Virtuous and Vicious Selective Scrutiny

Abstract:

Thomas Kelly has defended a specific view of how belief polarization emerges and why it is rational to see this phenomenon occur. Kelly defines belief polarization as being more confident in one’s opinion after examining a body of mixed evidence. He has argued that belief polarization specifically due to selective scrutiny is practically rational, where selective scrutiny is the act of asymmetrically analyzing contradictory evidence to your beliefs while accepting confirming evidence. This view ties Kelly to asserting that selective scrutiny is a rational practice. He reaches this view by juxtaposing selective scrutiny to its much-maligned alternative, Kripkean Dogmatism, which is the act of simplistically and reflexively dismissing any evidence that conflicts with one’s existing belief.

While Kelly’s views are interesting and provocative, I believe they are misguided in their reach; I aim to create a differentiation between what I coin *vicious* and *virtuous* scrutiny, and argue that vicious scrutiny is irrational for the same reasons as dogmatism. *Virtuous selective scrutiny* is the sort which does conform to Kelly’s praise; it is contingent upon the state of mind in which a generous evaluation of counterevidence is possible. The act of virtuously scrutinizing, then, must have the very real possibility of the counterevidence in question *lowering* one’s confidence in one’s currently held belief. *Vicious selective scrutiny*, on the other hand, lacks this generosity – one’s mind is made up, doxastically closed, and without the possibility that incoming counterevidence will be fairly evaluated and may have the real potential to lower one’s credence in what one already believes. Viciously scrutinizing entails nothing more than a *performance* of evaluating counterevidence – the agent merely fools herself into thinking she has fairly examined the evidence or argumentation from the other side, while actually having given it no real chance to persuade her. Her mind was unavailable from the start.

Kelly is rather nonspecific when explaining why Kripkean dogmatism is irrational. So, in order to understand why vicious selective scrutiny is no better than dogmatism, we might ask, what *is* the problem with Kripkean dogmatism? First, it makes the dogmatist ignorant of potentially belief-altering information – not knowing what the other side thinks or why they think as they do makes it impossible to change one’s mind if one was in fact wrong – because the dogmatist could not ever examine the relevant counterevidence that might change her mind! Dogmatism also precludes the use of the totality of an agent’s available evidence. And finally, both dogmatism succumbs to an irrational self-predictability – the agent can know what evidence she will dismiss before knowing any details about it, simply by being told if it conflicts or confirms her current belief. The issue for Kelly’s account, however, is that these problems corrupt vicious selective scrutiny in the same way as dogmatism. I conclude that these irrationalities in vicious scrutiny thus temper Kelly’s optimism about the rationality of selective scrutiny and its resulting belief polarization.