

ON THE ORIGINS OF BELIEF ABOUT VALUE

POSTDOC RESEARCH ABSTRACT

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Reflecting on the origins of our most cherished convictions can be unsettling. Suppose you believe that governments should heavily tax the wealthy. But then you realize that you believe that, in some sense, *just because* you were raised in a left-leaning political community. Had you grown up in a right-leaning milieu instead, your current position on fiscal politics might be different. That realization is unsettling: intuitively, you should be less sure about your political convictions now, on fiscal politics and beyond. This is an instance of the so-called *problem of irrelevant influence*: your political beliefs are influenced by factors that are irrelevant to their truth, and render them epistemically problematic.¹ Not only our political beliefs are affected, though. Rather, the worry arises for most beliefs about *value*, whether moral, political, aesthetic or epistemic.²

Recently, the problem of irrelevant influence has attracted significant philosophical attention. However, most of the discussion in the literature narrowly focuses on one particular instance thereof, namely whether evolutionary history irrelevantly influences our moral beliefs.³ Meanwhile, the more general phenomenon, despite its obvious importance to our intellectual lives, remains underexplored and poorly understood. The aim of my proposed Post-Doc project, jointly hosted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University, is to address this shortcoming.

My project consists of three parts. Part I argues that the arbitrariness of many value beliefs provides the best general explanation of why awareness of their origins is generally epistemically problematic. Part II refines this account by applying it to a pressing issue in contemporary political epistemology: whether social media irrelevantly influences the formation of political belief and, if so, why this is. Part III discusses how to rationally respond to irrelevant influence, harnessing the social media case to develop general counter-measures at the level of epistemic agents, environments and theorizing.

¹ See, for instance, Mogensen 2017, Vavova 2018 and White 2010.

² At least assuming that our value judgments are *beliefs* about *objective* values. However, many meta-ethical views share these commitments: moral realism (e.g. Enoch 2011, Schroeder 2007), quasi-realism (e.g. Ridge 2014) and, perhaps, even constructivism (e.g. Bagnoli 2017). Note that the worry also affects religious and philosophical beliefs. But those are beyond the scope of my inquiry.

³ See, for instance, Joyce 2005, Kahane 2011 and Street 2005.