

Socially Motivated Belief and Its Epistemic Discontents

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I

What might an ideal epistemic agent look like? The picture given to us by philosophers over time suggests something like an autonomous thinker who appropriately responds to her evidence wherever it may point. She would believe those things for which there are the best (epistemic) reasons and wouldn't simply believe on the basis of what is comfortable or what is popular. Thus, Descartes sought to rebuild his belief system from the foundations of only those beliefs of which he could be rationally certain. Socrates challenged the widely held philosophical and theological assumptions of his time, for which he was put to death. Mill enjoins us to follow the argument wherever it leads, even if it goes against commonly held opinion.

But for better or worse, we are not like this ideal thinker sketched by these philosophers. Overwhelmingly, the picture given to us by recent work in psychology and cognitive science suggests that we are biased creatures who often reason in self-serving and post-hoc ways (Stanovich 2021). Some have argued that such biases are a feature, not a bug, of our cognitive architecture. Thus Mercier and Sperber (2017) suggest that the function of reasoning is not to allow us, as solitary thinkers, to reach the truth. Rather, reason is like a *lawyer*: its function is to justify our beliefs (and actions) to others. However, this bias facilitates an elegant division of labor on their view. The myside bias allows our reasoning to stop once we have gathered enough good facts and arguments that support our view on some matter. Our interlocutors, who may be biased towards other views, can in turn search for good reasons for their side. And the truth emerges through a sort of critical engagement with one another's reasons. The analogy with the rationale for the modern legal system is straightforward: justice is meant to emerge out of a contest between the defense and the prosecution, set against the background institutions.

Now, it is a truism that we are social creatures. We rely on others for many of our needs, both material and psychological. But

our social nature also shapes our belief forming processes. We exhibit a *conformist bias*—that is, the tendency to believe what those in our community believe—and a *prestige bias*—the tendency to believe what high-status members of our community believe. On the face of it, these biases seem irrational, or at least unreliable as a means for getting at the truth. Neil Levy (2022) has recently argued that this appearance is deceiving. These processes reflect our rational incorporation of *higher-order* evidence. In general, the fact that others believe P is good evidence for P . To take some easy examples: the fact that others around you believe it’s 3pm is good reason to believe that it’s 3pm, even if you haven’t looked at a clock yourself. The fact that you think Tutto is a great spot for ramen in town is good reason for me to think so too, even if I haven’t been there. Prestige bias seems rational too. After all, high-status members of our community are high-status because they’ve done *something* right—thus we strive to emulate them, both in terms of behavior and belief (Storr 2021).

Building on the work of Henrich (2015) and others, Levy further argues that these processes of deference are essential to our success because they enable cultural evolution.¹ For example, a range of indigenous communities had developed context-specific knowledge about how to use materials from their environment for shelter, sustenance, and tool-making. Thus, Native American communities who consumed corn would prepare it with an alkali solution, which, as it turns out, releases niacin and prevents the disease pellagra. However, when asked why they did this, they’d typically refer to custom. The tendency to defer to custom thus enabled these communities to survive and to know how to prepare corn, even if they did not know the chemistry behind such techniques, which was discovered much later. Similar examples can be extracted from the Inuit in the Canadian Arctic and the Yandruwandha of the Australian Outback, both groups which flourished in extremely inhospitable environments by developing complex techniques that they passed on through successive generations.

Does this mean our beliefs—even insofar as they are formed through conformism and status-seeking—are off the hook? This, I think, is a hasty conclusion to draw and we can see this most clearly by reflecting on history. As Mill (1859, 23) warns us,

¹ See also: Henrich and Boyd (1998), Chudek et. al. (2012).

it is as evident in itself as any amount of argument can make it, that ages are no more infallible than individuals; every age having held many opinions which subsequent ages have deemed not only false but absurd; and it is as certain that many opinions, now general, will be rejected by future ages, as it is that many, once general, are rejected by the present.

Regardless of one's moral, religious, or political persuasion, one can accept that the past contains many horrific practices and atrocities. In groups, humans have practiced slavery, burned witches, conducted human sacrifice, and socially sanctioned mutilations of various kinds, ranging from foot-binding to infibulation. In the 20th century, the Nazis carried out the Holocaust and communist regimes in various parts of the world killed about a hundred million of their own people in total.² These practices and atrocities were undergirded and facilitated by *beliefs*—about the will of the gods, the progression of history, the proper role of women in society, and so on. Our conformist tendencies can lead to *groupthink* and have led us to a range of military and economic disasters (Sunstein 2019; Mackay 1980). And high-status members of society, from dictators to religious authorities to intellectuals of various stripes, have held a range of unfounded beliefs, such that blind deference to them would have led us astray.

II

As deeply social creatures, our beliefs are sometimes sensitive to social rewards and punishments. In recent work, Daniel Williams (2021a; 2021b) has made the case for this idea in detail. When it comes to certain matters, our beliefs are subject to *social scrutiny*. Within the communities that are important for our success—our professional circles, our religious congregations, etc.—it can be beneficial to express certain attitudes and costly to express others. These incentives affect our belief forming processes.

It might be thought that since others only have access to what we say, write, or outwardly express in some way, their scrutiny need not affect our *beliefs*—only our outward behavior. However, there are costs to believing one thing and saying another in this way

² See Pipes (2001).

(Funkhouser 2017; 2022). First, there is the possible cost of detection (others may be able to tell, via our facial expressions, verbal cues, etc., that we are being insincere), which may be high. Given that we have evolved sophisticated deception detection mechanisms, the risk of being caught can be non-negligible. Second, it can be psychologically taxing to constantly be on the lookout for who is around so that we can decide whether to express our actual beliefs. Third, it can also be generally taxing to maintain two narratives that we must selectively employ depending on who we're addressing. Furthermore, insofar as we want to view ourselves as honest people, saying one thing and believing another is likely to produce cognitive dissonance (cf. Festinger 1962).

So there is a sense in which our dishonesty hides itself from us, and we can even deceive ourselves (Trivers 2011). That is, we can engage in and endorse the conclusions of the sort of motivated or fallacious reasoning that we can readily detect as mistaken in other contexts. These mechanisms allow us to be mendacious without lying. As Nietzsche (1989, 137–38) remarks in the *Genealogy*:

Our educated people of today, our “good people,” do not tell lies—that is true; but that is *not* to their credit! A real lie, a genuine, resolute, “honest” lie...would be something far too potent for them: it would demand of them what one *may* not demand of them, that they should open their eyes to themselves, that they should know how to distinguish “true” and “false” in themselves. All they are capable of is a *dishonest* lie; whoever today accounts himself a “good man” is utterly incapable of confronting any matter except with *dishonest mendaciousness*—a mendaciousness that is abysmal but innocent, truehearted, blue-eyed, and virtuous.

Our tendencies to differentially assess the import of evidence depending on whether it yields conclusions friendly to our tribal identities have been brought out in several ways. Kahan et. al. (2017) for example find that even mathematically sophisticated individuals are likely to make basic statistical errors when doing so yields a friendly conclusion. Gampa et. al. (2019) obtain a similar result with respect to assessing the validity of arguments. Taber and Lodge (2006) find that people tend to be overly accommodating of confirming evidence and dismissive of contrary evidence when it

comes to political beliefs that are the subject of partisan disagreement.

Some have argued that such tribal beliefs played an important role in our evolutionary history (Tooby 2017). Our ancestors would have faced a strong need to build *coalitions*. But building a stable coalition is no easy task and requires reliable signals of loyalty. Loyalty can be elicited through various means, among which are rituals involving costly signals. However, one important mechanism is *belief*—particularly, beliefs that are unlikely to be shared by people outside the coalition. Interestingly, *absurd* beliefs can play this role better than easily verifiable practical or logical beliefs. If you believe that $2+2=4$ or that chairs are used for sitting, that doesn't tell me whether you're part of my coalition—anyone can believe that. But if you believe in specific supernatural or ideological claims, that can be a reliable basis on which to ascertain whether we are on the same team, so to speak.

III

What is the epistemic import of all this? In other words, suppose someone learns that the sorts of mechanisms mentioned above affect their belief forming processes—should that lead them to thereby worry about their justification for such beliefs? If so, exactly which beliefs should such etiological information cast doubt on?

Let me begin with an analogous argument that targets our moral beliefs, based on facts about the Darwinian process of evolution. Sharon Street (2006), among others, has argued that facts about our evolutionary past do not sit well with a certain interpretation of our moral beliefs. Thus, suppose there are mind independent moral facts. That is, there are facts of the form *murder is wrong*, *pleasure is good*, and so on, and moreover, they are true irrespective of what anyone believes. Just as the earth revolves around the sun regardless of what anyone thinks, murder is wrong regardless of what anyone thinks.

Now, we can reflect on how our basic evaluative dispositions—our tendencies to approve or disapprove of certain things—would have arisen in the evolutionary context. Certain dispositions would have been selected for because they conferred a survival advantage to those who had them. Thus, creatures sufficiently like us, who were not disposed to think they have special obligations towards their offspring, would not make it very far in the evolutionary arms

race. Likewise, certain attitudes towards fairness and reciprocation would also have been adaptive (Axelrod 1984). But note that evolutionary processes like these do not care about moral truth—what is selected for has to do with how many surviving offspring are left behind over successive generations, irrespective of where the moral truth lies. An example from Street’s original paper is helpful. Suppose you get into a sailboat at a random location with the intention of reaching Bermuda. But you have no compass. After a while, you hit land—how confident should you be that you have reached Bermuda? Presumably, not very confident at all, because the winds don’t care about taking you to Bermuda.

Street’s core worry is that evolution is not truth-tracking with respect to morality. If evolution somehow led us to the moral truth, it would be an accident. Analogously, the worry when it comes to our socially adaptive beliefs is that social pressures are not truth-tracking—at least not robustly so. The social influences that affect our belief formation have to do with facts like who is in our coalition, which contingent historical processes led to the specific coalitions that exist today, who has status, and so on. Like evolutionary processes, these dynamics do not care about the truth.

For Street, the problem with accepting the basic Darwinian story along with the view that there are mind independent moral truths is that it leads to mass moral skepticism. A process of belief formation that only accidentally leads to truth will not generate *knowledge*. Thus, if we want to preserve our sense that we know various moral truths, for example that murder is wrong, we must either reject the Darwinian story or reject the idea that moral truths are mind independent. Street opts for the latter: for her, moral truths are not mind independent, rather they are true in virtue of our evaluative attitudes (along with coherence constraints and non-normative facts about the world).

This type of view, on which moral truths are true at least partly in virtue of our evaluative attitudes, has enjoyed many defenders over the years. While there are important differences in the details, the basic idea is there for example in Korsgaard (1996), Smith (1994), and Schroeder (2007), among many others. Can an analogous view be used in defense of our tribal beliefs in general, so that they can constitute knowledge? The main problem with this strategy is that our tribal beliefs are not constrained to the normative domain—many of them seek to *describe* the world also. Views about the afterlife, the progression of history, the causes of crime, whether climate change is real, and so on are descriptive by almost

anyone's standards. And it's very difficult to maintain that such propositions are mind dependent. Can climate change be happening for me but not happening for you?

The other strategy to vindicate such beliefs is to say that despite initial appearances, the processes by which they are generated are indeed truth-tracking. This, for example, is the option defended by Derek Parfit in response to Street's challenge. "[J]ust as cheetahs were selected for their speed, and giraffes for their long necks," he says, "the particular feature for which we were selected was our ability to respond to reasons and to rational requirements" (Parfit 2011, 114). For Parfit, moral facts are facts about what we have reason to do, and we were selected to recognize these facts—just as we were selected to form (roughly) accurate beliefs about macroscopic objects. So, there is no problem in maintaining that moral facts are mind independent—i.e., this assumption need not lead to moral skepticism, according to Parfit, *pace* Street.

There is of course much more to be said about whether Parfit's strategy can succeed. But for our purposes: can the partisan make an analogous move? In particular, the partisan must claim that the process by which her beliefs are formed is not "off track" (cf. Kahane 2011), but rather tracks the truth. And moreover, it tracks the truth *despite* her individual Myside (and other) biases. This latter point is important to accommodate insofar as we don't want to posit radically different psychologies to out-group members, in a way that is not borne out by recent empirical work. Myside bias affects us all, not just the out-group (Stanovich 2021).

It might be thought that this project is a non-starter. How can belief forming processes tainted with Myside bias and in-group favoritism ever be truth-tracking? Plausibly, garbage in must yield garbage out. However, this is too quick. Suppose that I happen to defer to the Oracle, who, as it turns out, is a highly reliable testifier. But suppose that I am biased towards the Oracle in a range of ways—in the very ways that partisans apparently defer to their side. Now my epistemic state may leave some things to be desired—perhaps I lack *understanding* with respect to the issues where I defer to the Oracle. Nonetheless, my belief forming process seems to be truth-tracking because the Oracle is reliable. Insofar as the partisan can claim that their side is relevantly like the Oracle, it would seem they have a good response to the debunking style argument sketched above.

In past work, I have suggested some reasons to suspect that this form of response will face some important difficulties.³ First, at least within the U.S. context for instance, the issues that form the basis of partisan disagreement are *rationally orthogonal*. Thus, for example, if you know someone’s position on abortion and the minimum wage, you can predict, with reasonable accuracy, their views on guns, immigration, and climate change, among other things. But it seems that positions on these issues are orthogonal in the sense that the sorts of reasons that bear on, say, the abortion debate differ significantly from the sorts of reasons that bear on immigration policy. This raises a potential problem for the partisan—for not only must she claim that her side is reliable (like the Oracle) but also that the other side is *anti-reliable* with respect to a host of orthogonal issues. And while it is easy to model anti-reliability when it comes to a core mistaken assumption that has downstream epistemic effects, it is harder to explain how a group could be anti-reliable with respect to a large range of orthogonal issues (Joshi 2020).

Second, the sorts of social pressures that sustain coalitions, especially when it comes to core, identity-defining beliefs, are unlikely to lead to an epistemic environment where a representative set of the total relevant evidence is available to the group. Work on “hidden profiles” within group deliberation is instructive. In such settings, individuals are prone to avoid sharing information that is uniquely possessed by them, focusing instead on information that is common to the group as a whole (Sunstein and Hastie 2015). Groups deliberating with partial, biased subsets of information in this way are unlikely to be reliable in the way the Oracle is meant to be. In general, where there is social pressure to avoid sharing evidence against P , we should suspect that the evidence that makes its way to us about whether P is likely to be biased in favor of P (Joshi 2021; 2022b).

Analogously, imagine that an urn contains an unknown mixture of red and blue marbles. You draw 10 marbles from the top, without looking. It turns out that in your hand you have 8 blue and 2

³ See also Woodard (forthcoming) for a recent treatment of the moral and epistemic difficulties involved in justifying partisan deference.

red. This makes you reasonably confident that the urn contains more blue marbles than red. However, if you were then to learn that the red marbles have been weighted with iron filings and the jar has been shaken beforehand, this undermines your belief. It seems now that you should become less confident that the jar is majority blue, and perhaps even suspend judgment. In general, the fact that our evidence is not representative of the total, in some sense, provides at least a partial defeater for the relevant belief—for it makes it likely that there is *unpossessed* evidence out there that would defeat the belief (Ballantyne 2015; 2019).

This analysis is, as it were, focused on the “supply side” of evidence. In general, if suppliers are disincentivized from providing a certain good, they will supply less of it—and this applies to evidence as well. Our propensities for motivated reasoning and my-side bias also affect the “demand side,” however. Williams (2022) has recently argued that in cases where we derive utility from beliefs which comes apart from their truth, rationalization markets are created and sustained. The basic idea is that our beliefs are subject to a *rationalization constraint*—we hold beliefs for which we can produce satisfying reasons (read: rationalizations). This demand is met by vendors who produce the needed rationalizations—these vendors can include podcasters, newspapers, Youtubers, bloggers, and so on.

This point is important because it suggests another difficulty with the Oracle analogy. Suppose, for instance, there are multiple Oracles* out there. An Oracle* is a perceived authority about certain matters; however only the true Oracle is genuinely reliable. Now suppose I choose an Oracle* to defer to because I like the architecture of the temple that she works in. This process of deference again generates a debunking worry. For, the process by which I choose whom to defer to is off track, unrelated to the truth.

IV

What should we make of these worries? And how far do they extend? Which of our beliefs in particular are affected? One potential way to proceed is to note that in most cases, practical rationality requires having true beliefs and more broadly, maintaining belief forming dispositions that are truth conducive. Creatures who form inaccurate beliefs in general—about where the predators are, what is poisonous, and so on—are not likely to make it very far in the

evolutionary arms race. Furthermore, we have a suite of adaptations that enable us to be *epistemically vigilant*, so that we are not easily deceived by others who might want to take advantage of us (Mercier 2020; Sperber et al. 2010).

In general, then, it is helpful to our interests to believe the truth. It pays to believe truths about the location of one’s workplace, whether a storm is approaching, which neighborhood is suitable to live in, and so on. If we get things wrong on matters like this, we pay the price; we have “skin in the game.” Furthermore, we plausibly have belief forming dispositions to get at the truth even on matters where our interests aren’t directly affected. These dispositions are helpful in the long run though because it’s not always immediately obvious what sorts of facts will help us successfully navigate the world.

But the cost-benefit calculus shifts drastically when it comes to many political or ideological beliefs. In those cases, individuals do not pay the costs for being wrong. The costs of being wrong about these things are largely *externalized*; they accrue to the collective. Being wrong about climate change or the causes of crime is a nearly costless mistake for the individual, for two reasons. First, the individual usually does not have enough influence to change society’s course of action on matters like these. Second, insofar as society gets things wrong, the individual only pays a fraction of the total cost.⁴ The opposite is true when it comes to buying a house, for example. Thus, we should expect our vigilance to kick in most in these latter sorts of cases.

On the other hand, tribal beliefs are often the subject of intense scrutiny. Those around us often care about what sorts of religious, political, or ideological beliefs we have. In many cases, they are willing to reward or punish us based on what we believe about these matters. It then pays to have beliefs that are congruent with those of the communities most important to our prospects. In past times, this would have been people physically closest to us—the village or town, for example. In modern times, the reference network often consists of our professional or social circles, members of whom may be dispersed geographically.

Now we rarely, if ever, engage in such cost-benefit calculations explicitly. From the inside, deliberation about *whether to believe P* gives way to *whether P*. However, this leaves room for non-epistemic

⁴ For classic discussions of this point see Caplan (2001; 2008).

considerations to influence the ways in which we process or gather evidence, what sorts of evidence we think of as relevant, and so on. Very roughly, *homo economicus* can operate in the background in optimally irrational ways (Page 2022) and exert virtual control (Pettit 1995).

These observations suggest a heuristic (Joshi 2022a). We should be epistemically suspicious of our beliefs for which: (i) the cost of being wrong is negligible; (ii) our communities scrutinize where we stand with respect to the content of the belief, differentially imposing costs or benefits depending on our stance; and (iii) the belief isn't easily verifiable or obvious a priori. Condition (iii) is important for meeting the rationalization constraint. We want to be able to give reasons for our beliefs, and when it comes to claims for which we can't find rationalizations they're going to be difficult to hold on to. Thus, compare the claim that $2+2=5$ versus the notion that *X is the main cause of income inequality*. The former is going to be hard to rationalize. On the other hand, the latter will be rationalizable for a range of values for X even if the resulting claim is false. This can be done by overemphasizing certain historical observations, overweighting the import of some partial causes while underweighting others, selective demands for rigor, and so on.

The sort of debunking worry sketched here, namely that off track social influences affect our belief formation, is therefore circumscribed. It need not give way to global skepticism. That said, further work is needed to explore how debunking worries in this tribal domain interact with worries about moral beliefs generally. Hanno Sauer (2021), for example, has argued recently that some of the considerations marshalled earlier in this essay undermine the epistemic quality of moral judgments more generally, suggesting that we should opt for a moderate "moral abolitionism." That said, it remains an open research question whether we can say something in favor of widely shared moral judgments like the judgment that murder is wrong, or that one ought not to steal, that we may not be able to say about more narrowly tribal beliefs.

V

As deeply social, tribal, coalition-building creatures, we tend to form beliefs in a way that's often influenced by reputational pressures within our communities. On the face of it, such pressures seem "off track" in just the sort of way that motivates debunking

worries in a range of domains within philosophy. A potential response here is that depending on which community we choose, our deference to in-group members may not be off track. In this paper, I have gestured at some reasons to think that such a response is hard to sustain given the psychological nature of our deference and the dynamics of group deliberation. Of course, the generic recommendation that we check our biases is unhelpful. Motivated reasoning has a way of hiding itself from us. To that end, I propose a heuristic that might help us home in on beliefs where the cost-benefit calculus of holding them is divorced from their truth—it is here that the debunking worry hits hardest. More needs to be said, however, regarding just where the worry might stop, and to what extent our moral beliefs more broadly are immune from it.

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