

# The Rationality Of Belief In Inerrancy

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In recent years, scholars arguing against a conservative understanding of biblical inerrancy have appealed to a wide range of issues. It has been argued, for example, that belief in inerrancy should be abandoned or redefined because inerrancy is not taught by the Bible and it was not the view of many leaders in the history of the church. Others argue that the concept of inerrancy is not adequate to capture the nature of the Bible as revelation.

As important as these and related issues are, one suspects that Donald Dayton put his finger on the central reason why some scholars feel a need to abandon or redefine inerrancy: "For many, the old intellectual paradigms [including inerrancy] are dead, and the search is on in neglected traditions and new sources for more adequate models of biblical authority."<sup>1</sup> Simply put, many no longer think that it is rational to believe that inerrancy is true.

What are we to make of this objection? Is it no longer possible to hold that belief in the inerrancy of Scripture is a rational position to take? The purpose of this paper is to argue that belief in inerrancy is rational, i.e., one is within his or her epistemic rights in believing that inerrancy is true.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I will clarify the objection that belief in inerrancy is not rational. Then, some relevant features of the theory of rationality will be sketched and applied to the question of the rationality of inerrancy. For the sake of argument, let us assume that we possess a clear definition of inerrancy as it is understood by, say, the Evangelical Theological Society. This is not to imply that no more work is needed in clarifying all the aspects of a definition of inerrancy. But the doctrine of inerrancy, as it is held by the ETS and other conservative evangelicals, is sufficiently clear for our purpose. After all, proponents and opponents of inerrancy have understood the doctrine well enough to argue about it. The question before us is whether or not belief in inerrancy, so understood, is rationally justifiable.

## I. Inerrancy Is Not Rationally Justifiable

The view that inerrancy is not rationally justifiable involves at least four distinct theses.

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I. Inerrancy is not rationally justifiable because it is not supportable when a genuinely inductive method is applied to the phenomena of Scripture (where "phenomena" refers to all the relevant data inside and outside the Bible, e.g. problem passages, archaeological discoveries, scientific facts and theories, etc.). The "inductive" method here often means what philosophers call enumerative induction.<sup>3</sup> So understood, "induction" has two important features relevant to our discussion.

First, each particular fact in the phenomena carries equal weight. Second Timothy 3:16 and the problem of harmonizing the genealogies are two equally relevant facts that must be used in forming our doctrine of Scripture. The doctrine of inerrancy resembles a scientific law in that both are codified generalizations of particular facts.<sup>4</sup>

Second, the proper understanding of each particular problem in the phenomena should be reached by considering that particular problem on its own terms. Each particular problem should be evaluated in isolation from other parts of the phenomena. Further, the doctrine of inerrancy should not be used to settle a problem passage when an inductive evaluation of that passage would lead one to see it as an error.

As an example of this last point, consider the following statement by Daniel Fuller. Fuller is criticizing E. J. Young for allowing his doctrine of inerrancy to prevent him from adequately treating the problem of Stephen's chronology in Acts 7:14 when it is compared with Gen. 11:26–12:4. Says Fuller:

Now a historian, unfettered by the necessity to uphold Young's doctrine of inerrancy, would immediately declare it was highly probable that Stephen's peculiar chronology in Acts 7:14 stemmed from both his and his hearers having been nurtured in a text that is today extant in the Samaritan Pentateuch. But Edward Young, historical scholar that he was, could not follow this highly probable pathway of historical reasoning ... But to be unwilling to let historical data supply a highly probable solution is to reject historical data in the interest of theological dogma.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, proper historical methodology treats Acts 7:14 on its own without reference to Gen 11:26–12:4 or the concept of inerrancy.

2. The doctrine of inerrancy is not rationally justifiable because it places the Christian apologist in an untenable epistemic situation: he cannot be rationally justified in believing inerrancy until he has solved all the problems in the phenomena. On the other hand, a critic of inerrancy *is* rationally justified in denying inerrancy if he can find just one problem that defies "rational" solution. Clark Pinnock puts the point this way:

For my part, to go beyond the biblical requirements to a strict position of total errorlessness only brings to the forefront the perplexing features of the Bible that no one can completely explain and overshadows those wonderful certainties of salvation in Christ that ought to be front and center. It makes us

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into sitting ducks for the liberal critics like James Barr and postpones our ability to be certain about the Bible to that remote time when the experts will be able to say, "At last we have proved the Bible in every respect."<sup>6</sup>

3. The doctrine of inerrancy is not rationally justifiable because it fails to take seriously the falsifying problems in the phenomena. Whenever a "crucial experiment" for inerrancy is conducted and the results falsify inerrancy, proponents of inerrancy engage in a variety of activities that are epistemically suspect. Proponents of inerrancy create *ad hoc* hypotheses, they offer implausible harmonizations, and they engage in special pleading, opting for a suspension of judgment. The following statement by Timothy Philips is representative of this objection: "The inability of discordant data to conclusively test even the historical knowledge inferred from Scripture is evident from the well-known mental gymnastics in which inerrantists take part, thereby avoiding the conclusion that Scripture errs."<sup>7</sup>

4. The doctrine of inerrancy is not rationally justifiable because its proponents offer no criteria for telling us when they will admit that inerrancy is falsified and must be given up. In the absence of such criteria, the inerrantist's appeal to suspended judgment becomes a deductive dogma, untestable by evidence. Dewey Beegle raised this objection long ago, and it is alluded to frequently.<sup>8</sup>

Underlying this objection seems to be the assumption that in order to know (or have a reasonable belief) that p, I must have criteria for knowing that p or perhaps that~p [not p]. In this absence of such criteria, one is no longer rational in knowing or believing that p.<sup>9</sup>

Taken together, these four theses constitute a major objection to the rationality of belief that inerrancy is true. Can these objections be answered? I believe they can, and to show this, let us turn to a consideration of some key aspects of a theory of rationality.

## II. Features of a Theory of Rationality

In this section, there will be an attempt to reach limited goals. I will not try to give an ontological analysis of acts of rationality,<sup>10</sup> nor will I attempt to resolve the dispute between foundationalist and coherentist theories of epistemic justification. While I hold to a certain form of foundationalism, much of what I say here could be embraced, with adjustments, by a coherentist.<sup>11</sup> My goal is to state certain features of a theory of rationality that are relevant to the objections raised in the previous section.

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What is a theory of rationality? At this point it will be helpful to introduce, with some modification, the notation of what Alvin Plantinga calls a noetic structure.<sup>12</sup> A person's noetic structure is the set of propositions he believes, along with certain epistemic relations that hold between him and these propositions, and among the propositions themselves. A theory of rationality involves, among other things, an analysis of a person's noetic structure in such a way that light is shed on what it is for some epistemic states to be preferable to others. So conceived, a theory of rationality is a normative endeavor to answer questions like: What is it to be justified in knowing that p? When is a belief that p rational or irrational? How does one justify beliefs? When is it reasonable to give up a belief that p?

With this in mind, I now want to describe five features of a theory of rationality relevant to our discussion of inerrancy.

1. Epistemic concepts of appraisal. Our beliefs evidence different degrees of rationality. Some beliefs, e.g. the belief that I exist, are certain for me. Other beliefs, e.g. that the Kansas City Royals are one of baseball's best teams, are rational to a lesser degree than that of certainty. The following three epistemic concepts express different degrees of rationality.<sup>13</sup> Let us assume that we are trying to decide whether or not it is rational to believe some belief p. Let us also assume that if we *withhold* our belief that p, we are in a state of suspending judgment regarding p. That is, we neither affirm p, nor do we affirm-p.

a) Having some presumption in its favor: If p has some presumption in its favor, then it is better to believe p than to believe-p (although it may be equally good or better to withhold belief that p than to believe p).

b) Acceptability: It is not the case that withholding belief that p is better than believing that p (although it may be equally good to withhold, as to believe that p).

c) Being beyond reasonable doubt: Believing that p is more reasonable than withholding belief that p.

Points (a) through (c) are listed in order of increasing rationality. If p has some presumption in its favor, it is less reasonable to believe p than if p were beyond reasonable doubt. If p is "The conservative, classical doctrine of inerrancy is true," which epistemic concept must a defender of the rationality of inerrancy use?

Consider (a). If one holds that p has some presumption in its favor, then it could still be more reasonable to withhold belief that p. This does not seem to be strong enough to match what most defenders of inerrancy want to say about their belief that p. On the other hand, most critics of inerrancy imply that the current state

of scholarship makes it better to believe - p than to believe p. So if the defender of inerrancy could show that p has some

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presumption in its favor, he could at least argue for a suspension of judgment as opposed to a denial of inerrancy.

What about (c)? If the defender of inerrancy could show that p is beyond reasonable doubt, then of course he would be within his epistemic rights in believing p. This may be a good line of approach, but I do not think that the defender of inerrancy needs to argue for this strong a notion of rationality. In claiming that it is rational to believe in inerrancy, it seems to me one is affirming that belief in inerrancy is acceptable as defined above. The defender of inerrancy is arguing that belief in inerrancy is more rational than the belief that inerrancy is false. He is also arguing that it is at least as rational (perhaps more so) to believe p than to withhold p. Further, if one could show that p has some features in common with Pascal's wager and William James' discussion of live options, viz. that withholding p is not an option, for to withhold p is really to choose against p, then "acceptability" reduces to "having some presumption in its favor." In that case, defending the acceptability of inerrancy would involve showing it had some presumption in its favor.

The upshot of my analysis of rationality is this. In order to argue that belief in inerrancy is rational, one need not show that such a belief is certain, evident, or (perhaps) beyond reasonable doubt. One can be well within one's epistemic rights in believing the truth of inerrancy, without adopting such a strong notion of rationality that makes it incumbent on one to answer all problem passages and remove all doubts, puzzles, and objections. One does not need to solve the problem in Acts 7:14 *before* one can be rational in affirming inerrancy. If the defender of inerrancy were arguing that belief in inerrancy was absolutely certain or beyond reasonable doubt, his epistemic situation would be different. But I see no reason why the defender of inerrancy needs to adopt such a strong concept of rationality. His task, it seems to me, is less demanding. This will become more evident as we consider further features of a theory of rationality.

2. The proper context of evidence. In most cases, a belief is deemed a rational one because it is supported by some appropriate backdrop of evidence.<sup>14</sup> Ontologically, for some belief p, there would exist a set T consisting of all and only the evidence relevant to p. However, one may not know T, and the rationality of believing p depends on the evidential context I select and on whether this is a good evidential context.

Suppose I come home from work and I see toys and doll clothes scattered throughout the living room. Suppose further that I know these items belong to my two little girls. I also know they are in the habit of leaving toys scattered, and I see them in the room playing with the toys and clothes. Given this evidential context, I would be rationally justified in forming the belief p at time t1 "My girls messed up the living room by scattering their toys and doll clothes." Suppose at some time later, t2, my wife tells me my daughters had been gone all day and that our neighbor's children had been playing in our house all day with the doll clothes and toys. Furthermore, my wife tells me that my girls had just come home three minutes before I

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walked in the door. While p was rational for me at t1, p is no longer rational for me at t2. What has changed? At t2 I have a different body of evidence in the relevant evidential context.

Now consider a theist who is trying to defend the rationality of belief that God exists. Suppose an atheist argues that such a belief is not rational given the problem of evil. The theist could agree but go on to argue that this is not the appropriate evidential context. In other words, given that the problem of evil is the only relevant evidence for deciding the rationality of belief that God exists, it could follow that such a belief is not rational. But if the problem of evil is only one piece of relevant evidence in a much broader set of

relevant evidence (metaphysical arguments for God, miracles, religious experience, etc.), then the belief that God exists may be rational against *that* backdrop of evidence.

It is very important, then, in deciding whether some belief is a rational one, that I base my answer on the proper set of relevant evidence. We will see shortly that in deciding whether a problem in the phenomena of Scripture is a real or apparent error, the relevant set of evidence includes *other* passages of Scripture and the doctrine of inerrancy itself. Only a misunderstanding of induction and its normal role in science and other "inductive" enterprises would cause someone like Fuller to think that Gen 11:26–12:4 and the doctrine of inerrancy are not members of the proper evidential set for deciding about what to make of Acts 7:14.

For now, I want to offer one application for the inerrancy debate, of choosing the appropriate evidential context for justifying a belief. In ranking the plausibility of a variety of hypotheses explaining why an airplane crashed (a martian did it, the pilot was drunk, the brakes failed, etc.), one implicitly or explicitly appeals to one's background knowledge about the way things normally go in cases like these.<sup>15</sup> These background constraints usually constitute the accumulated tacit and explicit knowledge that resides in an appropriate community of practitioners. One need not accept conceptual relativism nor reduce intellectual history to the sociology of knowledge to appreciate the social component of knowledge and rationality.<sup>16</sup> This is why church history is relevant to the *rationality* of belief in inerrancy and is not merely of historical interest. If one could show that the great majority of theologians and biblical scholars in the history of the church have held to inerrancy, and if this group forms the relevant community of practitioners, then their beliefs provide background constraints for ranking the plausibility of the doctrine of inerrancy vis-h-vis other views of biblical authority.

I am not presenting this as a knock-down argument. Communities can be wrong and background constraints can be mere biases. But the relevant evidential set for deciding the rationality of belief in inerrancy should include the background constraints provided by church history. This would

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at least make belief in inerrancy *prima facie* justified,<sup>17</sup> and contribute to placing the burden of proof on those who deny inerrancy.<sup>18</sup>

3. Depth of ingression. A person's noetic structure contains what Alvin Plantinga has called an index of depth of ingression. Plantinga argues:

Some of my beliefs are, we might say, on the periphery of my noetic structure. I accept them, and may even accept them firmly, but I could give them up without much change elsewhere in my noetic structure. I believe there are some large boulders on the top of the Grand Teton. If I come to give up this belief (say by climbing it and not finding any), that change need not have extensive reverberations throughout the rest of my noetic structure; it could be accommodated with minimal alteration elsewhere. So its depth of ingression into my noetic is not great.<sup>19</sup>

One can think of a noetic structure as a web of beliefs. The more depth of ingression a belief has in one's noetic structure, the more it exhibits two important features. First, it is more closely and complexly interrelated with other beliefs in my noetic structure. It is less independent than a belief on the periphery. Second, it is an epistemically important belief in my noetic structure. It provides mutual support for other important beliefs deeply ingressed, and it provides epistemic support for a number of beliefs closer to the periphery.

The concept of such depth ingression has important consequences for a theory of rationality. The deeper a belief is ingressed, the greater the evidence required to justify giving up that belief. One *should* not give up a deeply ingressed belief without requiring a greater number and quality of defeaters than one would require of a less ingressed belief. The doctrine of inerrancy is unquestionably a belief that should be deeply

ingressed in one's noetic structure. If belief in inerrancy is given up, a number of other beliefs are weakened or need to be given up as well.

I am not here using a domino argument and saying that if the Bible is not true in all points we cannot know that it is true in any point.<sup>20</sup> I am simply making the point that inerrancy is clearly a belief which should be closer to the center of one's noetic structure than to the periphery. This means that one is rationally justified in requiring a good deal of evidence before giving it up.

Critics who argue, under the banner of induction, that particular problems in the phenomena should be treated strictly in their own terms, simply have a naive view of the way rationality fleshes itself out in one's system of beliefs. Similarly, the charge that defenders of inerrancy engage in special pleading, implausible harmonizations, and a suspension of judgment is too simplistic.

It is a simplistic scenario of the epistemic situation merely to look at a set of problem passages and the various explanations of them in determining whether or not those explanations are rational. The role of inerrancy in

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one's entire set of theological beliefs is also relevant to the rationality of the situation. An interpretation of a problem passage that harmonizes it with another text, and thus preserves inerrancy, may not be as rational as an interpretation that admits an error in the text, if one only considers this particular problem in isolation from other epistemically relevant considerations. But if one considers the depth of ingression of inerrancy as well, then the rationality of preserving belief in inerrancy in one's noetic structure (as opposed to denying it and having to readjust a large part of one's structure) can justify suspending judgment or believing a harmonization.

There are many times I have prayed and not received an answer to my prayer. On many of those occasions I thought I had correctly claimed a promise of God. How do I harmonize this lack of an answer with the promises of Scripture? If I take a case on its own terms, I may judge that I was sincere, prayed scripturally, and this falsifies the promises of God to answer according to his word. However my belief in God's faithfulness is a deeply ingressed one. It is supported by the general evidence I have for Christian theism, past answers to prayers, and so on. If I give up my belief in God's faithfulness, I will have to seriously readjust my noetic structure. But this would be irrational for me, given the role that belief plays in my noetic structure, supporting and being supported by other beliefs.

So I am rationally justified either in harmonizing this unanswered prayer with my doctrine of God's faithfulness, or in suspending judgment. The rationality of belief in inerrancy, I suggest, is similarly justified. The defender of inerrancy is not being irrational in calling for suspension of judgment, etc. because of the depth of ingression of belief in inerrancy. At the very least, critics of the rationality of inerrancy should consider this before they criticize as irrational the various attempts to harmonize passages and the like.

4. Insights from the philosophy of science. In our culture, science has been held to be *the* paradigm of knowledge. Whether or not one agrees with this judgment, there can be no doubt that a vast amount of work has been done studying the history, epistemology, and ontology of science. Because science shares various methodological features with historical study, exegesis, and theology (all form and test hypotheses, for example), then insights from philosophy of science can be applied *rouutaris mutandis* to these latter fields of study.<sup>21</sup> Since this area of study is so massive, I can only state, without much proof, certain generally agreed upon principles in the philosophy of science relevant to the inerrancy debate.

First, it is generally agreed that the sort of inductive method Fuller assumes, enumerative induction, is not the major way scientists form and test hypotheses.<sup>22</sup> Laws are not empirical generalizations formed by taking

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one fact at a time. Laws and theories are formed in a variety of ways. There is no formalized psychology of discovery. Nevertheless, in forming a hypothesis it is best to start from clear cases or exemplars of the phenomenon to be explained. One does not start with borderline cases.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, scientific hypotheses are tested by a hypothetico-deductive method or abductively. In the former case, implications are deduced from an hypothesis and an attempt is made to falsify or, perhaps, confirm the hypothesis. In the latter case, a hypothesis is seen as a conceptual web or Gestalt that explains facts by fitting them into a coherent picture.

In either case, scientific testing and explanation involves testing particular cases against the backdrop of a hypothesis. Particular experiments are not judged in isolation from this general hypothesis nor in isolation from other experiments involving the same kind of phenomena.

Second, trends in the philosophical studies of language, perception, and science have tended to break down the observation/theory distinction.<sup>24</sup> do not agree with an absolute denial of the distinction for a variety of reasons that do not concern us here. Nevertheless, it does seem true that the fact/theory distinction is not always easy to make.<sup>25</sup> If this is granted, then the interplay between theory and fact becomes much more complex than Fuller pictures it in his treatment of Acts 7:14. The disconfirmation of a theory is generally a very complicated affair. It is *not* a simple matter of a crucial experiment that falsifies the theory. As Larry Laudan points out, the rationality of a theory is multifaceted.<sup>26</sup> It involves much more than the presence or absence of anomalies. The status, nature, weight, and quantity of anomalies defy a simple characterization. Conceptual problems internal to the theory are also relevant. The way the theory fits into rational beliefs (scientific, metaphysical, theological) is also a factor in judging the rationality of a theory. Further, the presence and nature of a rival paradigm is also relevant in judging the rationality of a theory.

In short, studies in the philosophy of science show that it is very difficult to characterize when it is no longer rational to believe a scientific theory in the presence of anomalies. Studies in the history of science confirm this conviction.<sup>27</sup> It is, then, very difficult to give a simple treatment to falsification, *ad hoc* hypotheses, crucial experiment, theoretical simplicity, and the like.<sup>28</sup>

Third, when scientists study some entity - a substance, property, relation, or event - they treat that entity as though it were a universal.<sup>29</sup> When

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scientists are trying to learn something about dogs by studying Fido, they do not study Fido *qua* particular, but *qua* example of a kind or member of a class. The experimental evidence from studying Fido is *not* evaluated in isolation from knowledge of other examples of that kind. Further, scientists reason from clear exemplars of the class of entity they are studying to problem or borderline cases.

These three features of science are very important clues for understanding the rationality of hypothesis formation, testing, and acceptance. Scientists can be rational in believing a hypothesis in the presence of anomalies by treating them as *alleged counter instances* rather than real counterinstances. This is true even if some anomaly - considered on its own - would more plausibly be understood as a refuting case of the hypothesis. The scientist is often within his epistemic rights to suspend judgment, use *ad hoc* hypotheses, and refuse to give up the hypothesis in the presence of what appears to be a well-confirmed counterexample.

Consider an example. A standard organic chemistry test by Morrison and Boyd discusses a certain kind of chemical reaction known as halohydrogenation. This kind of reaction was supposed always to happen in a certain way based on scientific theories explaining halohydrogenation. However, a clear, refuting counterexample was found which, if judged simply by the evidence for that case in isolation from the evidence for the hypothesis, provided a refutation of the hypothesis. But scientists suspended judgment on

this case and engaged in *ad hoc* harmonization attempts from 1869–1933. At that time they discovered a new, hitherto unknown factor which severed the counterexample from its class.

Why were they rational in doing this? Because the evidence for treating the counterexample as a real refutation had to be sufficiently strong to overturn the combined evidence from a variety of sources that the hypothesis was true. If the counterexample was judged on its own terms, various interpretations that harmonized it with the hypothesis would have been ruled out. But this is not the correct epistemic situation. The counterexample was a member of a class, and the evidence supporting the hypothesis from the rest of the class was relevant to the situation.

The same is true of inerrancy. As Warfield argued,<sup>30</sup> before I am rationally justified in believing that an alleged error is a real one, the evidence for this error must be sufficient to overturn all the evidence I have for the inerrancy of Scripture. Why? Because this problem text should not be rationally appraised *qua* particular but *qua* member of the class "Scripture." This is not theological dogmatism or presuppositional apologetics. This is a proper understanding of "induction" as it is used in any discipline which methodologically resembles science.

For example, in forming or testing the doctrine of the sinlessness of Christ or his diety, one does *not* rationally evaluate problem passages (cases of Jesus' anger, his lack of knowledge, etc.) in isolation from other considerations. Instead, one starts with clear cases ( 1 Peter 2:22), formulates a hypothesis, and uses the hypothesis and other cases in a rational appraisal of problem passages. This is a rational procedure, and this is what most defenders of inerrancy do.

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It may be instructive at this point to mention the problem of miracles. Theists argue that a particular miracle should be evaluated on its own terms and *not* in light of the general evidence from the majority of natural events in the flow of history. If this procedure is correct - and I think it is - does not this constitute one example of evidence evaluation which is just the opposite of the view I have been presenting?

No, it does not. In fact, the case of miracles further clarifies my argument. The theist does not exactly treat the miracle in its own terms. Rather, he argues that it is an *alleged* example of a new class, "supernatural event," and as such, it should be evaluated apart from the evidential support of an irrelevant class, "natural event." In other words, when the naturalist brings evidence to bear on the miracle from natural events, he is committing a category fallacy. The miracle *claims* to be an example of a *different* class and, thus, it should be investigated apart from the class "natural event" to keep from begging the question.

If errantists wish for passages like Acts 7:14 to be appraised independently from other texts or the doctrine of inerrancy, this is what they must do. They must sever the problem passage from the class "Scripture." That is, they must find independent reasons (to keep from begging the question) for why the problem passage should not be in the canon. If it can be sustained that this text at least *claims* to be non-canonical, by some criteria other than its status as an alleged error, it becomes severed from the class "Scripture." Then the combined evidence for the truthfulness of Scripture *would be* irrelevant to the problem text.

In sum, insights from the philosophy of science show that one can be rational in affirming inerrancy in the presence of a number of anomalies even if this involves suspending judgment or using *ad hoc* hypotheses. This activity can be rational because: 1) hypotheses are not formed or tested by enumerative induction (where cases are evaluated in their own terms) but by hypothetico-deduction or abduction (where the particular cases are judged against the backdrop of the hypothesis); 2) the fact/interpretation distinction, though a genuine one, is not always easy to draw; the rationality of theory change, therefore, is not a simple matter of falsification, but rather a very complex affair that defies simplistic treatment; and 3) problem cases are not treated *qua* particulars but *qua* members of a class and, thus, the evidence of this whole class must be overthrown before the case can rationally be judged as a falsifying instance of that class.

5. Criteria of knowledge. It could be objected that nowhere have I stated any criteria for knowing when there would be enough problems with inerrancy to justify giving it up. Thus, I cannot rationally claim to know that inerrancy is true.

I can only offer two brief but important responses. First, as has already been argued, there are no acceptable criteria in the philosophy of science that can be applied in a simple, algorithmic way to all or most cases of theory change in science. The simple fact is that the rationality of theory change is a very multifaceted affair. The same can be said of theological systems. No simple set of criteria can be given for when one theological construct should be given up and another believed. This is not to say that there are no cases where theological or scientific hypotheses should be abandoned. But

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determining *when* that point is reached and *how* one knows it has been reached is another matter. Theological constructs (first order or second order), Inerrancy included, are no different from scientific theories in this regard. So I can offer no adequate criteria for when inerrancy should be abandoned. But this is not surprising, nor is it because I am engaging in a special pleading. This is just the way it often is with hypotheses.

Second, as Roderick Chrisholm has pointed out,<sup>31</sup> there are many things one can know without having criteria for knowing them. If this were not the case, I would never know anything, since to know I would have to have criteria for knowledge. But to know my criteria, I would have to have criteria for my criteria. This *is* a vicious regress.<sup>32</sup> So I can know some things without giving criteria for knowing them or for falsifying them.

As an example, consider a puzzle from the ancient Greeks, known as the sorites problem.<sup>33</sup> Given a small heap of wheat, can I get a large heap by adding one grain? It seems not, for how could one go from a small to a large heap by merely adding one grain. But then it seems that one could add grains of wheat to a small heap and never reach a large heap.

Consider another puzzle. If one gradually changes the shade of a color from red to orange, can one tell when the color changes from red to orange? Probably not. But in the absence of such a criterion, how can I know when I see red or orange?

The problem with both puzzles is this: they assume that in the absence of clear criteria for borderline cases, one cannot have knowledge of clear cases. Without being able to judge when the heap becomes large, I can never know that it *is* large. Without being able to judge when the color changes to orange, I can never know that it is orange. But the fact is, I can know a large heap or an orange color even if I have no criteria.

I am not dismissing criteria altogether. Indeed, they are important in an overall theory of rationality. But I do not *need* criteria in *all* cases to know something.

In the case of inerrancy, the issue is complicated enough that I do not think one needs to give criteria for knowing when to believe errancy or to accept the falsification of inerrancy. It does not follow from this that it would never be rational to give up belief in inerrancy. It may. But giving criteria for this is not easy.

### Summary

I have tried to analyze the objection that it is no longer rational to believe that inerrancy is true. I have tried to meet this objection by clarifying what the objection is, and then by sketching and applying some important features of a theory of rationality. The reader may not agree with the arguments I have used. But

I hope enough has been said to show that the rationality of belief in general, and of inerrancy in particular, involves a number of complicated issues. If this is so, then critics of inerrancy should be cautious. A naive appeal to problem passages and "implausible" harmonizations simply does not capture the situation accurately.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Donald Dayton, "The Battle for the Bible Rages On," *TToday* 37 (1980) 79-84. Cf. B.B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1948) 169.

<sup>2</sup> For convenience, I will use "believe" and "accept" synonymously throughout this paper. This is most likely mistaken. See John Perry, "Belief and Acceptance," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy V: Studies in Epistemology* (ed. Peter French, Theodore Vehiling, Jr., and Howard Wettstein; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980) 533-42. Further, I shall use "rationality of inerrancy" for "rationality of the belief that inerrancy is true".

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Carl Hempel, *Philosophy of Natural Science* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966) 10-18; R. Harre, *The Philosophies of Science* (Oxford: University Press, 1972) 35-48. For a more technical treatment of induction and its justification, see Wesley Salmon, *The Foundation of Scientific Inference* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1966).

<sup>4</sup> See Dewey M. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 15-19, 175ff.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Fuller, *Hermeneutics* (Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1974) ix-22.

<sup>6</sup> Clark Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 59-60. See also p.76.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Phillips, "The Argument for Inerrancy: An Analysis," *JASA* 31 (1979) 86. See also Pinnock, *Principle* 231; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 639.

<sup>8</sup> Beegle, "Scripture" 159, 175-9.

<sup>9</sup> This seems to be assumed by Robert Gundry. See Robert Gundry, "A Response to Methodological Unorthodoxy," *JETS* 26 (1983) 95.

<sup>10</sup> For an ontological analysis of acts of knowing, see Dallas Willard, *Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> In the article cited above, Timothy Phillips is wrong when he says that foundationalism is the view embraced by all defenders of inerrancy. See Norman Geisler, "Inerrancy and Foundationalism," *BEPS* 3 (1980) 1-5. Even thinkers like Quine, Rorty, and Kuhn admit that there are beliefs closer to the periphery of one's web of belief which receive support from beliefs closer to the core of one's web. See James Cornman, "Foundational versus Nonfoundational Theories of Empirical Justification," *Essays on Knowledge and Justification* (ed. George Pappas and Marshall Swain; Cornell: University Press, 1978) 229-52.

<sup>12</sup> Alvin Plantinga, Reason and Belief in God, *Faith in Rationality* (ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) 16-93.

<sup>13</sup> See Roderick Chisholm, "A Version of Foundationalism," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy V: Studies in Epistemology* (ed. Peter French, Theodore Vehling, Jr., and Howard Wettstein; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980) 543-64.

<sup>14</sup> Plantinga, "Reason," 20-24.

<sup>15</sup> See Larry Wright, *Better Reasoning* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982) 47-105.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Larry Laudan, *Progress and Its Problems* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) 155-222; or see Laudan's more recent work, *Science and Values* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). I have argued against conceptual relativism elsewhere: cf. my "Kuhn's Epistemology: A Paradigm Afloat," *BEPS* (1981) 33-60.

<sup>17</sup> I use "prima facie justified" in John Pollock's sense. See his *Knowledge and Justification* (Princeton: University Press, 1974) 23-49.

<sup>18</sup> Thus, I do not believe the doctrine of inerrancy should be approached by a believer with what Van A. Harvey calls the morality of historical knowledge, viz., methodological skepticism. See Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (New York: Macmillan, 1966).

<sup>19</sup> Plantinga, "Reason," 50.

<sup>20</sup> See Geisler, "Inerrancy and Foundationalism," for an excellent discussion of this issue.

<sup>21</sup> See John Montgomery, "The Theologians Craft: A Discussion of Theory Formation and Theory Testing in Theology," *The Suicide of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1970) 267-313; Arthur Holmes, "Ordinary Language Analysis and Theological Method," *BETS* 11 (1968) 131-38; Norman L. Geisler, "Theological Method and Inerrancy: A Reply to Professor Holmes," *BETS* 11 (1968) 139-46; A. F. Holmes, "Reply to N. L. Geisler," *BETS* 11 (1968) 194-5; Paul Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," *Inerrancy* (ed. Norman L. Geisler; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 265-304.

<sup>22</sup> For a simple introduction to scientific methodology, see V. James Mannoia, *What is Science?* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. E. D. Hirsh (*Validity in Interpretation* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967 ]) for the application of this point to hermeneutics.

<sup>24</sup> See W. H. Newton-Smith *The Rationality of Science* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) 19-43.

<sup>25</sup> Theory independent facts do, however, exist and they ground the truth of our judgments. See Kevin Mulligan, Peter Simons, and Barry Smith, Truth Makers, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 44 (1984) 287-321.

<sup>26</sup> Laudan, *Progress* 1-120.

<sup>27</sup> See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970); Neal Gillespie, *Charles Darwin and the Problem of Creation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Stanley L. Jaki, *The Road of Science and the Ways to God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>28</sup> For a helpful treatment of ad hoc hypotheses in science, see Hempel, *Philosophy* 22-30.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. J.P. Moreland, *Universals, Qualities, and Quality-Instances: A Defense of Realism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985).

<sup>30</sup> See Warfield, *Inspiration* 169-75.

<sup>31</sup> Roderick Chisholm, *The Problem of Criterion* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1973).

<sup>32</sup> See Cornman, "Foundational".

<sup>33</sup> See Mas Black, "Reasoning with Loose Concepts," *Dialogue* 2 (1963) 1-12