

14. Siegel 2019: The Problem of Culturally Normal Belief

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PHIL 1460
March 8, 2021

I. The problem

Siegel focuses on the **problem of culturally normal belief**—the fact that people casually and unreflectively pick up beliefs from their social milieu.

Example: Whit. Teenager, grown up in a small, predominantly White town. Knows only White people. Through peers and culture has picked up racialized presumption/belief *P*.

E.g. maybe he associates “danger” with Black people.

Q: What, epistemically, should we say about Whit’s belief?

- On the one hand, it seems like it may be an instance of the generally epistemically innocent practice of learning from our upbringing.
- On the other, it seems that this belief has an epistemically (and morally¹) bad basis.

E.g. learning which foods to eat.

¹ But Siegel wants to set that aside

(Think about other beliefs picked up this way. E.g. political or religious based on your upbringing and/or subculture.)

II. Hijacked experience

First consider a case of **hijacked experience**:

Angry Jack

Jill is worried that Jack is angry with her. This causes her to see his (in fact neutral) facial expression as an expression of anger. As a result of this visual experience, she comes to believe he’s angry with her.

On the one hand, believing what our eyes tells us seems like a paradigm case of rational belief-formation.

On the other, the fact that our background beliefs and expectations can affect what we see raises the possibility of *bootstrapping*.

Remember Elga.

Siegel thinks Jill isn’t epistemically *blameworthy* for her belief, but there’s a problem in the system we want to be able to point to.

Introduces the notion of a belief being **well-founded** (or *ill-founded*):

- A belief is well-founded if it’s “formed and maintained epistemically well”.
- Your belief can be ill-founded even if have good evidence for it.
- It’s *something* like safety—tracking the causal history of your belief, and whether it could easily have been wrong. But not exactly.

Notably, well-founded beliefs can be false; ill-founded ones can be true.

Jill’s case: her ill-founded worry explains why she has visual evidence. Also: can believe for wrong reasons.

Importantly, ill-foundedness can be *transmitted* between attitudes.

E.g. Jill’s case, if explains origin or maintenance of belief.

III. Whit's attitude is not well-founded

First, Siegel defends use of the metaphor of the *mind of the world*. The basic idea is that cultures encode stereotypes, associations, presumptions, and beliefs. In some sense, Whit's *culture* presumes *P*.

Siegel argues that this cultural presumption can be epistemically ill-founded, and so can transmit to Whit:

P1 The cultural presumption is a main factor that explains how Whit's racialized belief is maintained.

P2 If (mental) state M_1 is the main factor that explains how mental state M_2 is maintained, and M_1 is ill-founded, then so is M_2 .

P3 The presumption of Whit's culture is ill-founded.

C So Whit's belief is ill-founded too.

Siegel thinks (P1) is fairly clear in a case like this

Defending P2:

Jill's case. We need a transmission principle to be able to say what's wrong with bootstrapping!

Objection: Ill-foundedness often doesn't transmit through testimony. Example: confused biology teacher who believes in evolution for irrational reasons, but teaches it to his students (Lackey 2007).

Reply 1: Testimony is more reliable than cultural presumptions.

Reply 2: Testimonial trust is *fine-grained*, in a way cultural presumptions are not.

Q: Convincing? How exactly does this save P2?

Defending P3:

Basically, we need to be able to assess the epistemic system as a whole!

Discuss!

Transmission

Note: the cultural presumption is grounded in individuals' beliefs. So the group as a whole is engaged in bootstrapping!

Remember Rini.

References

Lackey, Jennifer, 2007. 'Norms of Assertion'. *Noûs*, 41(4):594–626.