The Dark Outskirts of Rationality: Contradictory Beliefs and Intuitions in International Politics

Prepared for ECPR Joint Sessions 2013 (Mainz, Germany)

Marcus Holmes, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Political Science
Fordham University
671 Faber Hall
441 East Fordham Road
Bronx, NY 10458

mholmes6@fordham.edu
Phone: 718-817-3969
Web: http://www.marcusholmes.com

DRAFT
Abstract

Rationalist models of purposeful decision-making typically abide by the general form of desire + belief = action. Determining an actor’s beliefs and desires is difficult and scholars often disagree on the sources of these motivations. One set of theories has turned to psychology, and in particular emotions, in an attempt to uncover the ways in which emotion can help to shape and strengthen beliefs. Some of this work establishes that emotions can fit within the rationalist paradigm, and need not be relegated only to irrational behaviors, by serving as a source of rational belief. In this paper I argue that this move is only warranted if actors really believe that their feelings and emotions are reasonable. As I will suggest, there is a range of behavior where it is difficult to see how this could be the case. Instead, I suggest that actors often find themselves torn between contradictory affective intuitions and rational beliefs. The result is often cases where rational beliefs are present but the resultant behavior is irrational. I apply Tamar Gendler’s work on the belief/alief distinction in order to make sense of this phenomenon and draw out conditions under which contradiction this is likely to occur. Finally, I demonstrate these dynamics in the logic of the security dilemma, both at the international and domestic levels of analysis.
The Dark Outskirts of Rationality

In this paper I investigate an area of international relations (IR) where rationality is compromised but not completely absent. These “dark outskirts of rationality” represent a puzzling landscape for IR scholars to navigate because what occurs there is decision-making that does not conform to expectations derived from economic models of rational choice, but also cannot be characterized by complete irrationality. Specifically, I am interested in situations where rational belief and irrational behavior are seemingly in conflict. Consider responses to terrorism and the so-called delusions that result in irrational expenditures in international and homeland security protection (Mueller and Stewart, 2012). Policymakers understand and believe the low probabilities of terrorist attacks, yet neglect those very probabilities when taking action and crafting policy. Similarly the logic of the security dilemma has long involved the role of rational belief among policymakers that increasing security may indeed exacerbate the unintentional escalation of hostilities, yet fear is understood to result in behavior that belies this belief (Bleiker and Hutchison, 2008).

In an attempt to study this territory, IR scholars have largely turned to emotions, such as fear, to understand the interplay between the affective and cognitive dimensions of decision-making. Much of this research has focused on explaining the source of beliefs and how they combine with desire to produce purposeful action, following the familiar rationalist general form of desire + belief = action (Fearon and Wendt, 2002; Herrmann, 2002). Thus there has been a focus on how “emotional beliefs,” for example, can affect behaviors such as persuasion, assessment of evidence, and so forth (Mercer, 2010). The assumption in much of this work is that actors really believe that their feelings are reasonable. In this way emotion is said to both constitute and strengthen beliefs in such a way that it produces certainty beyond any available evidence and influences what one desires (Mercer, 2010). Indeed, "feeling is believing because people use emotion as evidence" (Mercer, 2010). Much of the research that has followed in IR has continued this trajectory: emotions help to constitute beliefs and do not undermine, but rather enhance, rationality.

But what about cases where the actor does not actually believe that the feeling they experience is reasonable but nevertheless acts as if they do? In 2007 the Hualapai Tribe opened a skywalk over the Grand Canyon. The skywalk is a glass structure that is suspended over the canyon, 4,000 feet above the canyon floor. As the New York Times reported, visitors often feel a sense of dread when walking out on to the glass and feel a strong desire to retreat, often clutching the arms of those around them. As Tamar Gendler (2010; 2008) has persuasively argued, this is a case where the individuals experiencing

---

1 I am grateful to Jennifer Nagel for this turn of phrase. See:
2 There are of course ways to explain this type of irrational policy-making through a rationalist lens, such as policy-making as a response to demands from the domestic polity. I will address these interpretations later in the paper.
3 This formulation of explaining motivations and actions by appealing to desires and beliefs is rooted in the Humean understanding of practical reasoning.
the feeling of dread do not believe that they are unsafe. After all, who would willingly walk out onto a glass structure if they truly believed that it was unsafe? The emotional response here is invoking behavior that is not rational and the individual involved knows this to be the case. The emotion of fear here is not enhancing rationality but rather undermining it. It is not strengthening a belief of insecurity but rather creating some other type of belief-like mental state. This is a case where the rationalist equation fails us and turning to emotion is not much help. The belief of security and action representing insecurity are in conflict and emotion has served to create a desire to get off the skywalk as soon as possible. Put another way, feeling is definitely not believing. Thus we are in the dark outskirts of rationality where rational belief is present yet the resulting behavior looks irrational.

The reason IR has a tough time explaining these types of puzzling cases is because of the cognitive bias of emotions research. As I will argue below, the move to look at emotion to explore the roots of rational or irrational behavior is a welcomed one, but it has done so by privileging the cognitive aspects of emotion while downplaying the affective. This move is explainable in light of the trajectory of IR scholarship over the second half of the 20th century, particularly the behavioral and cognitive revolutions, but it has served to create an incomplete picture of the role of emotions in IR. We need a new framework for thinking about emotions in a way that does not privilege the affective or cognitive while providing an explanation for the seemingly contradictory beliefs and intuitions that can obtain when emotions are invoked. Put simply, we need a way of understanding how rational beliefs and seemingly irrational actions can co-exist. In what follows I develop a theory of intuitions and beliefs that utilize emotions in a new way. Instead of attempting to understand how emotions shape beliefs, I look at how emotions shape intuitions and how these intuitions may come into conflict with rational beliefs. In doing so I apply Tamar Gendler’s innovative framework of “alief” and belief to IR scholarship and create a new typology of aliefs, beliefs, emotions, and intuitions that help to make sense of cases where rationality and irrationality co-exist. I turn to Gendler’s work for two main reasons. First, introducing aliefs into the discussion help to provide a more comprehensive picture of decision-making, thus helping us to make sense of extant puzzles, while providing a useful simplifying distinction. Second, the work in philosophy of mind that Gendler draws on and adds to speaks directly to our debates regarding political motivations and emotions in IR. I suggest that taking seriously what philosophers make of these problems will help us to clarify these debates.

Below I briefly review the existing literature on intuitions and emotions, staking out the various approaches in IR to both and illustrating where this new perspective fits into the existing literature. I then introduce Gendler’s framework and suggest an application to IR in a way that creates a theory of contradictory intuitions and beliefs in international politics. I end with empirical and theoretical examples that represent thorny puzzles for IR scholars precisely because they exhibit this rationality-irrationality characteristic that, until now, has been difficult to navigate. Ultimately I suggest that this new perspective on aliefs and beliefs help to further flesh out the logic of the security dilemma both internationally, where policymakers believe that adding capabilities will
make them less secure though they do so anyway, and domestically in homeland security spending, where policymakers believe that adding security will increase domestic demand for security perfection yet similarly do so anyway.

**Intuitions: Dealing with Uncertainty**

“What is intuition all about” (Simon, 1983)? Herbert Simon asked this important question three decades ago and the answer continues to elude. Intuition plays an important role in daily life and has been the subject of much study in psychology and philosophy but has received relatively less overt attention in IR and economics. While emotion, certainly a component of many conceptualizations of intuition, has been studied significantly, intuition has not typically been invoked directly. This is likely because of the dominance of rational choice models that privilege reason and calculation based on available evidence or knowledge-based belief over feelings or other unobservables such as hunches or introspection. Also important is that intuition is often viewed pejoratively in decision-making as the source of bias or irrationality which has little place in rationalist models of behavior (McDermott, 2004b). After all, *homo economicus* is a rational cost-benefit calculating individual (Frantz, 2004), not one prone to gut reactions and decisions based on instincts.

Pinning down precisely what intuitions are is not an easy task. Robin Hogarth in *Educating Intuition* lists a number of characteristics, including the speed of knowing something, immediacy of cognition, absence of rational thought, knowing without knowing how you know, and also knowing without a conscious step-by-step process” (Frantz, 2004; Hogarth, 2001). John Locke offered similar insights when suggesting that intuition serves as the inspiration behind axioms (Frantz, 2004). “According to Locke, an intuition occurs when the mind perceives a relationship (or lack of one) between two ideas immediately, directly, and with a sense of certainty such that proof is not required” (Frantz, 2004). Roger Frantz provides the examples of the mathematical problem $2 + 2 = 4$ or a triangle having three sides. Reasoning or proof is not required for an individual to be certain of these relationships. On the other hand, reasoning “is the mind perceiving a relationship (or lack of) between two ideas indirectly, that is, using intermediate ideas in order to do so. Reason is thus ‘indirect intuition’” (Frantz, 2004).

Thinkers since Locke have expanded upon this conceptualization of intuition as a type of non-reasoning or pre-analytic mode of thinking. Joseph Schumpeter, for example, argues that intuition is a “pre-analytic cognitive act that supplies the raw material for the analytical effort” (Schumpeter and Schumpeter, 1954). Simon identifies intuition as a distinct model of decision-making, suggesting that individuals often can be unaware of the sub-conscious or non-logical processes that result in particular decisions but nevertheless be quite confident in those decisions. Others have identified the conditions under which the intuitive, rather than rational, satisficing, or normative models for example, is most likely to be utilized. These include: when high levels of uncertainty

---

4 I am indebted to Roger Frantz’ excellent review of the literature on intuitions for this section in (Frantz, 2004).
obtain, facts are limited or in dispute, and analytical data is of little use (Agor, 1986; Borkowski, 2009; Khatri and Ng, 2000). The efficacy of this type of decision-making remains mixed, with some arguing that expert intuition is often no better than random guessing, particularly when it involves making predictions about the future, a situation characterized by high levels of uncertainty and limited facts to use in the analysis (Tetlock, 2005).

A simple way of understanding these results is to view intuition as a type of heuristic that bypasses conscious rational thought processes. A familiar example of this work is found in Kahneman and Tversky’s research program in prospect theory. As Kahneman notes in his article version of the Nobel Prize lecture, “From its earliest days, the research that Tversky and I conducted was guided by the idea that intuitive judgments occupy a position – perhaps corresponding to evolutionary history – between the automatic operations of perception and the deliberate operations of reasoning” (Kahneman, 2003). The insight here is that conditions of uncertainty lead individuals to make decisions based on their natural assessments of the environment they are in and those assessments vary in their validity, in predictable ways, depending on the conditions. Put simply, intuition can lead individuals to make decisions that are at odds with what neoclassical economic models would predict.

More recently neuroscientists have tried to elucidate these distinctions between the various models of decision-making, including the conscious and the subconscious, in the brain. The first insight here is that intuition and rational decision-making are linked. As Antonio Damasio argues, “The strategies of human reason probably did not develop, in either evolution or any single individual, without the guiding force of the mechanisms of biological regulation, of which emotion and feeling are notable expressions” (Damasio, 1994, p. xii). This is not to say that all decisions are subject to reason, particularly in the sense that political scientists and economists use the term, of course. Damasio notes that rather than approaching decision-making with a blank slate, individuals bring feelings, emotions, and so forth to a decision, “marking” them with particular valences. These somatic markers “[force] attention on the… outcome and to which a given action may lead, and functions as an automated alarm signal which says: Beware of danger ahead if you choose the option which leads to this outcome… The automated signal protects against future losses, without much ado, and then allows you to choose among fewer alternatives” (ibid., 173). The result of this is that somatic markers help to screen alternatives in decision-making process which may allow for a more efficient process. Somatic markers may act subconsciously, affecting us in ways that are difficult to tap into and lead us to outcomes that may not involve reason processing. “This covert mechanism would be the source of what we call intuition, the mysterious mechanism by which we arrive at the solution of a problem without reasoning toward it” (ibid., 188).

In order to investigate the origins of this intuitive processing in the brain, neuroscientists looked at the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (VMPFC), an area associated with the processing of risk and fear in decision-making. The VMPFC is implicated heavily in Damasio’s framework, playing a role perhaps as the origin of somatic markers.
Individuals with damage to the VMPFC often exhibit normal IQ and memory test distribution compared to non-brain damaged individuals. Yet, they tend toward indecisiveness and making bad decisions, though are unaware of their flaws and often unable to modify their decision-making behavior when problems are pointed out by others (Bechara, Tranel & Damasio 2000). These types of decision-making problems are exemplified by a laboratory gambling tax developed by Bechara et al. (1994):

In the Bechara gambling task, a person gambles a hypothetical stake of money. On successive trials, the person makes a choice among four different options that offer probabilistic gains and losses. Two of the four options provide occasional large gains, but these gains are offset by frequent or large losses. The other two options provide smaller gains but less frequent or smaller losses. Optimal decision making in the gambling task requires that a person forego occasional large gains in order to accrue the small gains that are more profitable in the long run. VMPFC patients continually select the options that provide occasional, large short-term gains but that ultimately lead to long-term losses. Control participants quickly learn that the best long-term payoffs come from choosing the options with smaller short-term gains.

Further, participants in the control group developed hunches about what deck to choose from before they could formulate a reason for that hunch. One implication of this is that the VMPFC stores memories of past rewards and punishments, creating “response to current rewards and punishments which we call a hunch, or an intuition” (Frantz 18-19). A damaged VMPFC can lead to the lack of this intuitive ability and therefore lead to poorer decision-making.

Bringing the philosophical and neuroscientific insights together, a number of important points regarding “what intuition is all about” can be drawn. First, intuition represents the pre-analytical non-reasoning based “knowing without knowing how you know.” The epistemological status of this knowledge is debatable, but what seems relatively uncontroversial is that intuitions constitute belief-like mental states. These may be formed through complex emotional processes and play an important role in the decision-making process. Second, it also true that intuition is a part of rational reason-based decision-making. This does not imply that all intuitions result in optimal decisions, but, perhaps counter-intuitively, good rational decisions often have an intuitive component. Third, these distinctions between the intuitive and reason-based approaches have discrete areas of the brain associated with them; fine-grained analysis shows an important role of the VMPFC in mediating intuition and emotion.

Ultimately this analysis suggests that intuition is a mental state, similar but different to belief, with a large emotional component and can lead to both rational or irrational decisions. In the following section I investigate the relationship of intuition to
IR, paying particular attention to efforts to elucidate the precise role of emotions in constituting intuitions in decision-making. I will suggest that IR has reclaimed the cognitive role of emotions, but unlike psychological and neuroscientific approaches, has done so at the risk of minimizing the importance of the non-cognitive.

The Cognitive Bias of Emotions Research in IR

Research investigating the role of emotion in IR has flourished in recent years. After decades of either not including at all or marginalizing the utility of turning to emotions for explanation (Crawford, 2000), the field has gradually accepted that essential concepts of international politics practice and inquiry that have dominated the literature have large psychological components (Ross, 2006). Trust, credibility, risk, assurance, security, and so on, are either entirely psychological in nature or are affected by psychological processes such as emotion. Put another way, as Janice Gross Stein argues, “[these concepts] are not objective properties of the environment but a function of how an ally or adversary feels about and understands reality” (Stein, 2012). Therefore it makes sense that IR has turned away from assuming its central concepts are purely objective in nature and attempted to understand the processes by which subjective understandings about trust or insecurity, for instance, come to be. Emotions are central to this understanding since they give personal value, either positive or negative, to putatively objective realities on the ground (Stein, 2012).

The problem IR scholars have faced in studying emotion is that emotions are incredibly complex, with psychologists and neuroscientists alike still working out the details of what exactly they are and how they operate in the body. While we do know a number of important characteristics of emotions, such as the way “emotions influence beliefs” (Frijda and Mesquita, 2000), the important link rather than separation between cognition and emotion (Oatley, 1992), and the important role of automatic processing in the brain that produces preferences and behaviors such as habit (Hopf, 2010; Pouliot, 2008), the truth is that much of the specific role of emotions remains mysterious, not just to social scientists but natural scientists as well. Further, the problem is not simply about what they do but also about what they are. George Marcus in reviewing this literature concludes that emotion research is “rife with basic disagreements about crucial conceptual definitions” (Marcus, 2000). Mainly for this reason of process complexity and ontological ambiguity, emotions research in IR has been pulled in two directions on two different axes: epistemology/ontology and reduction/accession.

Some scholars have sought to bring in the utility of emotions by reducing these complex processing mechanisms to more simple abstract concepts that can be utilized in as variables. The virtue of this move is that it avoids getting lost in the complexities of how emotions work and in doing so allows scholars to get on with studying what they might mean for political outcomes. In response to this simplification, some scholars have tended toward the opposite, problematizing the very ontology of emotion and pointing out the virtues of embracing the complexity of a concept whose ontology is not entirely clear. The payoff here is that for those who go this route emotions do not lose the very thing that makes them distinctive: their complex and emergent properties. This is not to
suggest that one move is more productive of the other. Simplification and complex problematization both have their place, and indeed much of IR theory has progressed by following a similar trajectory of interdependent and parallel development of ideas.

One exemplar of the reductionist approach is Jon Mercer’s work on “emotional beliefs” (Mercer, 2010). Mercer suggests that the distinctions traditionally drawn between emotion, rationality and beliefs need be rethought as neuroscience continues to demonstrate the interconnectedness between cognition and emotion (McDermott, 2004a). Rationality and emotion are two sides of the same coin and therefore it makes little sense to separate the two as disconnected constructs. For Mercer this means that some beliefs may be formed or strengthened by their emotional content.

For instance, credibility is one of the critical constructs of IR I delineated above. Mercer argues that emotions and feelings such as trust/distrust, like/dislike, love/hate, and so forth, all influence the types of evidence individuals seek out and retain, and those that they discard, when assessing credibility (Mercer, 2010). As such the emotions serve as an “assimilation mechanism” that, when paired with cognitive biases such as the confirmation bias, help to explain why and how some actors are viewed credibly and others not. These credibility beliefs are further affected by risk assessment, which decades of research demonstrates is, itself, affected by emotion (Mercer, 2010). The upshot for Mercer is that emotions can both constitute and strengthen beliefs. Perhaps most importantly, these emotional beliefs are not to be read pejoratively; linking cognition with emotion helps to guard against the claim that emotion-based beliefs are simply irrational. Mercer overtly takes a reductionist approach for a justifiable reason: “Getting lost in the psychology of emotion is easy but avoidable” (Mercer, 2010). By sidestepping the complex psychology Mercer is able to distil an important idea that can be used in predictive and testable theory.

Further up the accession/reduction axis Andrew Ross theorizes emotions as unique human emergent experiences that constitute a particular mode of human agency. The need for theorization of emotion is not just that emotions are difficult to study because of their ephemeral nature, but also because they are difficult to place in the well-known material/ideational dualism that characterizes much of the IR field. One of the intriguing aspects of Ross’ characterization is the addition of affect that is not necessarily mediated by the type of cognitive processes Mercer focused on. As such emotion for Ross has the potential to affect cognition, as Mercer indicates, but also is part of an “an open, adaptable system” where affective excess, the unreflective or unconscious but nevertheless important and real affective experience, is a driving force of politics. For Ross this excess is not the realm of the mystical, but rather the realm of bodily performance that is difficult to pin down analytically and perhaps biologically, but nevertheless exists and produces important outcomes in the body. Perhaps most notably, while existing in the body these affective experiences can be felt in groups as well, as Ross demonstrates in the U.S. collective experience after 9/11. Put simply, emotion works by both affecting cognition and producing feelings that are in “excess” of cognition. In Bially Mattern’s reading of Ross, this is tantamount to constructing a theory
of emotion that makes them simply more than the sum of their parts and therefore adopts an explicitly anti-reductionist perspective (Bially Mattern, 2011).

While these examples illustrate variation on the reduction/accession axis, there is less variation among the epistemology/ontology axis. IR scholars have tended to address the question of emotions in international politics from what Bially Mattern calls an “epistemology first” perspective. Scholars look for “the site or force through which the emotional experience becomes known to those in its throes, and to researchers” (Bially Mattern, 2011). As Bially Mattern notes, a number of other significant recent works follow this move. Bleiker and Hutchison (2008) illustrate how visual media had a significant effect on strengthening emotional response after 9/11 and indeed likely shaped the response in ways that other media forms, such as text alone, could not. Jacques Hymans investigates the links between emotion and national identity with respect to nuclear decision-making in order to gain purchase on the thorny puzzle of why some, and only some, leaders seek nuclear weapons (Hymans, 2006). Similarly Karin Fierke in an excellent and synthetic book uses a complex understanding of emotion to investigate an under-studied action of international politics, self-sacrifice (Fierke, 2012).

Put simply, researchers in IR (and elsewhere) have tended to investigate what emotions, however conceptualized, can help to explain. These epistemology first perspectives characterize most of emotion scholarship in IR, whether focused on cognitive, affective, or socio-cultural perspectives (Bially Mattern, 2011). This move is justified through consideration of the complex and often opaque understanding of emotions’ ontology, as evidenced by the diverse approaches noted above. At the end of the day while scholars may be clear on the complexity of ontology, they need to make the emotion variable usable, and thus refocus attention, perhaps unwittingly, on epistemology.

The problem with this approach is that it is difficult to adopt epistemology without a firm stance on ontology. Bially Mattern puts the problem succinctly:

The heart of the problem is that it is impossible to adopt any epistemological analytic that does not also imply specific ontological foundations, which then tend to become reified in the theorizations and insights that follow. Hence, from biological analytics of emotion tend to arise accounts of world politics in which emotions appear as materially determined, naturally given forces... In other words, the pursuit of analytic clarity about the distinctive effects of emotion ironically ends up rendering emotion indistinguishable from other forces (Bially Mattern, 2011).

Breaking from this trend Bially Mattern attempts to situate emotions not in epistemology, but first in ontology. The ontological perspective here is one of practices, or competent performances, that bring with them certain meanings in given contexts. The upshot for grounding emotions in practice theory is that it allows for thinking about emotions in a way that does not reduce them to their constitutive parts, be it cognition or affect, but
instead focus on the moment of enactment, the moment in time where the “doer” of a practice is both experiencing the political process, understood broadly, as well as experiencing his or her own “existence as a being in the human world” (Bially Mattern, 2011). Understood this way we can begin to think about emotions as distinguishable from other forces in politics. For instance, grounding emotions in practice theory allows scholars to view emotions outside of the familiar levels-of-analysis paradigm. This refocuses emotions on the human body, on what Bially Mattern calls “the doing of being human,” and suggests a shift a way from “the individual” to social order writ large.

As the preceding analysis suggests and the following (representative though not exhaustive) table reflects, emotions research is complex and difficult, but certain approaches and perspectives have emerged in the literature over the last decade:

Table 1 – Typology of Emotions Research in IR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>epistemology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ontology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First, Bially Mattern is correct in arguing that the complexity in ontology has led to a focus on epistemology. This has had significant benefits as the literature has progressed to including emotional variables in a wide swath of areas of international politics, from nuclear politics (Stein, 2012) and generalized trust (Michel, 2012; Rathbun, 2011) to funding for homeland security (Mueller and Stewart, 2012). Second, there is also value in embracing the complexity of ontology since it can be argued that epistemology without a firm grasp of ontology leads to a muddied picture of international politics where forces and variables become indistinguishable from each other. In addition, research on emotions has problematized the notion that emotions are somehow
associated only with irrational, instinct-like gut reactions to stimuli. Rather than serving as the antithesis to cognition or rationality, this new wave of research finds a complex but interdependent relationship between emotion, cognition, and rationality. As Mercer states clearly, “Emotion is not irrational and neither are emotional beliefs.” Finally, a new “wave” of emotions research seems to be emerging that highlights the ontology-first perspective, attempting to understand emotions not just as variables that may affect other variables, but as discrete international practices in their own right.

While the problematization of emotion and embracing of its complex ontology has led to important insights such as these, significant problems remain. First, while the move to view emotion as part of rationality is welcomed, much of the literature has gone overboard in stating this relationship. Sometimes emotions do play a role in constructing beliefs that exhibit characteristics we would consider irrational. Put simply, while IR has progressed to a point where it is able to challenge the cognitive/affective divide and has move toward an understanding where both cognition and affect play a role in reasoning, it has done so with a bias toward cognition. As evidenced above, much of the research on emotions in IR has sought to rescue the cognitive from the grips of what was previously perceived to be the belief that emotion and irrationality are tied together. While this move is warranted it has gone too far. As I will suggest below, sometimes emotions are unreasonable and sometimes behavior, such as that based on emotion, is born out of irrational roots. In order to account for this range of activity emotion has in international politics, we need to broaden our conceptions of how mental states, be they rational beliefs or irrational intuitions, are formed.

Second, the complexity of emotions remains problematic. The problem with complexity here is not complexity in itself, indeed many of IR’s favorite variables are complex but can nevertheless the studied, measured, and so forth. The complexity with emotion lay in its ephemeral nature: that it tends to be unobservable except for its effects, difficult to define precisely what it is, and unclear that scholars mean the same thing when they invoke the concept. As Wendt has argued, “Ontology gets more controversial when it invokes unobservables” (Wendt, 1999). This has led to Bleiker and Hutchison to suggest that there are currently limits to the social scientific inquiry into emotions, leaving scholars with a major choice to make when they invoke emotions. Scholars can either accept the ambivalence in the study of emotions (and accept that knowledge about emotions in politics will necessarily be uncertain, immeasurable, and perhaps subjective), examine emotions through representations and communication (such as the visible effects of emotion), or broaden the perceptive and cognitive tools we use to understand emotional politics (such as in viewing emotions as a type of international practice, for example) (Bleiker and Hutchison, 2008).

There is another option, however. It is one that responds to these complexities in studying emotion by reducing it to a more simple conceptualization while also retaining an ontology-first perspective. This approach is represented in the lower-right hand corner of the above table. This may seem counter-intuitive since discussions of ontology are often about embracing the complexity of a concept or problematizing its constituent parts. However if one slightly revises the focus of the ontological question away from
“what are emotions?” to the subsequent question of “what are beliefs?” then we can gain significant insight into decision-making, and the role of intuitions therein, while bracketing the difficult ontological complexity of emotion.

**Introducing Aliefs and Belief-Discordant Behaviors**

The value of switching the ontological question to one of beliefs is that it allows us to concentrate on mental states that may exist together but may nevertheless be contradictory. As mentioned above, the difficulties with deciphering the precise relationship between emotion, intuition, belief, and behavior are many. First, the co-constitution of rationality and emotion make it difficult to pin down the source of any given belief or behavior. That is, if emotions and rationality are tied together, how can we know what work rationalist and cognition are doing relative to other processes, such as habit or instinct? Second, as suggested, scholars have tended to privilege the cognitive aspects of belief-formation when resolving this debate. As noted above, Mercer for example makes it clear that in his conceptualization emotional beliefs are not irrationally held. Those who argue that emotional beliefs can be irrational tend to view them dichotomously; that is, the belief is either irrational or it is not. This move is a function of not being able to sufficiently articulate what it is that emotion actually do and why they can end up producing rational beliefs in some cases but irrational beliefs in other cases.

Philosophers have recently taken up this challenge and have argued that we may be thinking about the links between emotion and belief in the wrong ways. They point out that rational belief and irrational behavior often co-exist together. In these instances the individual is feeling *both* the rational and irrational concurrently, in a type of belief-behavior mismatch. Tamar Gendler, a philosopher of mind, has attempted to clarify this concurrent relationship. In order to do so she invokes a modern version of a common thought experiment, the “problem of the precipice,” alluded to above and exemplified in a recent *New York Times* piece on the recently installed glass walkway over the Grand Canyon:

A visitor to these stark and imposing lands of the Hualapai Indians on the western rim of the Grand Canyon knows what sensation is being promised at the journey’s climax. After driving for a half-hour over bone-jolting dirt roads ... you take a shuttle bus from the parking lot .... You deposit all cameras at a security desk, slip on yellow surgical booties and stride out onto a horseshoe-shaped walkway with transparent sides and walls that extends 70 feet into space, seemingly unsupported.

Below the floor’s five layers of glass (protected from scratches by the booties) can be seen the cracked, sharp-edged rock face of the canyon’s rim and a drop of thousands of feet to the chasm below. The promise is the dizzying thrill of vertigo.
And indeed, last week some visitors to this steel-supported walkway anchored in rock felt precisely that. One woman, her left hand desperately grasping the 60-inch-high glass sides and the other clutching the arm of a patient security guard, didn’t dare move toward the transparent center of the walkway. The words imprinted on the $20 souvenir photographs taken of many venturesome souls herald completion of a daredevil stunt: “I did it!!!” (Rothstein, 2007)

As Gendler argues, few would find this story perplexing. The basic phenomenon of stepping out onto a platform that you are quite sure is safe inducing vertigo or fear is, in her words, familiar and unmysterious (Gendler, 2008). Yet it is also a quite problematic example of something like an “emotional belief.” The person who decides to walk out onto the Skywalk clearly believes, quite rationally, that they are safe. As Gendler argues, no one would willingly (of their own volition) step onto a platform that extends over a mile-high precipice if they were not quite certain that the activity was safe. On the other hand, and existing alongside this strong belief, is something very different occurring, a feeling of dread, an arguably irrational emotional response that has the content of something along the lines of: “Really high up, long long way down. Not a safe place to be! Get off!!” (Gendler, 2008). Thus, while on the Skywalk individuals are likely to believe that they are perfectly safe, they are also concurrently experiencing a mental state that is quite the opposite. Gendler terms this alternate mental state aliefe. While individuals on the walkway believe that they are safe, they aliefe something completely different.

This example is one of many that have been cataloged over decades of research. Paul Rozin’s work on “sympathetic magic” are particularly insightful here. For example, individuals will gladly eat a piece of chocolate that is in the shape of a square but not when it has been formed into the shape of dog feces. Similarly, individuals will not eat soup out of a brand-new bedpan or put a piece of rubber in the shape of vomit to their mouths (but they will when the rubber has been made in the shape of a sink stopper. As Gendler notes, the individuals do not believe that the bedpan is dirty or that the chemical composition of the chocolate has changed based on its shape, but they nevertheless show hesitation in acting upon these beliefs. “Although they believe that the items in question are harmless, they also aliefe something very different. The aliefe has roughly the following content: ‘Filthy object! Contaminated! Stay away!’”

Horror movie enthusiasts often experience similar reactions. Kendall Walton in “Fearing Fiction” relays the following scenario:

Charles is watching a horror movie about a terrible green slime. He cringes in his seat as the slime oozes slowly but relentlessly over the earth destroying everything in its path. Soon a greasy head emerges from the undulating mass, and two beady eyes roll around, finally fixing on the camera.
The slime, picking up speed, ooze on a new course straight towards the viewers. Charles emits a shriek and clutches desperately at his chair.

As Gendler notes, in this example clearly Charlie does not believe that he is in any kind of danger. The slime is not real, Charlie is in no danger, and he believes this. Yet, he is alieving something completely different, something along the lines of “Dangerous two-eyed creature heading toward me! H-e-l-p….! Activate fight or flight adrenaline now!” (Gendler, 2008).

In each of the examples the rational belief held by the subject is clear. The Grand Canyon walkway is safe, the chocolate in the shape of feces is edible, and the theater is not in danger of being invaded by slime. The subjects have no problem admitting that these claims are all true. Yet, when it comes to behavior, something is amiss. The behavior is not matching the belief.

While there are ways to give rational interpretations to these behaviors, none are particularly convincing. For instance, one may argue that the behavior reveals some type of uncertainty about the situation. Maybe the individual who walks out onto the Grand Canyon walkway is simply playing the odds, hoping that a low-probability outcome does not obtain. Yet this does not hold up to scrutiny. As Gendler points out, Charles does not leave the movie-theater thinking to himself that he was lucky not to have slime on him. The individual who will not eat chocolate as feces is not playing the probabilities that the researcher has tricked them into eating feces, indeed the same reaction obtains even if they consciously think to themselves that the feces is indeed chocolate. Put simply, it is hard to equate stepping onto the walkway with a version of Russian roulette.

Similarly, these are not cases of temporary forgetfulness of self-deception either. Individuals hesitating to eat the chocolate have not momentarily forgotten that it is not chocolate and it seems unlikely that individuals stepping onto the walkway have forgotten that it is safe. Indeed, as Gendler argues, if they had forgotten that it is safe then we would expect them to do perform an action that is much more dramatic, such as run off of it as quickly as possible. Self-deception may be a candidate here as well, but there is a problem of what the subject report. They have no problem endorsing the belief that runs contrary to their behavior. Therefore they are not convincing themselves that the walkway is not safe or that the chocolate is actually feces, indeed they consciously admit that these are not the cases.

What these examples illustrate for Gendler is the existence of a mental state that is belief-discordant. This particular mental state has representational-affective-behavioral content that includes feelings such as fear, habit, and so forth. The mental state is termed alief because it is “associative, action-generating, affect-laden, irrational, automatic, agnostic with respect to its content, shared with animals, and developmentally and conceptually antecedent to other cognitive attitudes.” The reason such a formulation is necessary is precisely because of the wide range of perplexing phenomena of belief-behavior discordance that would otherwise be unexplainable. As she argues, “either such
phenomena remain overlooked or misdescribed, or they seem to mandate such a radical 
reconceptualization of the relation between cognition and behavior that traditional 
notions like belief seem quaint and inadequate” (Gendler, 2008).

Finally, it is worth addressing why aliefs cannot simply be subsumed into belief, 
such that aliefs represent a type of belief. One reason for this is that beliefs, according to 
Gendler and Mercer alike, are propositional attitudes that involve acceptance. “To 
believe… that P is to regard P as true (in some way).” Alieving, on the other hand, does 
not require this condition. “Unlike belief… alief does not involve acceptance.” In order to 
illustrate this point Gendler cites a 1986 study by Paul Rozin where subjects saw “sugar 
poured into two bottles, and then applied labels of sugar and sodium cyanide, each to one 
of the bottles, making their own choice.” Even though the subjects applied the labels 
themselves, they “showed a reluctance to consume sugar from the cyanide labeled 
bottle.” Thus, similar to the example above, the subjects believed that the bottles 
contained sugar, but had an concurrent alief state with the content such as “cyanide, 
dangerous, avoid” attributed to the second bottle. Perhaps, however, the alief here is 
accepting that the substance is actually sodium cyanide and not sugar. Follow-up studies 
where the bottles are labeled “not sodium cyanide, not poison” produce a similar effect. 
This illustrates that while subjects believe both bottles are sugar, they cannot be accepting 
that one is sodium cyanide precisely because they were explicitly told it was not. What 
this demonstrates is that aliefs involve “the activation of an associative chain – and this is 
something that can happen regardless of the attitude that one bears to the content 
activating the associations.”

What this suggests is that there is a wide-ranging phenomenon of belief-
discordant behaviors that cannot be explained with traditional appeals to emotion or 
cognition alone. Indeed without a new conceptualization for these types of behaviors we 
are left with an inadequate way of thinking about very common occurrences in daily life 
and world politics. As Gendler argues, “In short, I will argue that if you want to take 
seriously how human minds really work, and you want to save belief, then you need to 
make conceptual room for the notion of alief.”

This formulation of belief and alief is quite useful for our purposes because it 
provides an alternate, and somewhat profound, way of thinking about the relationship 
between emotion, beliefs, and intuitions (see table 2).
Table 2 – Conceptualizations of Mental States Involved in Producing Action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intuition</th>
<th>Pre-analytical non-reasoning belief-like mental state</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>Proposition that is held to be true, though not necessarily intuitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alief</td>
<td>Belief-like mental state with associatively-linked content that is representational, affective and behavioral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>Subjective experience characterized by physiological change, biological reaction, and mental state formation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rather than viewing beliefs and behaviors in terms of being either rational or irrational, introducing aliefs allows us to understand how the two can co-exist and produce otherwise perplexing outcomes. This not only allows us to explain a wider range of phenomena but also to explore a critical, yet under-researched, aspect of political decision-making: intuitions. What the alief mental suggests is that individuals may, under certain conditions, hold mental states that are in direct contradiction with each other. Put another way, we can make an addition to the familiar belief + desire = action framework and amend it as alief + belief + desire = action. As I will suggest below, this implies the possibility of contradictory intuitions and beliefs.

Believing This and Alieving That: Contradictory Political Intuitions and Beliefs

The phenomenon I described above, where rational beliefs and irrational aliefs meet resulting in belief-discordant behaviors, is present in the political world just as it is present when walking above the Grand Canyon or eating feces-shaped chocolate in a university laboratory. In this section I want to draw attention to two areas of IR theory and practice that may benefit from understanding the ways in which these types of contradictory political intuitions may be present. In doing so I demonstrate how the belief/alief mismatch results in particular behaviors. First I demonstrate how the mismatch is present in the logic of the security dilemma at the international level and I then turn to an examination of its corollary in homeland security by examining probability neglect among policy-makers and illustrate the nature of this mental state conflict.

The security dilemma is perhaps the best known conjectures about how hostilities escalate and violence begins in IR theory (Jervis, 1978). While typically focused on the international level of analysis, it has also been used at the domestic and group level to explain ethnic conflict (Posen, 1993). The dilemma occurs because policymakers have to decide both whether military developments by others constitutes offense or defense and whether enhancing military capabilities at home will provoke others to do the same. This logic relies on anarchy, weapon indistinguishability, and fear. Since under anarchy states cannot be certain of the intentions of others and each method of approximating intentions is inherently imprecise, states, at least according to realists, are said to be fearful of each
other, fueling the dilemma. Indeed when states are relatively certain about the hostile intentions of others, then the dilemma ceases to be a dilemma and instead becomes a challenge of what to do about it (Schweller, 1996). Finally, as Robert Jervis has argued, eliminating the security dilemma is impossible. “The ideal solution for a status quo power would be to escape from the state of nature. But escape is impossible. The security dilemma cannot be abolished, it can only be ameliorated” (Jervis, 1976). Policymakers understanding the dynamics of the security dilemma may help to lessen its potency, but it cannot eliminate it.

Analyzing the security dilemma through the alief-belief mismatch illustrates how beliefs alone cannot explain behaviors. The source of the security dilemma seems to be an alief, or intuition, about the intentions of the other driven by fear. Unable to know the intentions of others states that find themselves in a dilemma are necessarily intuiting unclear intentions and reacting to them in fear. The dilemma is that the policymaker, by understanding how the security dilemma works, believes that they may be intuiting negative intentions because of the dynamics of the situation and by adding security he or she may be exacerbating the situation. Put simply, one believes that adding security may make the situation worse, but one alieves that it is the prudent strategy. This dynamic is famously in play in pre-war Britain in 1909 as the Parliament decides how to proceed in the escalation of hostilities with Germany. Sir Edward Grey, British Foreign Secretary, argues for the buildup of the navy while simultaneously understanding the ramifications:

Remember, in Germany there is apprehension with regard to our intentions. I am constantly told… that one of the reasons why German public opinion is apprehensive is the fear that we may be preparing an attack upon them – a most wild apprehension. But see how an increase of naval expenditure, how debates of this kind… must foster these ideas in the mind of the public… Deeply as I feel… the great evil of increased naval and military expenditure not only here but in Europe,… we must be prepared to defend our national existence.5

Just as one believes walking out on to the suspended walkway is safe yet the behavior is one that exhibits latent fears, so too does the security dilemma suggest that policymakers believe that they are contributing to insecurity as they build their own capabilities. Yet, precisely because of the latent existential affective fears that accompany these decisions, the alief is represented in the resulting behavior.

The underlying logic of status claims and legitimacy are relevant here as well. Status claims and status signaling can exacerbate the security dilemma through belief-behavior mismatch. Consider a “rising” China that is simultaneously sending signals that it seeks great power status in order to gain equal power as the United States with a fair say in international rule-making while also resisting attempts to pin it as a superpower in

5 (Grey, 1909)
order to shirk the costs of system stabilization through free-riding. Beliefs about China’s intentions, ambitions, and legitimacy of status claims are likely derived from interpretation of observable indicators, such as actions, discourse, and capabilities. Yet intuitions derived from beliefs regarding the same exact question will rely on the affective and representational under conditions of uncertainty.

A similar dynamic occurs in the security dilemma at the domestic level, particularly in terms of terrorism response and relates to the puzzle identified above regarding terrorism delusions and homeland security spending (Mueller and Stewart, 2012). Frank Harvey (2008) puts the problem succinctly:

The greater the financial costs, public sacrifice, and political capital invested in security, the higher the public’s expectations and corresponding standards for measuring performance, the more significant the public’s sense of insecurity after each failure, and, paradoxically, the higher the pressure on governments and citizens to sacrifice even more to achieve perfect security.

Thus very similar to the security dilemma on the international level, with homeland security a counter-intuitive thesis emerges: “[t]he more security you have, the more security you will need. Not because enhancing security makes terrorism more likely… but because enormous investments in security inevitably raise public expectations and amplify public outrage after subsequent failures” (Harvey, 2008).

Partly because of this problem, homeland security spending in response to terrorism often appears irrational. As John Mueller and Mark Stewart argue, “[A] key problem in much homeland security analysis is the tendency to take a selective approach to risk assessment, focusing almost exclusively on imagining hazard scenarios (mostly rather extreme ones) and then analyzing the prospective consequences” (Mueller and Stewart, 2011). What is often neglected in these analyses is the likelihood of the scenarios occurring. Gregory Treverton, risk analysis at the RAND Corporation, puts the problem of probability neglect clearly:

When I spoke about the terrorist threat, especially in the first years after 2001, I was often asked what people could do to protect their family and home. I usually responded by giving the analyst’s answer, what I labeled “the RAND answer.” Anyone’s probability of being killed by a terrorist today was essentially zero and would be tomorrow, barring a major discontinuity. So they should do nothing. It is not surprising

---

6 Similar arguments are made in the “risk society” literature, stressing the risk rejection that occurs in something like the homeland security apparatus (Beck, 2009; De Goede, 2012).
that the answer was hardly satisfying, and I did not regard it as such (Treverton, 2011).

Probability neglect is a prevalent form of risk aversion that manifests itself in a variety of ways, including focusing on worst-case scenarios, adding rather than multiplying probabilities, and inflating importance of potential terrorist targets, among others (Mueller and Stewart, 2011).

The problem of probability neglect, according to some stems from emotional, rather than rational, reasoning and decision-making. Cass Sunstein, for example, argues that probability neglect occurs when “emotions are intensely engaged” and “people’s attention is focused on the bad outcome itself, and they are inattentive to the fact that it is unlikely to occur” (Sunstein, 2003). Some have argued that when emotions are aroused we can expect sub-optimal decision-making with respect to assessing risk (Rottenstreich and Hsee, 2001). Bruce Schneier has suggested similarly that worst-case scenario thinking “involves imagining the worst possible outcome and then acting as if it were a certainty. It substitutes imagination for thinking, speculation for risk analysis, and fear for reason” (Schneier, 2010). As Mueller and Stewart and others have forcefully and convincingly argued, neglect of probabilities has resulted in a number of peculiarities or delusions when it comes to funding homeland security since it leads to analyzing funding based on only the benefit side of the cost-benefit equation (Holmes, 2009; Mueller and Stewart, 2011).

For instance, Mueller and Stewart argue that an overinflated risk outweighs the benefits of many counterterrorism initiatives. Put another way, they argue we are grossly overspending on homeland security expenditures relative to the safety our money is buying. “[T]errorism is a limited problem with limited consequences and... the reaction to it has been excessive, and even delusional” (Mueller and Stewart, 2012). For the U.S. to “break even” on its expenditures the U.S. would have to prevent or foil “333 very large attacks that would otherwise have been successful every year. That would be about one a day”(Mueller and Stewart, 2012). These cases of “delusion” drawn from the domestic, international, and invisible contexts and the responses to them are useful in demonstrating the tendency in homeland security to privilege response to threat while not paying enough attention to costs and actual risks. As Mueller and Stewart have argued, probability neglect due to strong emotional ties to homeland security may explain this behavior. The delusions and arguably irrational responses to them arguably exist because of the strong emotional pull of terrorism and homeland security.

This perspective, while intuitive, is not without its problems. If we assume for a moment that Mueller and Stewart are right about these delusions, an argument that is not without controversy, then a number of arguments follow from it. First, the temporal nature of threat and emotions leads to problematic predictions. If probability neglect is tied to emotional response and the valence of affect in response to terrorist attacks wanes over time, then conceivably we should see more rationality in homeland security spending as time since attack increases. As Mueller and Stewart document, however, the opposite is true. While there has not been a significant terrorist attack in the United States
since September 11, the spending has reflected just the opposite. From 2001 to 2011 the U.S. spent $360 billion on domestic homeland security spending, with the funding increasing on a yearly basis from $24.72 billion in 2001, to $72.51 billion in 2011 (Mueller and Stewart, 2011).

Just as with the security dilemma at the international level, policymakers are likely aware of this dynamic. They know that increasing security leads to greater feelings of insecurity among constituents. This is reflected in the ways in which policymakers discuss the homeland security spending process. In his Senate confirmation hearing, Department of Homeland Security Secretary, Michael Chertoff, claimed that the work of “DHS must base its work on priorities driven by risk.”7 Indeed, the Congressional Research Service in 2007 noted that the department has increasingly made sure that risk assessment has “influenced all of the department’s efforts intended to enhance our nation’s ability to prevent, respond to, and recover from future terrorist attacks and natural disasters.” The report goes on to outline the various ways that the department assesses risk and concludes that while clearly more work needs to be done, risk assessment methodologies have evolved within the department. Thus, while Mueller and Stewart might be right that there is an element of probability neglect occurring based on emotional response, there is a very rational and deliberate process occurring in parallel, further complicating this picture of pure neglect and delusion. Policymakers are in the uncomfortable position of understanding that it is not rational to address security threats without taking risk into account, but conducting that behavior anyway. Existing approaches cannot explain this puzzle with emotion, beliefs, or rationality alone since the outcome is discordant with the underlying rational belief.

Using Gendler’s typology, it is conceivable that policymakers believe that the probabilities do not suggest the type of spending that they engage in, yet they nevertheless believe something different, something along the lines of “we must be always taking steps to protect the homeland” or “my re-election chances hinge on protecting the homeland.” This type of content is likely partly emotional and partly habitual, but it is not rational precisely because they are aware of the security dilemma they are engaging in. Thus, it may be that policymakers and decision-makers are not delusional or bad at math. Nor are they simply creatures of emotion operating out of fear. Rather, they are rational beings who may believe one thing yet act differently.

Conclusion

This paper has had both broad and narrow goals. At the broadest level I have attempted to introduce Tamar Gendler’s recent work on aliefs and beliefs into the IR discourse. I argue that by incorporating the alief mental state into the familiar desire + belief = action model, IR scholars gain significantly more explanatory leverage by being able to make sense of instances where beliefs and behavior are discordant. I have illustrated cases where I believe this takes place, most notably the security dilemma at the

---

7 (Masse, 2007)
international level as well as the dilemma of homeland security spending at the domestic level.

More narrowly I have attempted to add to the burgeoning literature on emotion in international politics. By staking out the extant positions and perspectives I illustrate that there has been a bias toward cognitive theories and “saving” rationality when emotions are involved. This is understandable and expected given the dual traditions of viewing emotion pejoratively as it relates to rationality and the dominance of cognitive models in IR. More specifically I have constructed a theory that occupies the space devoted to adopting a reductionist and ontological approach. My focus here is on narrowing in on the concept of intuition in order to understand the ontological properties of the decision-making process.

Clearly there are challenges ahead in this research agenda. First, the ontological status of aliefs is really a philosophical position. We cannot yet see aliefs in the brain or delineate precise conditions under which aliefs materialize. As an unobservable, aliefs will perhaps always be in dispute. Therefore it becomes very important in future research to be clear on what a belief-only position would predict or help to explain while adding aliefs to the equation would predict something else entirely. Second, research into emotions in international politics remains in its relevant infancy. Scholars often reduce emotions to simple concepts not just because emotions are complex but also because psychologists and neuroscientists are not clear on precisely what they are. If the jury is still out for them, then perhaps simplification for the time being is warranted. Finally, empirically aliefs and beliefs are difficult to demonstrate, though ironically it may be that by complicating the picture makes it easier. While individuals make have difficulty precisely defining an emotion or feeling they experience in any given instance, they may be able to describe the contradictory impulses they feel in any given policy scenario. Contradiction between aliefs and beliefs, in other words, may be more empirically tenable than belief alone.
Bibliography


