

9. Schoenfield 2020, Arbitrary influences

Kevin Dorst
kevindorst@pitt.edu

PHIL 0450

We all can recognize **arbitrary influences** on our beliefs: things that led us to believe q without being evidence for q .

- (Non-)religious upbringing \rightarrow (a)theistic beliefs.
- Liberal institutions and social groups \rightarrow liberal beliefs.

And vice versa for conservative.

Even if some people can avoid these dynamics, *most* of us can't—or, at least, don't have any reason to believe that we *have*.

Recall McGrath on unique green

E.g. Schoenfield (let's imagine) was raised by atheists, and is one now. She's glad she is, but she acknowledges that she would believe otherwise (and be glad of it) if she were raised by theists.

The **You-Just-Believe-That-Because challenge**: Once we're aware of the arbitrary influences on our beliefs, how can we still be justified in believing them?

Reply 1: arbitrary influences are, by definition, *irrelevant* to q , so can't undermine our beliefs.

Problem: Compare thermometer designed to tell me temperature in Fiji. I believe $q = \text{it's } 75 \text{ degrees in Fiji}$. You tell me $r = \text{your thermometer isn't hooked up}$. I reply: "But r is irrelevant to q !"

Surely I can't maintain my belief.

Proposal: A belief generated by method M is justified only if it's *recoverable from the perspective of doubt*—one that doesn't take the verdicts of M for granted.

- Some beliefs meet this challenge, e.g. $M = \text{vision}$.
- Others don't, e.g. $M = \text{the Fiji(?) -thermometer}$.

"Bracket" your beliefs, and try to (re)justify them.

Reply 2: Sure, the method "believe whatever your community believes" is unreliable. But my method was "believe what *this* community believes". And, lucky for me, they use reliable methods!

It's like learning I bought my thermometer, the XT-1000, from a store that sells many unreliable ones. If *Consumer Reports* says the XT-1000 is reliable, no need to worry.

Problem: This response only works when you have an *independent* check on the reliability of the method. But the belief that *this* community is reliable is *itself* induced by living in that community.

So more like: rival magazines saying other thermometers aren't reliable.

P1 A belief formed by method M is justified only if we can recover it from the perspective of doubt about M .

P2 Given the effects of arbitrary influences, our religious (political, etc.) beliefs are *not* recoverable from the perspective of doubt.

C So our religious (political, etc.) beliefs are unjustified.