

The Relevance of Belief Outsourcing to Whether Arguments Can Change Minds

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There is a wealth of evidence which indicates that arguments are not very efficient tools for changing minds. Against this skepticism, Novaes (2023) presents evidence that, given the right social context, arguments sometimes play a significant role in belief revision. However, drawing on Levy (2021), I argue that the evidence Novaes cites is compatible with the view that it is not arguments that change individual minds but instead belief outsourcing that occurs alongside the consideration of arguments.

In this paper, I will argue that Novaes' evidence does not establish that arguments can change minds. Once we look at the broader social context of the examples Novaes cites, we see that this context is compatible with the claim that it is not arguments themselves that change minds, but instead the outsourcing of one's beliefs to others that is sometimes correlated with argument evaluation that changes minds. In what follows, I will draw on Levy's (2021) account of belief outsourcing. I will then present Novaes' observations of people who changed their minds. I will then argue that belief outsourcing enables the hypothesis that arguments cannot change minds to explain these observations. I will then argue that this result generalizes due to certain features of Novaes' broader model of belief change. Thus, *any* of the types of cases on which Novaes' argument *must* rely will encounter the same problem. Finally, I will discuss how future empirical work on belief outsourcing could vindicate Novaes' model.

Regarding belief outsourcing: When we discover what we believe we look to our social environment. We consider what people who we think are like us, who we think are honest, and who we regard as experts believe. And that constitutes what we ourselves believe. This happens unconsciously and automatically. It may, upon introspection, seem to us that we have a rich and detailed set of beliefs stored internally. But much of what we believe is instead stored in the external world.

Levy gives several empirical informed arguments for this view. For the evidence, I refer the reader to Levy (2021). Here, I will briefly mention one illustrative example. Prior to 2016 the majority of Republicans thought that moral character was relevant to assessing the quality of a president. After 2016, Republicans thought that moral character was irrelevant. Levy's explanation is this: Before Trump, Republicans assessing a presidential candidate would see that people like them thought that moral character is important. After Trump, however, the social environment had changed. Ordinary Republicans saw that those like them believed Trump would be a good president and did not regard his immorality as a barrier to his being a good president. So, that is what ordinary Republicans themselves believed. Levy's diagnosis is that our very evaluation of arguments for who to support for president is shaped, automatically and without realizing it, by social cues. The beliefs we outsource include beliefs about which reasons for belief are good and which are not.

Now consider the examples Novaes uses to support the claim that arguments can change minds. One concerns Megan Phelps-Roper. Raised as a member of Westboro Baptist Church, Megan began to question the worldview she had inherited after debating others on Twitter. After several years she changed her mind and ended up rejecting the views of Westboro. As Novaes (2023, p. 187) puts it:

However, two necessary conditions had to be in place for these arguments to do their work: naturally, she had to be exposed to them (on Twitter, she could be exposed to a wide range of sources and interlocutors); but more importantly, these arguments were coming from people she had grown to

respect and care about. She had had exposure to ideas that clashed with the Westboro doctrines before (for example, at school), but this time the sources of these ideas were people she had forged deeper connections with. This time, she paid more attention and engaged in earnest with the substance of their arguments. What is perhaps remarkable about Megan's trajectory is the fact that the process of recalibration of attributions of respect and trust to different people (away from Westboro members and towards 'outsiders') happened primarily by means of online interactions rather than face to face. (Her New Yorker profile describes the process as 'conversion via Twitter'.) Online connections can become 'real' connections after all, and may offer a much wider net of potential epistemic exchange partners.

If Levy is right about belief outsourcing, then it seems to me that Novaes' two necessary conditions are sufficient, by themselves, to generate belief revision. And it is not necessary to posit a significant role played by arguments. As Megan got to know people on Twitter, she began to identify with them and find more and more points of connection. Before she changed her mind, when she considered what she believed and why, she unconsciously outsourced her beliefs and reasons for belief to fellow members of Westboro. But more and more, as Megan became closer to the people she met on Twitter, she began to subconsciously outsource her beliefs and reasons for belief to them. That new group had a different set of beliefs and reasons for those beliefs than Westboro. And, as a result, Megan adopted the beliefs and reasons for beliefs of her new community. When Megan introspected, it seemed to her that she was reflecting on the merits of the arguments in an independent way. But subconsciously, her very assessment of the arguments was outsourced to her Twitter community whereas before it had been outsourced to Westboro.

Another example concerns Derek Black. As Novaes (2023, p. 189) puts it:

These conversations went on for years, during which Derek gradually moved away from the white supremacist ideology he had grown up with.... As with Megan Phelps-Roper, Derek's epistemic breakthrough did not happen overnight: it was the result of a long process where his original beliefs were gradually dispelled, at least partially through the force of arguments (that is, if we are to believe his own account of this process). However, once again the fact that arguments came from people whom Derek had come to respect on a personal level (despite the ethnicities of some of them being considered as 'inferior' according to the white supremacist world-view he had espoused until then) was a crucial element in the process. He truly listened and engaged with the substance of their arguments because of this favourable interpersonal setting, which in turn was facilitated by his vulnerability and the fact that these were the only people still willing to interact with him on campus. (Like Megan, Derek also ended up in a long-term romantic relationship with one of the people who challenged his beliefs early on.)

As with the case of Megan, it seems that Derek's story can be explained without positing the ability of arguments to change minds. It is true that, like Megan, Derek sincerely reports that arguments changed his mind. But Levy's theory predicts that Megan and Derek would make such sincere reports even if the arguments played no role. Derek was welcomed by the Jewish community on campus when everyone else had ostracized him. He became closer and closer to them. And as he became closer and closer to them, he outsourced more and more of his beliefs and his assessment of arguments to them. All the while, introspection convinced him that he was changing his mind on the basis of arguments.

These are the real world examples Novaes discusses. But they share a common structure. They are cases in which a subject gets close to a group that they disagree with, and after having changed their minds,

reports that arguments changed their minds. My view is that for any case of this type, Levy's account of belief outsourcing is capable of explaining the belief change without positing a significant role for arguments.

Novaes' model of belief change via argument requires that, prior to evaluating content, subjects select which potential epistemic exchange partners, among those that they are aware, they deem worthy. Worthiness, for Novaes, is determined by trustworthiness and expertise. As Novaes (2023, p. 181) puts it:

Among those sources that have caught my initial attention, who do I view as worthy of consideration as an exchange partner? At this point, considerations of *trustworthiness* and *expertise* come into play....

Recall that for Levy, I outsource beliefs to three types of people: those I regard as like me, those I regard as trustworthy, and those I regard as experts. While Novaes' model does not require that epistemic exchange partners are regarded as like me, it does require that epistemic exchange partners are regarded as trustworthy or as experts. And, given belief outsourcing, it is at this stage, and prior to the stage that engagement with content occurs, that belief change can be explained. If I regard someone as trustworthy or as an expert, I will outsource my beliefs to them. And that is sufficient to explain any changes in my beliefs without appeal to argument.

Five things to note by way of conclusion: First, for Levy this is a rational process. Levy thinks that the deeply social nature of the way in which we form and maintain beliefs is responsible for our greatest epistemic achievements. Even experts on a topic automatically and unconsciously largely rely on others in this way. Megan and Derek began to trust people who were trustworthy. That caused them to outsource their beliefs and assessments of arguments to trustworthy people. And there may well have been nothing Megan and Derek were doing that was epistemically wrong before. It is just that their misleading social world led them astray.

Second, Levy himself thinks arguments can cause belief change. But it happens far less often than we suppose. So Levy is in agreement with Novaes. And my view is not Levy's. My view is instead that Levy's theory of belief outsourcing, whether Levy agrees or not, gives the skeptic new and powerful resources to resist the claim that arguments change minds. And this is true even when the claim is backed by cases as plausible as the ones Novaes provides.

Third, there is a question about what we mean by 'argument' in this discussion. Given that Levy would say belief outsourcing is rational, there may be a sense of 'argument' on which arguments do change minds when belief outsourcing occurs. But it is clear that participants in this discussion are using a narrower sense of 'argument'. Novaes observations of Megan and Derek, are about first order assessments concerning the content of the Bible, what various studies say and how well they are conducted, and whether a particular idea is inconsistent. If I am right, these observations can be explained without positing that such first order assessments caused belief change.

Fourth, my argument does not conclusively show that arguments do change minds. Rather, it shows that the evidence Novaes cites is compatible with the conclusion that arguments do not change minds.

Fifth, I think there are a number of unsettled empirical questions about belief outsourcing. And certain ways of settling those questions would vindicate Novaes' argument. In particular, the exact nature and extent of belief outsourcing has yet to be determined. It may turn out that once we learn more about belief outsourcing, we will then discover contexts in which it operates and contexts in which it does not. And it may be that contexts in which it does not operate will be ones in which it is necessary to posit arguments as having a significant causal role in changing minds in just the way Novaes' theory predicts.

References

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