (e.g., no desire or goal of

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acting morally and no desire or goal which would be served by so acting). No instrumental conception of reasons would come into the picture.

<sup>5</sup> Consider, for instance, the common locution, “ $p$  is (isn’t) a reason to believe  $q$ .” We often use this locution in such a way as to suggest that all that is at stake is a relation between  $p$  and  $q$ .

<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank Mark Kaplan, Tom Kelly, Jonathan Weinberg, and Joan Weiner.