

Rational People's Irrational Beliefs

In the middle of this brutal summer, with scorching heatwaves across Europe, Asia, and North America, it is poignant that so many believe that climate change is not real. Nearly 15% of Americans believe it is not real (Gounaridis & Newell, 2024), and among the members of the 118th US Congress, almost a quarter share this belief, who are all Republicans (So, 2024). Even more alarming, climate denial is just one example in a much broader, unsettling set of irrational beliefs, including but not limited to cases of superstitious, religious, political, and conspiratorial beliefs. The burning question is: Why do people obstinately hold onto irrational beliefs in the face of counterevidence?

When a belief fails to be sensitive to evidence as it should and is epistemically irrational (Bortolotti, 2010), it is likely influenced by non-evidential factors that do not bear on the truth of the belief. In the case of climate denial, the non-evidential factors may include the denier's anxiety over the catastrophic implications of climate change, her fondness for Trump whom she may take to be a climate denier as well, and her practical consideration that the belief solidifies her identity as a proud Republican. What is less clear is how exactly non-evidential factors contribute to the development of irrational beliefs.

Existing approaches often assume that non-evidential factors either distort the way the person collects and evaluates independent evidence or are taken by the person as evidence for her belief (Schleifer McCormick, 2020; Glüer & Wikforss, 2022; Simion, 2024; Flores, 2025).

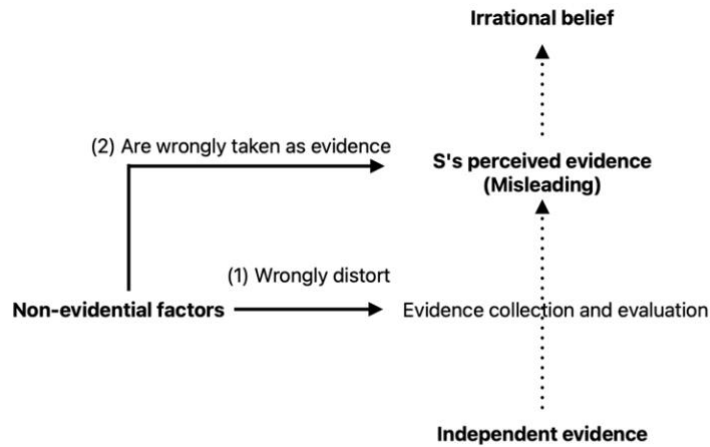


Figure 1. Existing approaches

While acknowledging that these irrational cases can occur, in this paper I will propose a new approach that does not presuppose such irrationalities and allows for the possibility that the person is clear-eyed about the conflict between her belief and independent evidence. According to this new approach, non-evidential factors may contribute to the formation and maintenance of a distinctive kind of seeming experience (also referred to as appearance, intuition, or impression). The climate denier’s anxiety over the catastrophic implications of climate change, her fondness for Trump, and her practical consideration may give rise to a very strong seeming that climate change is not real. A seeming itself is not a belief (Pryor, 2000; Huemer, 2001; Moretti, 2020; McAllister, 2023). But a strong seeming can, in various ways and degrees, compel belief. Specifically, a strong seeming that p may causally incline the person to believe that p (Nie, 2025), may make the person think or feel that it is justified to believe that p , and may make the person think or feel that she simply knows that p .

As a result, the person may find herself in an epistemically dilemmic situation: on the one hand, she faces and, to varying extents, recognises the independent evidence against her belief, but on the other hand, she experiences a strong seeming that compels the belief. No epistemic norm is easily available for one to resolve this tension (for an inverse case where the seeming is true and the independent evidence is false, see Williamson, 2025). What the person ultimately believes depends on a complex interaction between her seeming and her

consideration of the independent evidence. The interaction may differ from case to case. Whenever a false seeming prevails, the person will end up with an irrational belief in the face of counterevidence.

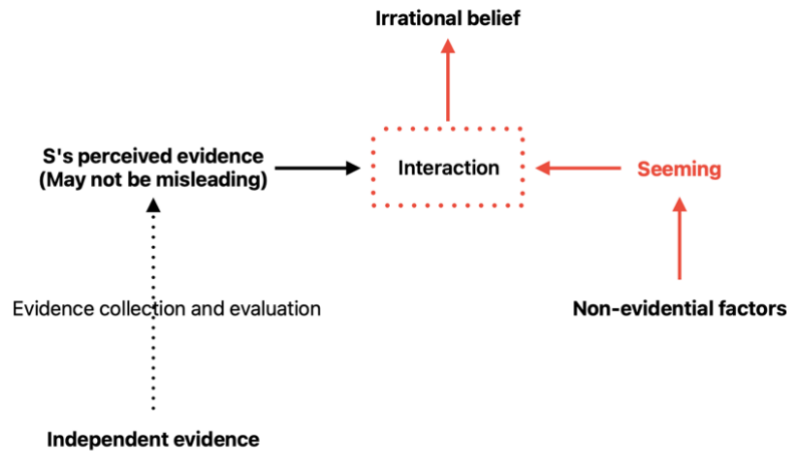


Figure 2. The new approach

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