

20. Vavova 2018: When are irrelevant influences relevant?

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I. Setup

Begins (again) with Cohen case: Oxford vs. Harvard.

An **irrelevant influence** for a given person X and their belief in p is something that (a) has influenced their belief about p and (b) does not bear on the truth of p .

Challenge 1: How can we distinguish the cases where we should vs. shouldn't be worried about irrelevant influences?

The question of the course, basically.

Challenge 2: Can we do so in a way that doesn't collapse the problem of irrelevant influences into that of disagreement or skepticism?

White's (2010) challenge.

Vavova has a proposal that, she argues, addresses both.

II. Vavova's Proposal

Primed: In a psychology experiment, you watch a video, and then evaluate some data about the effect of pet therapy on elderly folks who are chronically ill. You become convinced it is highly effective.

Later, you receive an email telling you that the experiment was set up so that half the participants were subliminally primed by the video to reason in a certain way, and that all such participants misread the data, while all un-primed participants read it properly.

It seems irrational for you to think "Well pet therapy *does* work, so I must've been in the un-primed group—how lucky!".

Even if, in fact, you *were* in the un-primed group and reasoned flawlessly.

In contrast, it's perfectly rational for *the experimenter* to think "I wasn't primed to have my belief—how lucky!"

Similarly, compare the **Possible BIV** vs. **Probable BIV** cases.

Vavova's diagnosis? Say that you are "MISTAKEN"¹ with respect to p if you've made an epistemic error, some way or other, related to p : you're irrational, unreliable, incoherent, inaccurate, etc.

¹Note: this is a (rather unfortunate choice of a) technical term. I'll put it in small-caps.

Good Independent Reason Principle (GIRP): To the extent that you have good, independent reason to think that you're MISTAKEN wrt p , you must revise your confidence in p —insofar as you can.

III. What to make of this?

Gets uncontroversial(?) cases right:

If Cohen has every reason to think Oxford and Harvard are on a par, then he has reason to revise.

But if instead he has reason to think that the correlation is driven by “guru effects”, and the Harvard professors are much more charismatic, then he has less reason to think *he* is MISTAKEN.

Doesn't just reduce to the problem of disagreement.

Rather, disagreeing with a peer is *one instance* of getting reason to think you're MISTAKEN.

E.g. evolutionary debunking; maybe couldn't have believed otherwise

Doesn't reduce to generic skepticism

Contrast GIRP with:

No Independent Reason Principle (NIRP): To the extent that you *fail* to have good independent reason to think that you are *not* MISTAKEN with respect to matters like *p*, you must revise your confidence in *p* accordingly—insofar as you can.

This, she thinks leads to skepticism. Possible BIV case.

For once you bracket off *all* your beliefs, you have nothing to stand on—no reason to think anything!

Similarly, GIRP doesn't undermine your *fundamental* beliefs—for the same reason. (Cohen case.) So perhaps political beliefs are okay!

Is this too good to be true?

Q1: Is this line between “no reason not to think MISTAKEN” (NIRP) and “good reason to think MISTAKEN” (GIRP) robust?

Q2: Your beliefs can be subject to threat from GIRP. But consider a **fundamentalist** duplicate of you, who believes all the same things but for which any revisions would lead them to give up *everything*.

GIRP seems powerless against them. Is it? Is that as it should be?

References

- Vavova, Katia, 2018. 'Irrelevant Influences'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 96(1):134–152.
- White, Roger, 2010. 'You Just Believe that Because...'. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 24:573–615.