

Straight Thinking in Warped Environments

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1. Cognitive penetration and the rationality of perception

In previous work, Susanna Siegel has offered novel and probing arguments for what she calls the “rich content view” of perceptual (specifically, visual) experience, according to which experience is capable of representing a richer array of properties than philosophers and psychologists often give it credit for. That is, a particular visual experience can represent not only a cluster of low-level properties relating to shape, color, motion, and illumination. It can also represent, for instance, the decidedly higher-level property of *being John Malkovich*.¹

A natural ally of the rich content view is the cognitive penetration thesis, i.e., the view that the contents of perceptual experience can be affected by our beliefs and other cognitive states.² In *The Rationality of Perception*, Siegel draws attention to the epistemological consequences of the cognitive penetration thesis.³ It is easy to see how cognitive penetration might give rise to epistemological concerns. We often appeal to perceptual experience to justify our beliefs. My belief that the soup is too salty is based on my perceptual experience of its tasting too salty. Ordinarily, I am not even brought to reflect on the justificatory link between the experience and the belief.

Once the cognitive penetration thesis is on the table, this naïve view must be reconsidered. Some might worry that cognitive penetration would render the epistemic standing of all perceptual beliefs uncertain. This is not Siegel’s view. But in cases where perception is penetrated by *irrational* beliefs, the normative story might be importantly different, as we must now take account of the problem of “hijacked experience.” Take Vivek, the vain and overconfident performer, to whom the audience somehow always looks pleased. To the extent that his vain self-confidence is irrational, and to the extent that his irrational attitude influences his perceptual experiences, those experiences are

¹ For the fullest statement of this view, see Siegel 2010.

² For more on the concept of cognitive penetration, see Begby 2017.

³ See also Siegel 2012 for an earlier statement of these concerns, and Silins 2016 for an overview of the debates.

not available to justify his confidence. To Vivek himself, of course, things might appear to be just the way they should: the audience's response certainly seems to him to offer perfectly good evidence of his excellence. But in cases of hijacked experience, the experience inherits the irrationality of the belief, and is thereby unavailable to provide epistemic support for further beliefs, or to rationally increase our confidence in the original attitude (Siegel 2017: 3-4).

Cases like Vivek's provide simple and effective demonstration of Siegel's analysis. But a deeper motivating interest of the book is to bring this analysis to bear on more problematic cases. Race relations in contemporary US society are marked by a significant degree of fear and distrust. Several psychological studies claim that many white people associate young black men with violence and crime, even at deep ("implicit") levels of psychological representation. As is suggested, for instance, by Keith Payne's famous "weapon bias" studies (Payne 2006), subjects are significantly more prone to misidentify an everyday object (e.g., a tool) as a gun if primed with the face of a black male.⁴ In real-life situations such as law enforcement, or even ordinary citizens presuming to exercise their right to "stand their ground," the outcome can be as predictable as it is tragic. To the extent that the initial fear is not rationally grounded, such "fearful seeing" cannot, Siegel argues, justify the belief that the person one is facing is holding a gun.

Large parts of the present book are devoted to laying out, in considerable detail, the case for thinking of perceptual experience, and not just the beliefs formed on the grounds of experience, as a fit subject for rational evaluation. In what follows, I will mostly look aside from this discussion and focus instead on a different application that occurs in the book's final chapter. Here, Siegel draws our attention away from perception and over onto beliefs absorbed from the subject's social environment, with the aim of showing that the analysis can apply to epistemic transitions occurring across individuals (as in testimony) as surely as it does to epistemic transitions within individuals (as in the transition from perception to belief). To show this, we are introduced to Whit, a late-teen boy who has grown up in an ethnically homogeneous white community in contemporary United States, and who develops the predictable racial attitudes as a result.⁵ Just as perception is normally a benign route to belief, so is the absorption of "culturally normal" attitudes. But just as in the case of hijacked perception, this rationalizing connection is severed when the source of the absorbed attitude itself is irrational.

⁴ For discussion, see Siegel 2017: 174.

⁵ Siegel 2017: ch. 10.

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Accordingly, Whit's racial attitudes are not just false, not simply unjustified; rather, they are irrational, and therefore reflect poorly on him as an epistemic subject.

2. Background: the epistemology of prejudice

This conclusion is of concern to me. In previous work,⁶ I have discussed cases that bear a clear resemblance to the Whit-case (such as Nomy Arpaly's Solomon-case (Arpaly 2003: 103-104)), and have argued that people can be epistemically justified in holding prejudiced beliefs, for instance in cases where those beliefs come to them by way of peer testimony. Much of my current work continues to rely on that conclusion.⁷ This conclusion stands in stark contrast to the widespread view that prejudiced beliefs always involve some manner of epistemic pathology or malfunction on the part of the subject holding them.

In Begby (2013), I entitled myself to the assumption that the justification in question would not be fundamentally challenged by the stipulation that one's peers were not justified in holding the beliefs in question. One reason for not raising the issue was the apparent internalist leanings of the authors whose views I took myself to be opposing.⁸ But Siegel's argument appears to expressly threaten this assumption: it is her contention that "ill-foundedness" can transmit along a testimonial chain, rendering one's testimonially acquired belief "ill-founded," even if the epistemic fault does not lie in oneself. Moreover, the ill-foundedness doesn't simply detract from the justification; it renders the resultant belief irrational and epistemically blameworthy.

In what follows, I will look more closely at the Whit-case. In section 3, I situate the issues in relation to standard approaches in epistemological theorizing. In section 4, I argue that there's a lacuna in Siegel's normative vocabulary: finding that a subject's beliefs are in some important sense ill-founded or unjustified does not force the conclusion that the subject holding them is thereby irrational or epistemically blameworthy. In section 5, I argue that specific features of the Whit-case stand to limit the scope of the generalizations that we can draw from Siegel's analysis. I end, in section 6, by

⁶ Begby 2013.

⁷ See Begby MS*a*.

⁸ Clearly in evidence, for instance, in Fricker 2007:33-34. For the record, I don't think it's true that whenever there is prejudiced belief acquired by testimony, there must be some epistemically irrational party further up the testimonial chain. But that's orthogonal to the issue currently at hand: Siegel's arguments bake the stipulation of irrationality in the source belief into the structure of the example.

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pointing out that these concerns are made in the spirit of friendly amendments: both could be accommodated without significant loss to the overall argumentative trajectory of the book.

3. An externalist norm?

As noted, much previous work on the epistemology of prejudice tends to lean in a rather clear internalist direction: what makes prejudiced beliefs epistemically bad can be traced to features of the subject's own epistemic policies, e.g., irrational trust in epistemically dubious sources, willful neglect of contrary evidence, etc.

For clarificatory purposes, then, it might be helpful to begin by asking whether Siegel is simply changing the terms of the debate by moving toward an externalist norm of belief, according to which the question of epistemic justification cannot be settled simply by reference to processes occurring within the individual, but must also take into account the relations between the individual and her environment.

Consider, for instance, the following premise which figures in Siegel's "Argument from Maintenance":

P2: If mental state M1 is the main factor that explains how mental state M2 is maintained, and M1 is ill-founded, then M2 is ill-founded. (Siegel 2017: 191)

Presumably, there are some instances of P2 that both internalists and externalists can agree to, such as intra-personal cases: if I believe, irrationally, that the Elvis-impersonator I saw in the hotel bar last night was in fact Elvis, I wouldn't thereby be justified in inferring that Elvis is still alive, even though the latter plausibly follows from the former. But notice that P2 appears to be a perfectly general principle, and should apply also in inter-personal cases. In cases of testimony, the main factor that explains how my mental state is maintained is presumably my testifier's mental state. Here internalists and externalists might part ways. Externalists will apply the principle in full generality, arguing that ill-foundedness can transmit along a testimonial chain as surely as it can in an intra-personal inference. Therefore, if my testifier's mental state is ill-founded, so is mine. Internalists might balk at this conclusion. If I end up with an ill-founded belief here, it is only because something goes wrong on *my*

side of the transaction: either my epistemic trust in the testifier was misplaced or I failed to make use of epistemic resources that would have defeated the content of the testimony. The ill-foundedness of the source belief plays no role per se in determining my epistemic standing.

On the one hand, the apparent generality of Siegel's P2 suggests an externalist principle. But on the other hand, a closer reading suggests that her position does not, after all, classify so easily. Some details point toward a stronger position than externalism, others a weaker. Both, I think, are problematic. To be clear, they are not problematic simply in virtue of failing to cohere with an externalist approach. (In general, I don't think that interesting philosophical issues are settled at that level of abstraction, and I imagine Siegel is of a similar mindset.) Rather, they are problematic, in the first case, because they lead her to overshoot her goal of providing a plausible normative analysis of Whit's epistemic standing, and in the second, because they threaten to severely restrict the scope of the generalizations that we can draw from the Whit example.

4. Justification, ill-foundedness, and irrationality

In this section, I will focus on Siegel's deployment of normative epistemic vocabulary to describe Whit's case. Let us begin by granting, for the sake of argument, the assumption outlined above: an inferential belief can only have such justification as would be supplied to it by the belief that it is inferred from; if the source belief is unjustified, so is the inferred belief.

But Siegel seems to want to push further. It may be that such beliefs aren't merely lacking in some epistemically relevant dimension, e.g., justification. Rather, they are actually irrational. And to the extent that they are irrational, they reflect poorly on the epistemic subject: the subject is epistemically culpable for acquiring and maintaining the belief in question.⁹

This position is considerably stronger than what even many externalists are willing to endorse. While externalists might hold that the subject is violating some relevant norm of belief – e.g., the norm according to which one should believe p only if one knows that p – they have come around to the idea

⁹ Cf. Siegel 2017: xxiv-xxv. For the record, I believe it is important to distinguish the epistemology of belief acquisition from the epistemology of belief maintenance. Once acquired, beliefs can substantially change the epistemic situation that the subject finds herself in, for instance by defeating evidence which, had it been made available at the earlier time, would have rendered the acquisition of the belief irrational. On this, see Begby 2013: 96-97 and *MSa*.

that not all such norm violations are blameworthy. That is, one might be excused even for holding an unjustified belief.¹⁰

This is a welcome concession. Moreover, reflection on why it is welcome points us toward an important lacuna in Siegel's normative-epistemic vocabulary. We want, quite generally I think, to make room for the notion that people can be 'doing the best that they can' with the epistemic resources available to them, while leaving open the question of whether the product of their doing their epistemic best is a justified belief.

To see why, consider the fact that we often stand to acquire all sorts of ill-founded beliefs via testimony. Assume that I am a PhD student in a biology lab. On Monday morning, my PI informs me of the latest lab results, and I form the relevant beliefs accordingly. As it happens, the equipment malfunctioned, and the results are wrong. What should we say about the epistemic standing of my belief? Let us distinguish between two variants of the case. In one, the equipment malfunction is a brute error: the results fell well within the margin of expectation, and the PI had no reason to think that the equipment was faulty. In the other, the PI really should have known that the equipment might be unreliable, and should not have disseminated the results without further corroboration.

What should we say about the various participants' epistemic standing in these cases? In both cases, I'm inclined to say that the belief in question is ill-founded, at least by Siegel's standards. Further, I'm inclined to say that the PI is justified in holding the belief in the first case, but not in the second. Maybe this is controversial: externalists might say that she was justified in neither. But importantly, they might concede that in the first case, though not in the second, she possesses an *epistemic excuse* for holding the belief. After all, she had no reason to believe that the equipment was malfunctioning. What, then, about my standing as the PhD student? Assuming that I had no reason to doubt the scientific integrity or scrupulousness of my PI, my inclination would be to say that I would be justified in both cases. Again, the externalist might counter by saying that I would be justified in neither. Even so, and in contrast with the PI, I might well be excused in both cases. That is, although the belief is ill-founded and therefore unjustified, in neither case does acquiring the belief reflect badly on me as an epistemic subject.

At the end of the day, the diverging verdicts on justification might come down to a matter of terminological convention. At any rate, my present concern is not about justification, but about the

¹⁰ See, for instance, Williamson MS.

question of epistemic culpability: though they disagree (whether substantively or merely verbally) on the question of whether my belief would be justified, internalists and externalists can nonetheless agree that I am not at epistemic fault for holding the belief.

This dimension of normative assessment doesn't seem to find an expression in Siegel's argument. It is her contention that Whit's belief is not merely lacking in justification, but that it is irrational, and that it reflects poorly on him as an epistemic subject. To be clear, she arrives at this verdict not because of its racialized content *per se*, or because it embodies a morally problematic outlook more broadly.¹¹ Rather, it is irrational simply because it is derived from an ill-founded source belief.

I believe this conclusion is rash. It is crucial to observe that Whit is exercising his epistemic agency under decidedly sub-optimal conditions. To my mind, one of the most important insights to emerge from systematic reflection on social epistemology in the last decades is the extent to which our epistemic outlooks are shaped by the affordances provided through our social environment. The phrase "non-ideal epistemology" suggests itself to as a way to capture these issues. But that phrase masks an important ambiguity. Non-ideal epistemology could be taken as expressing a concern with characteristic limiting mechanisms of human psychology, as in the study of implicit bias. Here, although we want to say that the resulting belief bears the mark of irrationality, it is a form of irrationality that we may be powerless to correct.

My approach is different: I am interested in the epistemic standing of subjects performing ideally well, epistemically speaking, with the limited resources at their disposal. To my mind, the problem with Siegel's description of Whit's situation is that we are given no reason to think that he isn't doing precisely what is rationally required of him given the epistemic context that he (blamelessly) happens to find himself in.¹² Perhaps this leaves open the question of whether his belief is epistemically justified: as I suggested above, this is largely a terminological matter. But to the question of whether he is being irrational, and therefore blameworthy, in believing as he does, I stand firm: so far as Siegel's

¹¹ That is, Siegel's argument does not follow the tracks of the recent literature on "moral encroachment" or "doxastic morality," according to which there are special epistemic requirements in play whenever our beliefs stand to cause harm to others. On this, see, for instance, Fritz 2017, Moss 2018: ch. 10, Basu MS, and Begby MS*b*.

¹² We might suspect that surely there must be available epistemic resources in Whit's social environment that should push him toward problematizing the outlook that is prevalent in his community. (Presuming, of course, that these epistemic resources have not been "preempted" along the lines analyzed in Begby MS*a*.) But Siegel gives us no reason to think that this is the case; moreover, if it were the case, the argument for Whit's epistemic irrationality could take a much more direct route than the one offered in the book.

example gives us any reason to believe, he might be doing exactly what he should be doing (epistemically speaking) in forming the belief that he does. That the belief is unjustified is a reflection on his socio-epistemic affordances (as in the biology lab case), not a reflection on him. To see why Whit is not irrational, consider the question: *what else should he believe?* If he were to arrive at the contrary belief, he truly would be irrational: so far as we can tell, he has no evidence whatsoever supporting that belief. Note also that suspending belief is hardly any better: to do so, he would be required to quarantine all the (apparent) evidence that he has supporting his racialized belief. Siegel's discussion suggests no clear reason for him to do this.

I could see a nihilistic conclusion coming out of this: trapped in a highly biased socio-epistemic environment, one is effectively consigned to irrationality no matter what one does.¹³ Tempting though this conclusion may be, it masks important distinctions: in forming the contrary belief, or in suspending belief altogether, Whit would be guilty of throwing away evidence which (for all he can tell) is perfectly good. Surely that must be reflected in how we should think about his standing as an epistemic subject. In forming his actual belief, Whit at least has the virtue of responding correctly to the evidence that he has, even if we might want to say, at the end of the day, that his belief is not justified.

5. Scope of generalization

The previous section isolated a feature of Siegel's position which seems too strong, leading her to overshoot the goal of providing a convincing normative framework for analyzing Whit's epistemic standing. In this section, I will point to a feature which is perhaps too weak, and which may be seen to limit the scope of generalization that we can draw from the Whit-case.

Siegel's description of the Whit-case is laudably rich, and has the benefit of situating him quite decisively in a particular social environment in a particular moment in history. Even so, I assume that Siegel takes the problem to be of broader scope, and that the Whit-case serves as a representative model of a common way in which prejudiced beliefs are passed from generation to generation. The normative analysis detailed above is presumably meant to apply to a range of these cases.

¹³ Note the contrast with Gendler 2011, who holds that people in such situations are in fact well-positioned to fulfill their epistemic ideals, but perhaps only at the cost of sacrificing their moral ideals.

But there's a peculiar twist buried deep in her analysis of the case. In building her case for "absorption" as a mode of testimonial belief acquisition, she briefly considers a parallel case of coming to believe that the water in the tap is unsafe to drink. She writes:

suppose your mother fears that the water is unsafe to drink, and she comes to believe that the water is as she fears it to be. Her fear is unreasonable, let's suppose, and so is her belief. When she warns you not to drink the water because it is toxic, you believe her. So now you believe that the water is unsafe to drink. Your belief may be false, but even so, it is arguably well-founded. It is reasonable for you to believe her – she's your mother. If the belief is well-founded, then the ill-foundedness of your mother's belief does not transmit to yours, even though you formed your belief on the basis of testimony from her. (Siegel 2017: 186)

This is a surprising concession, on the face of it. One reason it is surprising is that it appears to go counter to Premise 2 of the Argument from Maintenance quote above. That is, it constitutes a significant weakening of what appeared to be something like a fully general externalist principle, according to which one can never derive a justified conclusion from an unjustified premise.

But there is another and more important reason why this concession is surprising: it seems to undermine the conclusion that the culturally normal belief that Whit absorbs from what Siegel calls "the mind of the world" (Siegel 2017: 187-188) is itself ill-founded, just because the culturally normal belief is ill-founded.

However, Siegel believes that the concession in the mother-case does *not* jeopardize the conclusion drawn from the Whit-case. The mother-case is special, because "there's a range of potential epistemic good-making features that bestow well-foundedness on the beliefs that accept the mother's testimony, and none of these potential good-making features carry over to the outlook Whit absorbs from the mind of the world" (Siegel 2017: 192). She specifically mentions two such good-making features which positively distinguish the mother-case from Whit's absorption of racialized attitudes from his social environment (*ibid.*): (i) the mother's testimony takes the form an assertion, explicitly meant to inform (indeed to warn) her children; (ii) lies are relatively easy to uncover in the case of individual assertion. Neither of these potentially good-making features, Siegel believes, "scales up" to the case where we "casually absorb" the problematic attitudes from our cultural environment. This is

why Whit's belief remains ill-founded, whereas the child's belief may be well-founded, despite the fact that both derive from an ill-founded source.

I want to set aside (ii) right away, since it seems doubtful to me that lying is really a factor here: despite her confusions, the mother might be perfectly sincere in her belief. It is (i) that gives me pause, because it threatens to severely restrict the range of cases to which the analysis might apply.

Here's the worry in a nutshell: to make the distinction work for her, Siegel must simply stipulate that Whit's belief comes about from absorption alone, without further support of explicit assertion from authoritative figures (parents, friends, teachers, news media) in his social environment. She is free to make that stipulation, of course. But how representative is this as a model of the way that racialized attitudes are propagated in deeply divided societies?

Being not a social historian, I can only speculate here. But here's my speculation: it may well be that Siegel has painted a perspicuous picture of the way that racialized attitudes are propagated in contemporary US society. But then again, it is a decidedly peculiar and highly contingent feature of that society that it combines, on the one hand, widespread and institutionally reinforced pernicious racism with a significant social taboo against expressing racist attitudes, on the other. It is important to bear in mind that it wasn't always so; indeed, many fear that recent developments herald a return to a previous era. We don't need to go back many decades to find a time where that taboo would have been significantly weaker if not altogether non-existent. In the 1950s, let's say, explicit racist attitudes might have been freely expressed within the family and in broader social contexts. Certainly, I imagine that many other societies displaying similarly institutionalized racism would have no hesitation embedding racist propaganda in the school curriculum.¹⁴

To the extent that Whit's case is representative of the way that racist attitudes propagate in contemporary United States, it is because there is a significant sanction on the expression of racist attitudes, attitudes which nonetheless are widely held and condoned, and which manifest unambiguously in patterns of social interaction. This is why Whit is consigned to merely "absorbing" the attitudes from his environment, rather than acquiring them by explicit assertion, be it from friends, family, or school textbooks. This peculiar constellation of features – deeply ingrained, institutionally sanctioned racism combined with a taboo on the expression of racist attitudes – is an idiosyncrasy of

¹⁴ See, e.g., Engelbrecht 2006 for a study of South African school textbooks during the Apartheid and post-Apartheid era, and Bernier 2016 for a telling account of a mid-1950s history textbook used in Texas public schools.

post-civil rights era US. We cannot assume that it is representative of other similarly racist societies. In other such societies, racist attitudes would be available both through absorption and explicit assertion. Here, people otherwise very much like Whit would apparently stand to benefit, like the child in Siegel's mother-case, from the epistemically "good-making features" of explicit assertion. Their beliefs, though materially identical to Whit's in content, and acquired, like Whit's, from ill-founded sources, could nonetheless enjoy full epistemic justification. This is troublesome, both because we might want to say that such beliefs would *not* be fully justified (even though, as I argued above, the lack of justification would not entail that the recipient would be blameworthy for acquiring and maintaining them), and because such cases might well be more common than cases sharing the specific features of Whit's situation.¹⁵

6. Concluding remarks

Susanna Siegel has written a characteristically challenging but richly rewarding book, which persuasively situates long-standing philosophical concerns about the perception-belief interface in the context of current discussions of the epistemological significance of psychological mechanisms of bias. This is a significant contribution in its own right. Additionally, many of her examples bear witness to a deep and salutary engagement with issues of social justice, in particular as they arise in the context of present-day United States. Both in terms of its theoretical core and in terms of its richly painted examples, the book deserves consideration from anyone working at the confluence of philosophy of mind, epistemology, and social philosophy.

In this brief paper, I have pushed two critical angles on Siegel's analysis of the epistemology of culturally normal beliefs, as it occurs in the closing sections of her book. One concerns our normative assessment of the epistemic standing of subjects who, through no obvious fault of their own, end up acquiring beliefs that we might otherwise classify as lacking in epistemic justification. The second articulates the worry that specific features of the central example, features which help make the analysis vivid and compelling, might also end up restricting the range of cases to which the analysis might apply.

¹⁵ And, to put to rest a worry from section 2, with this restriction in place, it can readily be seen that Siegel's conclusion in the Whit-case no longer jeopardizes my argument in Begby 2013, since that argument expressly deals with contexts where prejudiced beliefs are disseminated by explicit assertion.

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In lieu of a conclusion, I will add that neither of these critical angles take aim at load-bearing elements of Siegel's arguments. Instead, they draw attention to collateral commitments that she picks up along the way in the richly discursive contexts that her arguments unfold. Both commitments, it seems to me, could be reevaluated without significant loss to the overall plot trajectory of the book.

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