

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND BELIEF CAUSATION

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HOW ARE BELIEFS caused, and how does the justification of a belief relate to its causation? The answers to these questions have serious practical consequences for how we view our own beliefs and the beliefs of others. Most of us are willing to accept that some beliefs are justified only relative to certain social conditions, whereas others are justified no matter what. For example, the belief that the Mona Lisa is beautiful may be a belief that I can justify only relative to cultural norms for which there is no objective justification. If this is the case, then someone from a sufficiently different culture might be equally justified in believing that the Mona Lisa is not beautiful. However, we think, the situation is different for the belief that the earth is round. We have extremely persuasive evidence that the earth is round, so we think that anyone who is exposed to the same evidence and understands it and is rational will simply have to believe that the earth is round.

The popular view that belief is socially constructed is sometimes formulated as the claim that the above distinction is naive and misguided; rationally justified scientific beliefs are essentially no different from ethical or aesthetic beliefs. Justifying reasons, evidence and the like are never enough to explain scientific beliefs; in order to explain any kind of belief, scientific or aesthetic or whatever, we must appeal to contingent social values. These are rather surprising claims, ones that fly in the face of our usual views about scientific beliefs. However, in the sociology of science this kind of view is apparently quite compelling.

While the social constructionist thesis can be formulated in a variety of ways, the common thread tying together all views that belief is socially constructed seems to be the aim to undermine the position of relative authority that science holds. Most people think that scientifically supported claims have more authority than aesthetic claims because the justification for them is grounded in rationality. The social constructionist disagrees. However, we shall see, views which have the consequence of undermining the authority of science tend to have the rather embarrassing consequence of undermining themselves. In this paper I will be exploring one formulation of the thesis that beliefs are socially constructed, a formulation that is itself open to further interpretation. In an attempt to understand why so many find such a counterintuitive view compelling, I will sketch one

understanding of the formulation that is at least plausible, and that avoids the objection that it is self undermining. However, we will find that in defending itself against objection, this view loses its original motivation. In distinguishing the more intuitively plausible and coherent understanding of the thesis from the more radical understanding I will show that those who are drawn to the former do not have to accept the latter.

In “What is Social Construction?”, Paul Boghossian explores several possible formulations of the social constructionist thesis. In looking at the social construction of beliefs, he considers four possible theses that the social constructionist might be trying to express. The one which Boghossian takes to be close to “orthodoxy” amongst sociologists of science, is the thesis that “we are not actually moved to belief by things that justify; we are only moved by our social interests” (7-8). This is the formulation we will explore. On this view, we preserve the common sense thought that the nature of justification is such that only factual evidence, and not social interests or values, actually justifies beliefs. However, this view goes on to contradict the equally entrenched common sense thought that the only reasons that are relevant to the explanation of belief in a scientific claim are the fact-based evidential reasons. Rather, the claim is that social interests and values, not evidential reasons, explain or cause beliefs. What is most shocking about this claim is that it is clearly meant to apply not only to the “context of discovery”, but also to the “context of justification”. We might all agree that in the process of discovering a fact about the world, a scientist might be inspired in his question or his answer by non-rational, social factors such as religious or ideological conviction. However, the view under discussion goes on to say that even once the claim has been made that, for example, dinosaurs once roamed the earth, and sufficient evidence has been compiled for belief in the claim to be considered rational, even then it is not the evidence that moves one to believe the claim but rather social interests and values.

This claim clearly flies in the face of the usual view, that if a claim is adequately supported by evidence, then in explaining the belief we need not appeal to any factors other than the evidence. And it goes on to say some very uncomfortable things about science in general. On the face of it, it looks as though if it were true that we are moved to belief by social values rather than by good evidence, anyone who held social interests and values that were different from ours in the relevant ways could *rationally* refuse to accept our beliefs. This consequence brings us to Boghossian’s principle objection to this view. If the social constructionist is going to admit that what actually justifies belief is good evidence and reasons, then he must provide an explanation of

why he is excluding them as possible causes of belief. And what's more, he must do so without undermining his own view as a view which is justified by evidence and reason. I will try to show how the view that beliefs are caused by social interests can be fleshed out in a coherent and plausible way, and a way which is not vulnerable to the above objection.

According to Boghossian, one possible explanation of how the social constructionists were led astray onto this counterintuitive and slippery thesis is supposed to be a basic misconception of how the sociology of science, or of knowledge in general, is to proceed. The symmetry principle, which is a principle that is supposed to guide sociological explanations of scientific beliefs, states that in explaining why a certain belief came to be believed and accepted as knowledge at a certain time, the sociologist's story must be "impartial with respect to truth and falsity, rationality and irrationality, and success or failure" (Bloor 7). I would like to accept the suggestion that this social constructionist thesis should be viewed as an attempt to apply the symmetry principle, but I will show that the view that the symmetry principle actually suggests is quite different from the one Boghossian presents and critiques.

Boghossian takes this principle to be demanding that the sociologist not appeal to justifying reasons in his explanation of the beliefs of scientists. He writes that "while it may be plausible to ignore the truth or falsity of what I believe in explaining why I came to believe it, it is not plausible to ignore whether I had any evidence for believing it" (Boghossian 8). It is surely right that we cannot explain a belief that in the mind of the believer was caused by good evidential reasons without mentioning those reasons. It is less clear that this is what the symmetry principle calls for.

It seems obvious that in the mind of the scientist, or of anyone who holds a belief that they would classify as objectively true, it is the justifying reasons that he has for his beliefs that he takes to explain his having that belief. For example, I think that the reason I believe that my door is open is that I am looking at it and it appears to be open and I have further reason to believe that my perceptual apparatus is working properly and no one is trying to trick me and so on. It seems that any explanation of my belief that the door is open that makes no mention of these reasons whatsoever cannot possibly be right, for it is ignoring the simple fact that I take these reasons to explain my beliefs.

Furthermore, any view that makes no mention of justifying reasons in its explanation of beliefs will have a hard time defending itself from Boghossian's objection that it is self-undermining. If justifying reasons play no part in causing or *constraining* belief, it is hard to see how we

are going to say that most of the beliefs we think are justified really are justified. And if we cannot make this claim, it is hard to see how we will coherently go on to say that the very view under discussion—the view that beliefs are caused by social interests—is justified. So it appears that if the claim that beliefs are caused by social interests cannot make use of justifying reasons in its explanation of beliefs, then it will be in trouble indeed.

However, it is not clear that in order to treat good and bad reasons impartially, the sociologist must ignore the good ones altogether. In fact, it looks more like the opposite is true. If he were to ignore the justifying reasons for a belief and mention only the non-justifying reasons, the sociologist would be favoring the non-justifying reasons, and surely that cannot be true to the spirit of impartiality. But if he also ignores the non-justifying reasons, he is left with no reasons at all. So if one is to be “impartial to rationality or irrationality”, one *must* use both justifying and non-justifying reasons in any explanation of a particular belief.

Of course, the fact that in order to treat rationality impartially one must make use of justifying and non-justifying reasons alike does not mean that one *should* treat these reasons impartially, or even that there is a coherent way of doing so. It may be true in principle that anything that calls itself a “symmetry principle” ought to treat its object symmetrically, but it is still not clear what it is to be impartial in this respect. However, there is a lesson to be learned from our understanding of what it is to treat truth and falsity impartially.

In the case of truth or falsity, to be impartial is to not appeal to the fact that a belief is true in the explanation of the belief. In explaining why a paleontologist believes that there were once dinosaurs roaming the earth, simply to say “He believes it because it is true” is not a legitimate explanation.¹ Rather, one must appeal to the reasons that the paleontologist takes to support this belief. Assuming that it is true that dinosaurs once roamed the earth, it still is not exactly the truth of this claim that explains anyone’s belief that it is true. The fact that dinosaurs once roamed the earth does explain why there are fossils of their bones, and those fossils may explain why we believe that there were dinosaurs, but there must always be evidence mediating between a true claim and the belief that it is true. So to treat truth and falsity impartially, we must appeal to evidence that was taken as good justifying reason, and not to the truth or falsity of the belief. What is the analogue when we go a step further and treat rationality impartially?

First, we must define what we mean by “reasons”. In ordinary usage, this word can have a broad meaning or a narrow one. On the

broader reading, it means any statement of fact, belief or observation² which is offered in explanation of a belief. So someone might legitimately say “the reason I believe in God is that I simply couldn’t go on if I thought there would be no justice in an afterlife.” These more general reasons refer both to what Boghossian calls “things that justify” and to what he calls “social interests”. On the narrower reading, the meaning is restricted “things that justify”. In this case, my need for justice is not a reason for my believing in god, because my needs have nothing to do with whether or not god exists; my personal needs do not justify either belief or disbelief in god. In Boghossian’s language, only “things that justify” count as reasons in this sense. For clarity, I will use the broader sense for the word “reason”. When I wish to refer to reasons of the second kind, I will use the term “justifying reasons”.

So, if treating truth and falsity impartially means not using the truth of a statement to explain why it came to be believed, then treating rationality and irrationality impartially must mean not using the rationality of a claim to explain why it came to be believed. That is to say, to treat rationality and irrationality symmetrically is to deny that the following sort of explanation is acceptable:

S believed that *p* because it was rational of *S* to believe that *p*,
given reasons *r*.

On the above explanation, it is not the actual evidence or justifying reasons that cause the belief, but rather the very rationality of believing that *p*, given *r*. This is a strange distinction to be making, and already we should think something has gone wrong. The agent *S* is faced with a claim, *p*, and reasons for believing that claim, *r*. But on the above description, it is not the actual reasons or evidence that cause the belief, but rather the property that these reasons have in relation to *p*, the property of being rational or justificatory. But if it is the property of rationality that causes one to hold rational beliefs, what is it that causes one to hold irrational beliefs? Imagine that subject *A* has the same evidence as *S*, but holds that *not-p*. Unlike *S*’s inference from the reasons to the belief that *p*, *A*’s conclusion is irrational. If it is the rationality of a rational inference that causes an agent to hold a belief rationally, then it seems it should be the irrationality which causes the agent to hold a belief irrationally. On the above framework, the explanation of *A*’s belief would be

A believed that *not-p* because it was irrational of *A* to believe
that *not-p*, given reasons *r*.

Now what we need is a story about why one person’s belief is caused

by rationality, whereas another's belief is being caused by irrationality. Furthermore, unless we want to say that A is systematically irrational, we need an explanation of why the irrationality of a belief can cause a belief in some cases and the rationality of a belief can cause a belief in other cases *for the same thinker*. Without such an explanation it would look as though either all of an agent's beliefs are rational or all are irrational.

The above explanation just doesn't make much sense, and I think it points to the mistake in both of these explanations, the mistake that the principle of symmetry wishes to avoid. We should not give explanations of beliefs in which the actual rationality of the belief is used as an explanation. Rather, we should say:

A believed that p because he believed it was rational to believe that p , given reasons r .

and

A believed that *not-p* because he believed it was rational to believe that *not-p*, given reasons r .³

This seems to be the best way to include rationality in a description of a belief. With this framework we can preserve our intuitions not only about how one comes to hold a rational belief, but also on how one comes to hold an irrational one. For in both cases the agent thinks his belief is rational, it just happens to be that in one case he is wrong. On this kind of description, the rationality of the belief is treated impartially, but in filling out what the reasons are in any particular case, the description will still make reference to the reasons, justifying and not, that explain the belief. So the symmetry principle can be upheld while still using all reasons, not just non-justifying reasons, in the explanation of belief. Of course, in all of this it remains to be seen where the social element is supposed to come in. We will see below that it comes in with the story of how beliefs are actually caused.

Even if we accept the above description of the relation between belief and rationality in the mind of the agent, the question remains of *how* beliefs are actually caused. Let's assume that it is the case that for belief p , the agent believes that it is rational for him to believe that p , given reasons r . Still, how is the belief actually caused? Well, it seems reasonable to suppose that if we've got the belief that it is rational to believe that p given r , and we need to get from there to the belief that p , then the missing element is the desire to be rational, or to hold all and only those beliefs that it is rational to hold. This desire is a necessary element because it is hard to see how simply believing that it would be rational to believe that p is supposed to cause an agent to *do* anything,

including to hold a belief; you can imagine a thinker saying “so its rational to believe that the earth is a sphere; so what?”. But if the agent *wants* to hold beliefs that it is rational to hold, then with this belief and desire together it is easy to say how the agent comes to hold those beliefs he thinks are rational.

Maybe we can grant that what causes beliefs of a certain kind is the desire to hold rational beliefs. How is this supposed to help the social constructionist? Somewhere in this causing desire he must be able to point to a social element. There are two places where he might find this social element. First, he might argue that rationality itself is the social element. This would not be an unfamiliar argument. This line would collapse the view that we are only moved to belief by social interests into an alternative social constructionist thesis that any thinker’s system of rationality is justified only relative to culture. That is to say, p is rational only relative to the system of rationality the agent is working with, and there are no rational grounds on which to chose one system of rationality over another. This is well covered terrain, and I do not wish to get into it here. At the beginning we set out to find an understanding of the social constructionist position that was not self-undermining, and it does not look like we will find it here⁷. If one argues that any belief is justified only relative to a particular rational system, then one must admit that ones own beliefs are justified only relative to a particular rational system. And thus it is hard to see why one then suggests the belief, for example that we are moved to belief by social interests, to others.

If the social constructionist wants to avoid collapsing into relativism about rationality, he must find another way to bring in the social. The only way left is to argue that it is this desire itself, the desire to hold rational beliefs, which is a product of social conditions.

To review, the view that beliefs are caused by social interests is the view that regardless of whether or not a belief is rational, what actually causes the belief is contingent social interests. To be consistent with the symmetry principle, the view must deny that rational beliefs are caused by the rationality of the belief. Rather it must say that for a belief, the agent believes that it is rational to hold that belief, given the evidence. Furthermore, the view must employ an instrumentalist conception of rationality. That is to say, the view sees rationality as a tool used for picking out a certain kind of beliefs, specifically, rational beliefs. It says that while it is true that for a belief, the thinker believes that it is rational to hold that belief, this is not enough to actually *cause* a belief. The thinker must also have the desire to hold those beliefs which it is rational to believe. This is the framework that this view presupposes. The real meat of the thesis comes in at this point, for it is

at this point that the theorist must go on to argue that this desire which does the work in causing belief

The desire to hold all and only those beliefs which it is rational to hold.

is fundamentally a social product.

It is important to note here one of the developments that this explication of the social constructionist thesis has brought out. The primary objection to the thesis (when it was understood as excluding justifying reasons from explanations of beliefs) was that it was self-undermining; if the justifying reasons for a belief play no part in explaining that belief, how are we to say that any of our own beliefs (including the one under discussion) are justified? However, on the new understanding, I think this objection will not go through. The thesis ought to be understood as simply stating that while there are reasons that justify beliefs, these are not the causes of the belief. What does cause the belief is the desire to hold rational beliefs, and this desire will do as good a job as anything at ensuring that our beliefs are rational. If there is a fundamentally social element here, it should not prevent us, once we have the thought that is a candidate for belief, from examining whether or not it is rationally justified; as long as the social interests are pushing us to hold the beliefs that we deem rational, there is no reason to believe that we are any less likely to be holding justified beliefs.

So the thesis that we are now defending has shifted. In order to show that “we are only moved to belief by social interests”, we must be convinced that the desire to hold beliefs which it is rational to hold is a desire that arises out of social conditions. In order to see what a view might look like, it will be useful to contrast it with the most likely alternative. If one wanted to deny the social constructionist thesis one might agree that beliefs are caused by this desire to hold rational beliefs; but this desire is an essentially rational desire that results from contingent facts about the human condition. Humans have a very fundamental desire to survive; this desire is one that it is quite rational to hold, and this is what gives rise to the desire to hold rational beliefs. If I believe that it is rational for me to believe that if I drink arsenic I will die, then I will go on to believe that if I drink arsenic I will die, because if I do not believe this, I will have no reason to not drink arsenic, and thus I might drink the arsenic and die. Since I do not want to die, I am best advised to hold the belief that if I drink arsenic I will die.

There are several ways one might try to deny this explanation. One would be to simply concede the point that the desire to be rational

stems from the desire to survive, and to modify the thesis to accommodate this fact. The thesis would, on the modified version, say simply that we are moved to belief by *contingent* interests, rather than social interests. After all, there is nothing in the nature of being a thinker, or a thinker that holds beliefs, that says that you have to have the desire to survive. If there were thinkers who were immortal, they would not have a desire to survive, or if they did it wouldn't have the power to motivate them to do anything. Thus their beliefs would not be caused by the desire to survive. However, it does not look as though the social constructionist would be satisfied with this modification, for it denies one of the consequences that motivates the social constructionist to hold his view to begin with. The motivation behind the social constructionist thesis is supposed to be to undermine the privileged position of scientific beliefs. If the social constructionist thesis were just that we are moved to belief because of contingent facts about human nature (such as our mortality), this would have no impact on the deniability of justified scientific claims.

Another route would be to say that the desire to hold only those beliefs which it is rational to hold stems from a desire to be considered rational by ones peers, and this more basic desire is social. It is simply a matter of empirical fact that within communities that value rationality (such as scientific communities) there are benefits that come with being considered rational and sanctions that result from being considered irrational. The desire to hold rational beliefs, and consequently the holding of those beliefs that the agent believes to be rational, is simply a result of the desire to obtain certain social benefits and avoid certain social sanctions. So on this view, a theoretical physicist believes theories which are rationally justified because he knows that if he believes obviously unjustified theories he will be laughed at, and his peers will praise and appreciate his work only if they think it is rational. I think such a thesis does remain true to the spirit in which some social constructionist theses are offered; it preserves the thought that if culture were different (not just human nature), the beliefs we held would be different from the way they are. And still it does not undermine itself. Even the harshest critic of social constructionism will agree that when we are evaluating the rationality of a belief, we are not interested in *why* we believe it, but rather in whether or not it is rational. This version of the claim says nothing about whether or not any claim is rationally justified. It simply talks about why we believe the claim. If it is true, the only grounds one might have for not believing it would be to say that he does not wish to hold rational beliefs. This is not an problematic consequence. But with this explanation we face the same problem we saw when we suggested that the social constructionist

modify his claim to be simply that we are moved to belief by contingent facts about human nature. Again, the thesis will not undermine the rationality of scientific beliefs, for the same reasons that it does not undermine itself.

We could go on to evaluate the plausibility of these hypotheses about the nature of the desire to be rational. And we could go on to offer more hypotheses. However, all we need to see here is that the question that social scientists are addressing here, the question of why people want to be rational, is an empirical question. It will not be settled by way of rational examination. And this is as it should be, for the social scientist is supposed to be addressing empirical questions.

As I have shown, the new view, that the desire to be rational is a result of social conditions, does not support the program of undermining the sciences. It grants that the beliefs under discussion are in fact rational. Furthermore, it does not directly address the issue of whether there is one right system of rationality or whether we can have any adequate grounds from which to choose one system of rationality over another. It is, at this point, perfectly compatible with the view that science employs the best system of rationality we have available and that its claims, when supported, are more likely to be true than the incompatible claims emanating from different systems of rationality. However, it may be a thesis that those who are interested in the psychological or sociological causes of beliefs find compelling. What the preceding discussion has tried to show is that the view that we are moved to belief by social interests should be understood as an empirical claim about the causation of beliefs, distinct from any philosophical claim about the justification of beliefs. One who is drawn to the empirical claim should not feel forced to support the less tenable philosophical claim.

NOTES

¹ For more on this point, see Ian Hacking's *The Social Construction of What?*, p. 81.

² And of course, there is often overlap between "fact, belief, and observation."

³ This does not need to be taken as a description of all beliefs. It may be that we sometimes hold beliefs that we don't think are rational. However, this discussion, and the social constructionist thesis in general, is aimed at those beliefs which we *do* think are rational. So this description can be taken to apply only to those beliefs we would say are rational.

⁴ For more on this point, see chapter two of Thomas Nagel's *The Last Word*.

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