Kelly 2008 and McWilliams 2019: Is Biased Assimilation Rational?

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I. Biased Assimilation

What happens when people with different opinions are both presented with mixed evidence?

Biased Assimilation: People are inclined to interpret mixed evidence in a way that favors their prior beliefs.

Example: we disagree over *Deterrent*; both presented with two studies, one favoring and one disfavoring.

S_1: States A and B are next to each other; A has capital punishment, B does not; A has lower murder rate.

S_2: States C and D are next to each other; C has capital punishment, D does not; they have the *same* murder rate.

Result? I increase my confidence in Deterrent; you decrease yours.

Q1: Is the process by which this happens rational?
Q2: Is it still rational if we come to know what this process is?

II. Psychological story

Is this "Kripkean dogmatism"?

> "If *Deterrent* is true, then evidence against it is misleading. Deterrent is true. So I'll ignore the misleading counter-evidence."
>
> But this is *not* what people do.

Instead, they engage in **selective scrutiny**.

III. Normative story

Kelly argues that most people are *unaware* of this general tendency for selective scrutiny. Now *three* questions:

Q1.a: Is selective scrutiny reasonable?
Q1.b: *If* we selectively scrutinize the evidence, is the resulting polarization rational?
Q2: Does the polarization remain reasonable once we become *aware* of this process?

Q1.a: Is selective scrutiny reasonable?

Kelly says this is a question about *practical* rationality.

Analogy: science is *anomaly-driven*.

Likewise, say Kelly, with investigation generally. Unreasonable to

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Margin notes:

"Belief polarization", in Kelly's terminology.

Deterrent = capital punishment has a deterrent effect

Clearly unreasonable. Even if justified in believing Deterrent *beforehand*, once counter-evidence appears, must consider it.

Searching for *potential explanations* of data.

Kelly: Yes, Yes, No.
McWilliams: Yes, No, No.

Time- and resource-constraints.

demand equal scrutiny for surprising vs. unsurprising bits of evidence.

Q1.b: Is resulting polarization rational?

Key Epistemological Fact: How confident you should be of a hypothesis depends on the available alternatives.

- These alternative explanations are part of your "broad evidence".

So given that you have an alternative for S_1 and not S_2, you are rational to lower confidence in Deterrent. Vice versa for me.

Does this violate commutativity? If you first get evidence e_1 that convinces you of q, and then you are presented with e_2 you'll explain it away and maintain belief.
If you first get e_2, vice versa!

Kelly: which pieces of evidence you get first *affect* what total evidence you end up with. If get S_1 first, end up with $S_1 \& S_2 \&$ *expl. of S_2*.
If get S_2 first, end up with $S_1 \& S_2 \&$ *expl. of S_1*

So if you're unaware of the selective scrutiny effect (it's not part of your evidence), then you end up with different total (broad) evidence, which point in different directions, in the two cases.

Q2: How should learning about this process affect our beliefs?

But if you're *aware* of this process of selective scrutiny, you should realize it's no accident that you ended up with the alternative-explanations you did. Now in the two cases you end up with:

- $S_1 \& S_2 \&$ *expl. of S_2 & selectively scrutinized S_2*
- $S_1 \& S_2 \&$ *expl. of S_1 & selectively scrutinized S_1*

And *this* should lead to the same credence, he says.

(Maybe better: sometimes you'll find an explanation of the one you scrutinize, sometimes you won't. When you do, you get some evidence for D, when you don't you get some evidence against D. And these will average out.)

IV. McWilliams's Critique

There are a lot of moving parts in McWilliams's paper, but as I see it the core of the critique is relatively simple.

Warm-up case: Elena vs. Elena2.

- Elena is just like Kelly's agent. She sees S_1 and S_2; is initially inclined to believe D; scrutinizes S_2, and winds up increasing her confident in D.
- Elena then tells Elena2: $S_1 \& S_2 \&$ *expl. of S_2*. Elena2 increases her confidence in D.

Margin notes:

E.g. design vs. natural selection.

Vs. "narrow evidence" $\approx$ "data"

= the order in which you receive evidence shouldn't affect your beliefs. True for Bayesians who condition. If $P_{e_1} = P(\cdot|e_1)$ and $P_{e_2} = P(\cdot|e_2)$, then $P_{e_1}(q|e_2) = P(q|e_1 \& e_2) = P_{e2}(q|e_1)$.

- **Claim:** surely Elena2 is on better epistemic footing than Elena! Intuitively, Elena has access to information that should lower her confidence in D; Elena2 doesn't.

Why?

Basic idea: we can't justify different answers to Q1.b and Q2.
You (should) know that as a matter of fact you scrutinized one but not the other.

> You may not know *why*, of course.

And the fact that you found an explanation of the one you scrutinized should make you suspect that there's an explanation of the study you didn't scrutinize. So, if you scrutinize S_2, you end up with evidence like S_1&S_2& *expl. of S_2*& *selectively scrutinized S_2*.

On my reconstruction, McWilliams presses this idea by arguing that:

P1 Kelly's argument is committed to some form of **accessibilism**.

> = a piece of information is part of your evidence iff it's accessible to you.

P2 What's accessible to Elena doesn't depend on her motivations.

P3 But changing Elena's motivations *would* change how she scrutinizes and whether she polarizes.

> Schuette and Fazio 1995

C So *expl. of S_1* (or something near enough) is part of Elena's evidence, so she's not rational to polarize.

Question: Is accessibilism right? Looks like it's got the wrong logical form. It's possible that *each* piece of info e_1, e_2, ..., e_n can be accessible to you without them *all* being accessible.

> Remembering birthdays; deciding whether numbers less than 100 are prime; etc.

→Could each of *expl. of S_1* and *expl. of S_2* be accessible to Elena without them both being so?

Another Question: Is there an intermediate position? Elena2 in better position than Elena, but Elena in better position than someone who's aware of *expl. of S_2* but ignores it.

References

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