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Defending Wokeness: A Response to Davidson

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Lacey J. Davidson (2023) raises several insightful objections to the group partiality account of wokeness. The paper aims to move the discussion forward by either responding to or developing Davidson’s objections. My goal is not to show that the partiality account is foolproof but to think about the direction of future discussion—future critique, modification, and response. Davidson thinks that the partiality account of wokeness does not sufficiently *define* wokeness, as the paper sets out to do. Davidson also alleges that the account appropriates the term from minority communities.

The partiality account of wokeness states that a necessary condition for wokeness is partiality directed to members of minority groups. I call this *group* partiality, since the woke person is partial to the needs and interests of oppressed social groups. Note that this is not a full account of wokeness. *Partiality* here refers to Sarah Stroud’s (2006) epistemic partiality in friendship. According to Stroud, friends show epistemic partiality to one another. They, for instance, derive different conclusions with given evidence than they do with non-friends. Friends seriously scrutinize evidence that shows that a friend has poor character, and they treat their friendship as a good reason that the friend is a good person. Good friends also interpret one another’s behaviors in the most charitable ways possible.

I argue that these mechanisms—*Serious Scrutiny*, *Different Conclusions*, *Interpretive Charity*, *Reason*—constitute the epistemic practices of wokeness and, thus, partially constitute what it is to be “woke.” Although the article sets out for a full account of wokeness—and entertains the possibility that partiality is a necessary condition—it seems that partiality is not sufficient for wokeness, though it is necessary (Atkins 2023a, 324). Wokeness is a larger concept than mere epistemic phenomena and practices, as Davidson points out. Additionally, the paper shows that *group* epistemic partiality demands two other mechanisms too, *Base Rate Neglect* and *Degree Inquiry*. The woke person does not derive conclusions about specific members of minority groups based on the social group’s base rates. Moreover, the woke person will pursue more evidence when the reputation of a member of a minority group is at risk. Partiality with respect to wokeness, thus, has six epistemic mechanisms.

Drawing from Sanford Goldberg (2019, 2020), the paper shows the partiality account of wokeness is consistent with standard norms and practices in epistemology. That is, one does not need to be irrational to be woke. This is because the woke person has value-reflecting epistemic reasons for treating members of minority groups differently. Similarly, Goldberg argues that partiality in friendship does not require epistemic misbehaviors. I argue that group partiality also does not require misbehavior.

On the Partiality Account

Davidson’s first objection is that the partiality account is insufficient for wokeness. She cites the following reason:

Understanding, for example, that the base rates of a given character trait in a population are products of racist and otherwise oppressive systems

(especially when that base rate is the rate at which someone has access to institutions like the social club analyzed by Tamar Gendler (2011)) is an essential part of being woke. For this reason, I do not think the mechanisms involved in partially forming beliefs about individuals can constitute a comprehensive definition (19).

Davidson is right about this. Unjust and oppressive systems produce problematic base rates. The partiality account, however, does not propose the sufficiency of partiality for wokeness, only the necessity. I remark in the article that the partiality account is partially constitutive of wokeness. I take it that the partiality account captures the epistemic components of wokeness. So there will be other conditions required for wokeness. I want to see how the account can make sense of Davidson's observation. Consider the following passage:

A woke person has largely institutional reasons for partiality. According to the woke person, we ought to marshal more evidence that favors a marginalized person because this person is a member of a group that has been at a disadvantage. Not doing so contributes to ongoing systemic problems. It's not because the woke person knows every minority that she is woke, but because she is aware of the injustice that such people face (Atkins 2023a, 326).

This consideration gives us the germ of a response to Davidson's first objection. The sorts of reasons the woke person has for being woke are generated from unjust and oppressive social structures. Why be woke? Because forming racist beliefs—even if they are consistent with base rates—perpetuates oppressive and racist institutions. Additionally, the woke person needs to say that the accuracy of such base rate evidence *depends upon* racist and oppressive power structures. Perhaps Davidson would suggest that attunement to institutional reasons—that is, viewing these institutional reasons as the source of problematic base rates—as another necessary condition for wokeness. I would welcome this suggestion for a full account of wokeness.

Appropriating 'Woke'

Davidson's second objection is that the partiality account appropriates the term *woke* from the Black communities from which it comes. This is the most pressing issue with the paper. She writes:

My secondary concern with the paper is the overall disconnect with cultural and epistemic practices. Although the author does frame the published version of the paper with respect to pejoratively describing progressive policies as "woke," the larger framing and connection to concrete epistemic practices is missing throughout the paper. This concern is present for me particularly in the very quick treatment of worries about appropriation of Black English. When it comes to concepts developed by historically oppressed groups to understand their own experiences (conceptual

resources), the social and cultural context is always going to matter with respect to how the terms are deployed and even what they mean in a given context (19).

Davidson and I agree that this is a pressing concern for my view. Such appropriation, it goes without saying, is morally problematic. Davidson points out that “Defining Wokeness” is insufficiently grounded in the history of the term *woke*. Now, my goals were to (1) propose wokeness as a serious philosophical concept worthy of analysis (instead of a derogatory word for right-wing media) and (2) to argue that anti-racist belief formation, of the sort wokeness lends itself to, is reasonable given purist epistemic standards and norms. I think the paper succeeds in both goals. These two objectives are enough for an article, as the appropriation concern deserves a *much* more detailed treatment.

Appropriation and epistemic drift are existentially pressing concerns for me. It’s a relief, though not a surprise, that others share these concerns as well. I invite anyone concerned about appropriation to review Atkins (2023b). There I offer two—albeit brief—responses to the appropriation question. This, however, deserves to be addressed in much greater detail, perhaps a fruitful path for future work on wokeness. For now, I offer two interpretations of this objection. The first interpretation states that any theorizing about wokeness is necessarily not woke, so there is an internal tension between the demands of wokeness and theorizing about wokeness. This first interpretation reveals a deeper problem for *all* theorizing about wokeness. According to the second interpretation, Davidson’s objection says that I cannot offer an extensionally accurate account of wokeness because the term is embedded in a speaker context. After this, I want to give a brief response to the second interpretation.

According to the first interpretation, theorizing the term *woke* may be self-defeating. When we theorize about *wokeness* (or any word embedded within a community), we—philosophers and theorists—remove the term from that community and thereby change it. Emmalon Davis (2018) calls this epistemic appropriation. Epistemic appropriation, in part, is the morally problematic removal and reuse of words and concepts from minority groups, a form of oppression (Young, 1990).

Let’s suppose that theorizing about wokeness is epistemic appropriation. In the case of wokeness, it is *not woke* to appropriate. Stealing words or concepts from minority communities is one thing the woke person aims to stop. However, by turning *woke* into a philosophical concept, that’s what we are doing. To theorize about *wokeness* at all, therefore, involves doing something that is *not* woke. There’s an internal tension between being woke and performing conceptual analysis of wokeness.

This sort of internal tension between theorizing and practice should remind the reader of a problem with analyzing consequentialism. Suppose I could either address counterexamples to consequentialism or make extra money to donate to aid organizations, à la the Famine Relief argument. Consequentialism likely demands that I ignore these counterexamples and instead save lives. If theorizing about consequentialism fails to optimize the good, then

consequentialism condemns ethical theorizing about itself. A similar sort of paradox is present in theorizing about wokeness since both positions, if the modified objection above is correct, condemn theorizing about themselves. Analogous problems require analogous solutions. I leave such solutions for future work.

According to the second interpretation of the appropriation objection, extensional accuracy rides on whether an analysis rides on whether the analysis captures all instances of term usage. Given that members of minority communities use the term woke to refer to more things than mere epistemic partiality (with respect to oppressed social groups), it seems that the analysis of wokeness is not comprehensive. Since the analysis is not given from this community, the attempt to offer such an analysis (sometimes? must? often?) fails to capture all instances of usage.

On this interpretation, Davidson seems to assume a general principle that those outside of a community cannot understand the meaning of a term within a community. I'm sympathetic to this principle, but without further defense, I'm not sure why we should accept it. If we understand the partiality account as an account of the epistemic mechanisms of wokeness, then I think we can avoid this issue. I take it that something like partiality is present in the real epistemic practices of being woke. My goals in "Defining Wokeness" is to explain real epistemic practices with the theoretical machinery available in academic philosophy and to argue that those epistemic practices are epistemically permissible given the dominant views of rationality. Understood as a partial account of wokeness that identifies real practices, as opposed to a full account that is opposed to community usage, I think that the appropriation issue is not quite as pressing.

Base Rate Neglect

The last objection concerns the base rate mechanism. *Base Rate Neglect* says that the woke person has good reasons for not treating various racial demographics as good evidence for concluding facts about any particular member of that group. These reasons are generated by oppressive power structures. Thus, one can use base rates to draw conclusions about, say, white cops but not members of minority groups.

Davidson thinks that *Base Rate Neglect* is not necessary for wokeness. She helpfully points out that other mechanisms of the partiality account, namely *Serious Scrutiny*, could explain away the need for *Base Rate Neglect*. She suggests that the woke person "knows that the base rates don't tell the whole story" (20). Davidson also suggests that the woke person "considers the fact that population-level patterns are the result of oppressive social conditions" (20). She suggests that *Serious Scrutiny* can provide us similar results as *Base Rate Neglect*.

I'm open to tightening up the account, but, at first blush, Davidson's suggestion seems wrong. Even if, say, I think that the base rates are the result of oppressive conditions, the observation is consistent with *forming beliefs* based on those base rates. The problem of negative base rates is not our treatment of that data downstream of the belief, e.g., our attitudes, dispositions, and actions. The problem comes from the beliefs that the base rates

produce about individuals—you are likely to be this way because others in your reference class are too. Forming such beliefs strikes me as inconsistent with being woke. Forming beliefs that are consistent with stereotypes, I think, is the real problem, and, given that Davidson’s solution appears consistent with such belief formation, I think the suggestion needs development. Without further development, Davidson’s suggestion seems unsatisfying. I now develop Davidson’s suggestion about *Serious Scrutiny*.

Perhaps *Serious Scrutiny* can explain how the woke person engages with base rate data about minority groups. One way in which this person might scrutinize base rate data is to treat error possibilities where an individual deviates from this data as a serious possibility. This person might be generally skeptical of claims that are derived from this base rate data. I identify two problems with this suggestion.

First, *Serious Scrutiny* is not the outright prohibition on belief formation. Take, for instance, a good friend. A good friend scrutinizes evidence that suggests her friend has something wrong or has some negative character trait. *Serious Scrutiny* though is consistent with belief formation. After enough plausible evidence is mounted against her friend, the good friend *can* form the belief that her friend has done something wrong. Using *Serious Scrutiny* to explain negative base rates seems implausible to me because if the base rate evidence reaches the sufficient level of plausibility, it is permissible form belief consistent with the base rates. I do not think that is consistent with being woke.

On the other side of the coin, it seems like we run into the same problems that Davidson identifies with *Base Rate Neglect*. Let’s suppose that the sufficient level of plausibility to form beliefs consistent with the base rate is quite high. Suppose that for the woke person to form beliefs consistent with the base rate (and stop scrutinizing the base rate evidence) is rare and quite difficult to achieve. It seems that this level of scrutiny runs into the same problems that Davidson suggests that we avoid. That is, if we maintain a consistent and serious scrutiny of the base rates, we ultimately neglect them. We, therefore, commit the same epistemic mistakes as we do with *Base Rate Neglect*.

Davidson prefers her own response to Gendler’s Dilemma—the dilemma between rationality and moral goodness. According to Gendler, local base rates about social groups will lead to morally problematic beliefs and behaviors, e.g., misidentifying a black man as wait staff because he is black. To ignore these base rates, however, is to be irrational. Thus, rationality and moral goodness are pitted against one another. My solution in Atkins (2023a) is to show that such treatment of the base rates is not irrational.

However, Davidson (2017) suggests that forming belief consistent base rates about social groups has epistemic benefits, namely increased testimonial credibility and robust social exchange. I also take Davidson to say that not all base rates are created equal. That is, we are perfectly rational to ignore some base rates, even when we endorse the conclusions that the base rates produce. Take, for instance, the base rates about driving and car crashes. If we take the base rates as seriously as, say, Gendler demands, then it would be irrational to drive

a car. But Davidson rightly notes that these base rates can properly be ignored, and, thus, it is not irrational to drive a car. All base rates need not be weighed equally.

Davidson's proposal is not clear about what to do with "negative base rates," e.g., crime rates. If we take the driving example as giving an answer, it seems that we would be rational to form beliefs consistent with negative base rates. However, Davidson might suggest that we ignore those base rates in our practical deliberations about individuals or our own actions, similar to ignoring base rates about car crashes and driving. It is rational to simply ignore some base rates.

This tentative proposal is inadequate for conceptualizing wokeness. Being woke, I think, involves more than downstream phenomena, e.g., behaviors and attitudes. It also entails a process of belief formation and evidence assessment that's attuned to treating members of minority groups well. It strikes me that one must neglect the base rates—that is, one must refrain from making inferences about an individual from the base rates about their social group.

Overall, Davidson has presented several insightful objections to the partiality account of wokeness. Davidson's objections have shown that the partiality account is most plausible as a partial account of wokeness, an invaluable insight. I have responded to some of these objections and bolstered others for future work. My hope is that this response paper has laid the groundwork for further discussion about wokeness.

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