White 2010: You Just Believe that Because...
Schoenfield 2017, Meditations on Beliefs Formed Arbitrarily

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No class next week! (Oct. 10)

I. Overview

A variety of our beliefs seem to be subject to *arbitrary influences*.

≈ they were formed via a process which, "beforehand"(?), we had no reason to expect to lead to the truth.

Eg political, religious, cultural, and some moral beliefs.

The Question: Does realizing this pose a distinctive[1] skeptical threat to such beliefs, i.e. put pressure on us to reduce confidence in them?

[1] Over and above the problems of disagreement and generic skepticism.

White 2010: no distinctive threat. When we try to pinpoint it, reduces to disagreement, generic skepticism, or difficult issues around internalism/externalism.

Schoenfield 2017: Sometimes we find ourselves *doubting* our beliefs. Paradigmatic arbitrarily-influenced beliefs are distinctive because we can't recover them from the perspective of doubt. BUT:
1) This doesn't force us to abandon them.
2) Adopting the perspective of doubt is itself an *a*rational process.

Provided we take the right *kind* of perspective of doubt

Me: Suspect (sorry Roger) there *is* a distinctive threat in many (not all) cases. And (sorry Miriam) doubtful that adopting the perspective of doubt is an arational (vs. *ir*rational) process.

White 2010

"Why do you believe that?" can be asking about *justifying* or *explanatory* reasons. When does reflection on the latter put pressure on our beliefs?

Example: Cohen's choice of grad school. If went to Oxford, would've believed P, if went to Harvard, would've believed $\neg P$. Went to Oxford; came to believe P.

Two ways in which such a story could debunk a belief:

· *Undermining debunker:* initially belief is justified, but learning of truth of genealogy leads you to no longer be justified.

E.g. believe wall is red; then learn is bathed in red light, so could be white.

· *Blocking debunker:* truth of genealogy (regardless of whether you know about it) undermines your justification to begin with.

E.g. only believe the wall is red because a hypnotist induced that belief.

Two cases:

· **Correlation:** The Cohen case as above, where belief in P correlated with Oxford/Harvard.

- **No Correlation:** 50% of philosophers believe P, 50% believe $\neg P$, with no discernible pattern.

Is skeptical threat greater in first case than in second?
White (2010!) is doubtful, but says it deserves a closer look.

Is the fact that Cohen's belief in P was *inevitable* the problem?

Inevitability in general isn't a problem. E.g. belief that 1+1 = 2.

Insensitivity: if P were false, you'd still believe it.

Is the problem with Cohen's belief that it's *insensitive*?

- *Every* false belief is insensitive, so since justified beliefs can be false, this can't suffice to be a blocking debunker.
- Perhaps undermining debunker? Then need different principle:

Truth Sensitivity: If you're justified in believing that you'd believe P even if P were false, then you're not justified in believing P.

- Problem: this leads to general skepticism!
- Consider a case where you have overwhelming evidence that the defendant is guilty. The only way he could be innocent is if this was part of an elaborate conspiracy which generated all this evidence of his guilt. You're justified in believing he's guilty.
- But you know that if he were *innocent*, it would have to be because of a conspiracy—in which case you'd still believe he's guilty. So if Truth Sensitivity were true, your belief *wouldn't* be justified. Since it *is* justified, Truth Sensitivity must be false.

Different tack? Not about sensitivity but relevance: perhaps what's bad about Cohen's case is that the truth of P isn't needed in explaining how he came to his belief.
$\rightarrow$ That's not an issue in general (believe Hume born in 1711 because read it in a book), but maybe think about *ultimate/complete* explanations?

Explanatory Relevance: If I'm justified in believing that the ultimate explanation of my belief makes no reference to whether P, then my belief in P is not justified.

Two problems:

- Implies that beliefs about the future are never justified.
- If someone is justified in believing in God, how could they come to justifiably believe that the ultimate explanation of their belief makes no reference to God?

White: the intuitive thought behind Truth Sensitivity and Explanatory Relevance is the **gas gauge case**.

Note: sometimes appeal to *inevitability* of the relevant belief; other times appeal to *chanciness* of relevant belief. Clearly *both* can't be sufficient for undermining. So be suspicious...

If you believe P and P is false, then if P were false, you'd still believe it!

Generalizes. Suppose you're justified in believing something—*anything*—P. Then you're justified in believing $D = P$, *or you don't believe P*. If D were false, then *not-P* and *you believe P* are true. Since you believe P, you also believe D. Thus: if D were false, you'd still believe it! You can do this reasoning, so you *know* that your belief in D is not sensitive. If Truth Sensitivity is true, this implies it's not justified after all.

Why is it written in the book?

Does the antecedent give us an *independent* lever on your belief?

Gauge points to F so you infer that tank is full. Then realize that it's stuck, so would point there regardless.

But there's an important disanalogy. The fact that that Cohen *believes P* is not his evidence for *P*, so showing that he would believe it regardless (his belief is "stuck" on *P*) doesn't debunk in the same way.

[[Stuff on evolution. Upshots:

· Selection effects explain consensus, so remove boost we get from consensus (Adam's party), but don't straightforwardly explain individual beliefs.

· Maybe perception on *slightly* better footing, but even before understood evolutionary explanation, was on good footing!]]

A diagnosis

Learning explanatory reasons can *sometimes* undermine beliefs.

> **Coin in Head:** You do apparently sophisticated moral reasoning about a variety of actions. Neurosurgeons poke around while you do, and discover there's a black box with a coin in it; whenever the coin lands heads, you think the action is permissible; when tails, you think impermissible. When they turn the coin over, you rethink your reasoning and come to the opposite conclusion.

Clearly should give up beliefs. What's doing the work here?

White: the "coin in the head" process is evidence that we're not really doing any moral *reasoning* at all.

Blocking debunker.

So how could it matter whether the coin is actually in your head or not? Suppose Cohen flipped a coin to determine which grad school to go to; is that case analogous?

Careful. The details of the causal role of the coin matter.

Compare: I'll flip a coin; if it lands heads, I'll hypnotize you to believe that Biden is secretly a lizard; if tails, I'll leave you alone. It lands tails.

Does this undermine your belief that Biden's not a lizard? No.

So maybe if the debunking story *undermines your reason to think you're reasoning properly*, it should undermine your belief.
→ But this is just the problem of disagreement!

Q: Is that right?

We said "just the problem of disagreement" ≈ same reasons for doubt in Correlation and No Correlation cases.
But there *does* seem to be a difference that makes the Correlation case more analogous to Coin in Head.

For simplicity suppose he knew Correlation beforehand.

Proposal:
1) Cohen must initially think his later beliefs will be overconfident.
→ Like Coin in Head, must think he'll do *bad* reasoning.
2) So if he's gotten no defeater for that initial expectation, then his later self *should* still think he's overconfident.

In contrast: if he knew No Correlation, he wouldn't need to think that.

⇒ On pain of akrasia, his later self should lower his confidence.

Why (1)?

Let R be the initial rational credences, R^+ be the later ones. Let d be the claim that the analytic/synthetic distinction is legitimate.

For simplicity,[2] assume no relevant information loss: if p is relevant to d, then if $R(p) = 1$, then $R^+(p) = 1$.

> [2] We can force R^+ to have no info loss by stipulating it to be 'the credences that would be rational had he lost no info'. So defined, R still defers to R^+.

Most theories of rationality entail:

> **Reflection:** Your initial beliefs should match your best estimate of your rational, more-informed future beliefs.
> I.e. if you should estimate that, on average (across possibilities), $R^+(p) = t$, then you should currently have credence t.

> If $\mathbb{E}_R(R^+(p)) = \sum_t R(R^+(p) = t) \cdot t$, then $R(p) = \mathbb{E}_R(R^+(p))$.

Cohen's initially rational to be unsure of d: $R(d) = 0.5$. This is true even after he decides to go to Oxford.

> If it weren't, then whether he does to Oxford or Harvard would itself be evidence about d; we assumed it's not.

Reflection $\Rightarrow$ After he decides to go to Oxford, his initial best estimate for his future, *rational* credence in d must equal 0.5.

Let C^+ be his future, *actual* credence function. By known Correlation, he should initially be confident that $C^+(d)$ will be high.

> $R(C^+(d) = hi) = hi$.
> Notice: in No Correlation, this step is where the reasoning fails.

$\Rightarrow$ He should initially be confident that his future self will be more confident than that self *should* be.

> $R(R^+(d) << C^+(d)) = hi$.

Why (2)?

If things have played out as predicted, this initial confidence should not have been defeated: he still *should* (whether or not he *is*) be confident that he's overconfident of d.

> $R^+(R^+(d) << C^+(d)) = hi$

If so, on pain of akrasia, he *should* lower his credence in d.

Q: What do people think?

> And insofar as he worries that things have played out as predicted, his actual credences C^+ will assign weight to $R^+(d) << C^+(d)$, and he will *in fact* feel pressure to become less confident.

· Works best when people have well-defined rational priors. Harder with evolution or (maybe) religion.
· Reflection principle can be denied, but requires extreme subtlety to do so without saying it's rational to update in ways that license Dutch books, expected losses in accuracy, etc.
· Does it make a difference if Cohen didn't/couldn't know Correlation *beforehand*?

> Can we just re-run the argument with $\widehat{R}$ = *the rational credence if he'd been informed about Correlation*, and $\widehat{R}^+$?

· White says to focus on the person who has *in fact* been rational, so $C^+ = R^+$. Still, the fact that $R^+(R^+(d) << C^+(d))$ is higher in Correlation than No Correlation arguably implies that $R^+(d)$ is lower in former than latter.

Schoenfield 2017

Trying to address someone who's worried about arbitrary influences from the first-person perspective.

> So not directly concerned with questions of rationality; Right-Reasons-esque views don't help

Regard future belief as formed arbitrarily if treat it as independent of *p*.

Avoiding arbitrary beliefs.

Suppose $C(p) = 0.5$.

Why—from considerations of *accuracy*—should you prefer not to form a belief arbitrarily?

- Reasonable ways of measuring accuracy are *immodest*: a particular credence function π will regard itself as more accurate than any other particular credence function δ.

- So conditional on your future self believing *p*, you expect being 0.5 is more accurate than believing.

  E.g. *Brier score* measures squared distance to truth. Given C^+ *believes p*, *C* expects 0.5 to have inaccuracy:

  $$0.5 \cdot (0.5 - 1)^2 + 0.5 \cdot (0.5 - 0)^2 = 0.25$$

  Meanwhile, *C* expects C^+ to be more inaccurate. Eg if $C^+(p) = 0.6$, then it expects it to have:

  $$0.5 \cdot (0.6 - 1)^2 + 0.5 \cdot (0.6 - 0)^2 = 0.5 \cdot (0.16) + 0.5(0.36) = 0.26$$

- Similar reasoning works if C^+ *believes* $\neg p$.
  $\Rightarrow$ So *C* expects C^+ to be less accurate than itself.

Arbitrariness? Meh.

But there are *other* ways to be unsure about *p*. You can *lack an opinion* about *p*, meaning:

- $C(p) \not> C(\neg p)$, and
- $C(p) \not< C(\neg p)$, and
- $C(p) \neq C(\neg p)$

Instead, your opinion about *p* might be best represented by an *imprecise* state of $C(p) = [0.2, 0.8]$. $[0.2, 0.8]$ is your *representor*.

Schoenfield argues that if $C(p) = [0.2, 0.8]$, then you do *not* expect your state to be more accurate than any $c \in [0.2, 0.8]$, e.g. $c = 0.6$.

$\Rightarrow$ If you lack an opinion about *p*, you *don't* have accuracy-based reasons to avoid 'plumping' for a belief (say, $C(p) = 0.6$) arbitrarily.

The perspective of doubt.

Sometimes we find ourselves doubting a particular belief—being unwilling to rely on it (and perhaps related beliefs) in our reasoning. The question that presses on us is whether we can *recover* that belief from the perspective of doubt.

Sometimes we can, e.g. your belief that you turned the stove off.

Other times we can't. This is a feature of paradigm arbitrary beliefs: when you doubt your (say) political beliefs, you realize that large networks of supporting beliefs were *also* induced by the same process, so you (usually) aren't willing to rely on them.

Thus, in the perspective of doubt, what to do?
→ If you enter the perspective of $C(p) = 0.5$, accuracy will lead you to want to *avoid* your original belief.
→ But if—as it more common—you enter the perspective of *lacking an opinion*, e.g. $C(p) = [0.3, 0.7]$, then although you can't recover your belief, accuracy doesn't *prevent* you from returning to it.

So you can acknowledge its arbitrariness, and still return to it.

Is this (a)rational?
Schoenfield thinks adopting the perspective of doubt is an *a*rational process—it just happens to us, sometimes.

I assume this entails it's not rationally evaluable.

But surely it *is* rationally evaluable!

· Fact: If you believe p (say, $C(p) = 0.7$) and then you enter a lacking-opinion perspective of doubt (say, $C(p) = [0.4, 0.7]$), then Miriam's argument licenses you in coming out believing $\neg p$.

Eg $C(p) = 0.4$

· So consider Motivated Morris, who is strongly motivated to believe he's popular (p). He often gets evidence that he's *not* popular, pushing his credence below 0.5. But whenever he does, he (involuntarily, say) adopts the perspective of doubt, and shortly after that re-adopts the beliefs that p.
→ Morris seems like a paradigmatic case of irrationality, in the form of *motivated reasoning*.

This is not too distant from what the empirical literature on motivated reasoning suggests, e.g. Kunda 1990; Ditto and Lopez 1992.

· **Diagnosis:** Consider your opinions *before* you enter the perspective of doubt—say, $C(p) = 0.7$.
Following Schoenfield, suppose you think 0.7 is not expectedly more accurate than $C'(p) = [0.4, 0.7]$. Still, you *do* think 0.7 is more accurate than $C''(p) = 0.4$.
And you know that *if* you adopt C', you *might* then adopt C''. So adopting C' is, indirectly, a belief gamble.

[Awkward aside: a version of this objection might apply to *my* favored approach to arbitrary influences...]

Insofar as expected accuracy explains why belief gambles are irrational, it seems that is *also* implies that adopting the perspective of doubt is irrational.

References

Ditto, Peter H and Lopez, David F, 1992. 'Motivated skepticism: Use of differential decision criteria for preferred and nonpreferred conclusions.' *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 63(4):568.

Kunda, Ziva, 1990. 'The case for motivated reasoning'. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108(3):480–498.