12 The Problem of Historical Variability

Nathan Ballantyne

I know no way in which a writer may more fittingly introduce his work to the public than by giving a brief account of who and what he is. By this means some of the blame for what he has done is very properly shifted to the extenuating circumstances of his life.


1. INTRODUCTION

This essay explores a pervasive and disconcerting worry about intellectual life: our controversial beliefs regarding morals, politics, religion, and philosophy depend on facts about our personal history. The circumstances of the past clearly have a great impact on our present situation and outlook. This is sometimes called “the weight of history.” It’s like the weight of the atmosphere. It is unthinkably huge, we couldn’t live without it, and we rarely pause to think about it. What’s worrisome here is that there is apparently something accidental or arbitrary about having any particular history and this strongly suggests that the beliefs that are influenced by our historical backgrounds are sometimes rationally problematic. Historical variability (or, more briefly, variability) is the term I will give to the idea that our disputed convictions vary with different backgrounds.

Many of us have entertained worries about historical variability. Such worries may shape our intellectual views, shading particular matters with skepticism. Or variability may remain a source of disquiet, a threat to our cherished convictions. Either way, variability has not received sustained philosophical attention. Now and again, thinkers point toward it, but pointing is typically all we get—worked-out arguments based on variability are uncommon. My main concern here is to introduce and also to begin to defend some well-developed variability arguments. In a sense, what I will call the ‘historical variability problem’ has a double meaning: variability challenges our beliefs, all right, but there is also some difficulty in seeing what the problem really is.
In Section 2, I will introduce the historical variability problem by drawing on some old and newer sources. It is really a cluster of claims, which taken collectively seem to recommend doubt or skepticism regarding some disputed convictions. It remains uncertain, though, just how to spell out or arrange these ideas and thereby turn them into a good argument. So, in Sections 3 and 4, I shall develop a pair of new arguments, each one of which I argue is plausible. Both raise a genuine and novel challenge to the rationality of particular beliefs. I will conclude in Section 5 by noting some differences between these two arguments.

2. FINDING THE PROBLEM

Common to nearly all worries about historical variability is that they are underdeveloped. Let me briefly summarize three of its manifestations.

Going back to the ancient world, we find claims regarding variability in works from Xenophanes to Sextus. Philo of Alexandria confesses that he won’t be surprised if the “labile and heterogeneous mob” believes “whatever has once been handed down to them,” whether by parents, masters, or culture. Philo appears vexed, however, by the fact that philosophers, “who profess to hunt down the clear and the true in things, are divided into brigades and platoons and set down dogmas that are discordant.” Social factors seem to inculcate different dogmas in different groups—and philosophers aren’t exempt. This leads Philo to apply a standard Pyrrhonian “mode,” resulting in the canceling out of opposites and suspension of judgment.

From the Renaissance to the modern period, we find Montaigne, Descartes, Locke, and others concerned with variability, each appreciating the influence of culture on one’s thinking. And a famous passage from Mill’s On Liberty vividly captures a thought about variability:

And the world, to each individual, means the part of it with which he comes in contact; his party, his sect, his church, his class of society... Nor is his faith in this collective authority at all shaken by his being aware that other ages, countries, sects, churches, classes, and parties have thought, and even now think, the exact reverse... [I]t never troubles him that mere accident has decided which of these numerous worlds is the object of his reliance, and that the same causes which make him a Churchman in London, would have made him a Buddhist or a Confucian in Pekin. (1859: ch. 2, paragraph 3)

Mill’s idea appears to be that some of our convictions have cultural or historical causes, and that those causes are a matter of “mere accident.” Reflecting on the way certain beliefs are influenced by such causes, our “faith” in our received views should be “shaken” or “troubled.”
Variability has more recently made an appearance within debates in philosophy of religion. For instance, Peter van Inwagen (1995) asserts that the Christian Church is God’s “unique instrument of salvation.” Van Inwagen then entertains the following objection (put in an interlocutor’s mouth): “Well, isn’t it fortunate for you that you just happen to be a member of this ‘unique instrument of salvation’. I suppose you realize that if you had been raised among Muslims, you would make similar claims for Islam?” (1995: 237–38). Van Inwagen concurs: if he had grown up in Mecca, he’d likely be a devout Muslim. But he isn’t sure what follows from the observation. He notes that the objection, if it shows anything at all, can hardly be confined to religion; it spills over to topics like politics, too:

Tell the Marxist or the liberal or the Burkean conservative that if only he had been raised in Nazi Germany he would probably have belonged to the Hitler Youth, and he will answer that he is aware of this elementary fact, and ask what your point is. No one I know of supposes that the undoubted fact that one’s adherence to a system of political thought and action is conditioned by one’s upbringing is a reason for doubting that the political system one favors is—if not the uniquely “correct” one—clearly and markedly superior to its available rivals. (1995: 238)

Of course, granting that the objection against van Inwagen’s religious belief works, it also works against political belief. Van Inwagen claims that since the latter objection is not compelling, neither is the former.

But is it true there’s no problem with variability? Or is it a good reason for doubt about controversial convictions? I shall say more shortly. For now, consider some salient features of worries about variability that are revealed by the above sources:

1. The beliefs challenged by variability typically concern controversial topics like politics, morals, religion, and philosophy, not ordinary or commonplace topics.
2. These controversial beliefs are connected to various causal factors such that if one’s background is changed, one’s belief is changed. More exactly: if one’s background had differed in certain respects, then one would have had different beliefs.
3. The fact that a person has a particular history or background is a contingent matter.
4. These beliefs are often connected to factors that are non-epistemic. Growing up in one culture rather than another, for instance, is not usually what we would regard as good evidence or grounds for a belief.

All of this seems sensible if not clearly true. That is part of what has led many thinkers, from antiquity to the present, to grapple with variability. The variability problem should not be dismissed casually. Initial plausibility to
the side, questions remain. What should we conclude? What follows? What is at stake when we consider variability?

Befitting its subject, an argument inspired by variability can take many forms. Here, I’ll convert some thoughts concerning variability into two arguments for the conclusion that particular convictions are irrational, in the sense that, on balance, there is reason to give up those convictions.

3. THE SYMMETRY ARGUMENT

We just reviewed some passages that suggest an argument with the following conclusion:

\[ C \]

Your belief in some proposition \( p \) is irrational.

As we proceed, it’ll be useful to take the proposition to concern something controversial about politics, religion, philosophy, or morality.

What about premises? There is plausibly a causal link between particular beliefs and backgrounds. As we’ve seen, that link is such that if your background had been different in certain respects, then you wouldn’t have accepted everything you now believe (and you’d have accepted claims you don’t now believe). From here, there are two general ways to develop the premise. We might say that facts about variability by themselves imply that certain beliefs are irrational. Alternatively, we might say that someone’s reflective reasons (or knowledge or beliefs) concerning variability imply that certain of her beliefs are irrational. The sources we surveyed intend to suggest the latter sort of premise. To a first approximation, then, the premise:

\[ P1 \]

You have reason to believe that your belief that \( p \) is such that if your background had differed in certain respects, then you would not have accepted \( p \).

To simplify our discussion, here and below, when I say “reason” I mean “reason on balance.” I use “not accept \( p \)” as an umbrella term that covers someone’s either disbelieving \( p \) or withholding judgment on \( p \). Obviously, \( C \) doesn’t follow from \( P1 \). To get a valid argument, we can add a conditional as a premise whose antecedent is \( P1 \) and whose consequent is \( C \).

\[ P2 \]

If you have reason to believe that your belief that \( p \) is such that if your background had differed in certain respects, then you would not have accepted \( p \), then your belief that \( p \) is irrational.
An unrestricted P2 is dubious. Your belief that you are now reading this essay has the following counterfactual feature: if your background had differed in certain respects, you would not have accepted it—because you’d be working in the garden, say. There’s no rational problem with your belief, however. To set such cases aside, we can restrict P2 to cases where $p$’s truth value stays fixed across the background changes. Consider it done. Two notes on the significance of this restriction are in order. First, recall that we are mainly interested in beliefs about controversial topics like politics, morals, and philosophy. These beliefs are often such that if your background had differed in particular respects, then you would not have accepted $p$, where $p$ would still have had the same truth value. The restriction does not prevent us from talking about those kinds of convictions. Second, it follows from the restriction that the variability argument we are developing cannot lead to global skepticism. Some beliefs, including your belief that you are reading this essay, won’t be touched.\(^\text{10}\)

Although P2 needs refinement, notice how it is supported up front by a case:

**COIN FLIP**

Paul believes that proposition $p$ is true. McCoy tells Paul a story about a coin. The coin is not common currency—it has unique powers. If it lands heads, someone will believe $p$; and if it lands tails, someone won’t accept $p$. Then McCoy, who Paul sensibly thinks is a highly reliable testifier and not at all inclined to trickery, continues: “What if the outcome of the coin toss solely caused you to believe as you do, Paul? Well, here it is.” McCoy reveals the coin, heads up, in an open hand. Paul has reason to believe this coin affected his believing that $p$.

The natural reaction here is that, if Paul has a reason to think the coin toss is the sole cause—the complete explanation—of his beliefs, then his belief is not rational. Learning that you believe something because of a coin flip and continuing to believe isn’t rational.\(^\text{11}\) Notice how COIN FLIP supports P2. When we consider that case, we judge that once Paul appreciates his situation his belief is irrational. We think that the consequent of P2 is true. What’s more, we think the antecedent of the conditional is satisfied. If P2’s antecedent is true, then we have evidence that non-epistemically relevant features of Paul’s background play a role in causally determining his belief. Careful reflection on COIN FLIP can make it quite natural to generalize to P2.

P1, P2, and C are a first approximation of one variability argument. The task of refinement comes next.

As it stands, even the restricted version of P2 faces counterexamples. In these examples, though P2’s antecedent is satisfied, it is plausible to deny its consequent is true. Let me state them in rapid succession before offering the needed fixes. (a) Suppose you have reason to think you wouldn’t have believed $p$ if your background had differed because, in such an event, you would have lacked the evidence you now have for $p$. (b) Suppose you have reason to take it that you wouldn’t have believed $p$ if your background
had differed because you would have lacked the cognitive skills relevant to appropriately believing \( p \) that you now have. And suppose you have reason to think that you wouldn't have accepted \( p \) if your background had differed because you wouldn't have made use of the evidence and cognitive skills you now have. Given each of (a) through (c), it seems that your belief could be perfectly rational—yet P2 implies that your belief is irrational.

To repair P2 in light of (a) through (c), I will stipulate the following three further restrictions. A suitable version of P2 must be such that, for it to obtain, you have reason to believe each of the following: (d) that you and your dissenting counterfactual self have the same (total) evidence for \( p \) that you now have; (e) that you and your counterfactual self have the same cognitive skills or virtues relevant to rationally believing \( p \); and (f) that you and your counterfactual self both utilize the same relevant evidence and cognitive skills. The stipulations in (d) through (f) allow us to refine P2 as follows:

**P2a**

If you have reason to believe that your belief that \( p \) is such that if your background had differed in certain respects, then you would not have accepted \( p \), even though you would have used the same evidence for \( p \) and the cognitive skills relevant to appropriately believing \( p \) that you actually used, then your belief that \( p \) is irrational.

More refinement is surely needed, but I’ll let it be for now. The argument we’re working on has two premises: P2a and now this one.

**P1a**

You have reason to believe that your belief that \( p \) is such that if your background had differed in certain respects, then you would not have accepted \( p \), even though you would have used the same evidence for \( p \) and the cognitive skills relevant to appropriately believing \( p \) that you actually used.

P1a and P2a together entail C. This argument was arrived at by gradually ruling out relevant epistemic differences between you and your counterfactual self, and thus guaranteeing a kind of symmetry. Naturally enough, I will refer to this as the Symmetry Argument.

With the Symmetry Argument on the table, we can discuss the premises. Why think that P2a is true? A case like COIN FLIP may be devised to lend strong support to P2a. (I’ll leave such a case shelved for now; it is clear enough how it will go.) So why think that P1a is true with respect to any of our beliefs? Notice that P1a has been strengthened by assuming someone has reason to think that he and who-he-would-have-been both possess the same evidence and cognitive skills. A salient question, then: with respect to some proposition, do we reasonably take ourselves to have disagreeing
counterfactual selves who are our equals with respect to the relevant evidence and cognitive skills? Insofar as we do, skepticism looms. (Note a pair of important differences between this variability argument and “peer disagreement” arguments. Advocates of the latter typically say that only actual disagreement with another thinker is epistemically significant; see Christensen [2007: 208], for instance. But the Symmetry Argument gets off the ground with merely possible disagreement, with none other than yourself. These differences hold for the argument in the next section as well.)

I will offer two reasons for thinking P1a is plausibly thought true by philosophers with respect to some of their philosophical beliefs. The first starts with a case that is—or will be after enough story-telling— analogous to the situation of some philosophers. (It will be obvious how we could extend this case to controversial beliefs about other topics.)

Green must decide where to attend grad school. He tosses a fair coin to decide between two options. If the coin lands heads, Green will attend Brown University; if tails, the University of Arizona. No matter whether the coin lands heads or tails, a few years hence Green and who-he-would-have-been-had-the-coin-landed-otherwise will have the same relevant evidence and cognitive skills with respect to certain theses. Years later, in a fit of nostalgia, Green remembers that fateful coin flip. He believes that his belief in some philosophical proposition \( p \) is such that if that coin had landed otherwise, he wouldn’t have accepted \( p \), even though he would have had the same evidence and cognitive skills he now has.\(^{14}\)

At least arguably, Green’s situation is analogous to the situation of many philosophers with respect to some of their philosophical beliefs. But then those philosophers should accept P1a.

A second reason for philosophers to think that P1a plausibly applies to them is found in actual cases of disagreement. Some philosophers claim to have reason to take themselves to have equals with respect to evidence and cognitive skills.\(^{15}\) For example, David Christensen proposes that in philosophy “the parties to the disputes are fairly often epistemic peers” (2007: 215, emphasis added), by which he means philosophers are often equally intelligent, informed, and rational. And Richard Feldman writes thus: “(C)onsider those cases in which the reasonable thing to think is that another person, every bit as sensible, serious, and careful as oneself, has reviewed the same information as oneself and has come to a contrary conclusion to one’s own” (2006: 235). Feldman says such cases are common, inside philosophy and beyond. What follows from the claim that philosophers have reason to believe they have equals regarding evidence and cognitive skills? Well, by reflecting on actual disagreement, someone may conclude that if she had the background of her opponent, she would not have accepted what she now believes.

An example due to Peter van Inwagen will make this clear.\(^{16}\) As it happens, van Inwagen believes that incompatibilism concerning free will and deter-
minism is true and that David Lewis denies that thesis by believing compatibilism. Suppose also that, when it comes to incompatibilism, van Inwagen reasonably takes Lewis to be his equal with respect to the relevant evidence and cognitive skills. Now, to give the example a new twist, suppose that van Inwagen imagines how Baby Peter might have been switched in his cradle with Baby David. Then Peter considers how he could have grown up in the Lewis household—in just such a way to produce a boy relevantly like a compatibilist such as Lewis. That seems possible. If the cradle switch had happened like that, van Inwagen would have not accepted that incompatibilism is true, as he would have had Lewis’s background. Yet Lewis’s background might have given Baby Peter precisely the evidence and cognitive skills that the actual van Inwagen and Lewis now have. So, if all of that is true, then van Inwagen should believe P1a. And, reflecting on this story, van Inwagen may come to believe as much. The story deserves a more cautious telling, to be sure. But if you spin a similar tale about yourself, then P1a holds for you, too.

Thus concludes a sketch of one variability argument. P2a is supported by a natural intuition, and there are reasons to think that P1a is true of philosophers with respect to themselves. Of course, if we accept the Symmetry Argument, then some philosophers’ beliefs are irrational—perhaps even yours and mine.

Even if the Symmetry Argument does not persuade, it leaves us wiser. It shows us a hard-to-discern feature of some worries about variability. We will remember that, initially, the Symmetry Argument’s unrefined premises let in the following possibility: you could have differed in attitude with your counterfactual self due to some difference in evidence or cognitive skill. And that possibility revealed just where refinement was needed. After all, such evidential or cognitive differences make for relevant epistemic differences between you and your dissenting counterfactual self. Refinements excluded those potential differences.

The refinements were designed to guarantee a sort of epistemic symmetry between you and your counterfactual self. And here we come to what is suggested—but not quite said—by the Symmetry Argument. By your lights, if you and your counterfactual self have that kind of symmetry and yet disagree, you are open to a charge of arbitrariness. What is your reason for sticking with your view? Given the symmetry, you have no advantage. Holding your ground, absent reason to favor it, is unsuitably impartial and therefore irrational. As I think of it, the idea of arbitrariness plays an importantly different role in another variability argument. I’ll turn to that next.

4. THE ARBITRARINESS ARGUMENT

One way to criticize a belief is to say it is arbitrary. Saying so may carry with it an epistemic disparagement. Suppose that Blue is faced with incompatible propositions and he knows that each one is equally well-supported by his
(total) evidence. If he comes to believe one proposition over the other, Blue obviously does something epistemically improper. Rationality repels arbitrariness. What we find with Blue is evidential arbitrariness:

For propositions $p$ and not-$p$, and evidence $E$, $p$ and not-$p$ are evidentially arbitrary for you with respect to $E$ if $E$ no better supports one proposition than the other for you.

If we have reason to think some belief is evidentially arbitrary, then that belief is irrational for us. To see why, recall that I stipulated in Section 2 that someone's belief that $p$ is irrational if, on balance, she has reason to give it up. Let's suppose you judge that your belief in $p$ is evidentially arbitrary. Then believing $p$ is, by your lights, just as well supported as believing not-$p$. You are best off withholding judgment on $p$ here. You have reason on balance to do something other than believe $p$ and so believing it is irrational.

A variability argument based on evidential arbitrariness would begin with the following idea: if you and your counterfactual self have the same evidence and disagree, then your belief is evidentially arbitrary and thus irrational. As we've seen, the Symmetry Argument approximates that idea by requiring that you and your dissenting counterfactual self use the same relevant evidence (among other things) to arrive at different views. There's a catch: building this kind of arbitrariness into a variability argument will quickly bring us full circle to the Symmetry Argument (see Section 3).

Whatever its merits, the Symmetry Argument failed to capture something critical about variability. We realize that if life had gone differently, then across a vast range of situations, and regarding many propositions, we would have different evidence. That's because, for the most part, we and our dissenting counterfactual selves would be in evidentially asymmetrical situations. And with different backgrounds, our cognitive skills would often enough differ and thus make for relevant asymmetries between ourselves and who-we-would-have-been. The kind of epistemic symmetry required by the Symmetry Argument doesn't reach the bottom of our worry about variability.

So let us assume that in close worlds the only circumstances in which you wouldn't have accepted proposition $p$ are those in which you failed to have the same relevant evidence and cognitive skills you've actually used to arrive at your belief that $p$. The Symmetry Argument founders on the above assumption. Even so, we may still worry about variability. In a sense that I will soon explain, the worry just moves "up" a level.

To understand why variability should still concern us, imagine that you attended, say, Cornell University for graduate school and ended up with evidence $E$. If you had gone to the University of St. Andrews, you would have had some different body of evidence, $E^*$. And you know that a coin flip determined where you went to school. This is a case of variability that features evidential asymmetry. $E$ seems to be good grounds for believing $p$;
and your counterfactual self also finds that $E^*$ is good grounds for believing not-$p$. And we can even assume those grounds in fact make rational $p$ and not-$p$ for you and your counterfactual self, respectively. What is perplexing is this: you could have easily had $E^*$ and it wasn’t as though you had good reasons to select the path that brought you to $E$. Isn’t that worrisome? Doesn’t sticking to your view seem somehow arbitrary here? I am inclined to think so.

For comparison, consider the following case:

**FLIP**

You know that if a particular coin lands heads, you will get evidence which will lead you to believe $p$; and if it lands tails, you will get different evidence which will lead you to believe not-$p$. The coin lands tails and you end up believing not-$p$.

Though you wind up with a belief that is apparently arbitrary, this has nothing to do with evidential arbitrariness. Instead, FLIP puts on display what we can label *causal arbitrariness*:

For a proposition $p$ and events (or states of affairs or facts) $e_1$ and $e_2$, $p$ is causally arbitrary for you only if (i) were $e_1$ to obtain, you would believe $p$ and (ii) were $e_2$ to obtain, you would not accept $p$.  

Notice that in FLIP the proposition you believe is causally arbitrary for you. (To simplify expression of this idea, I’ll say your belief is causally arbitrary.) Is your belief irrational due to this sort of arbitrariness? Not plainly. That’s because—consistent with having a causally arbitrary belief—you might have reason to think that tails is more likely than heads to furnish you with a true belief. Another case will bring this out:

**MAJOR**

Several years ago you decided to major in Philosophy rather than Physical Education on the basis of a coin flip. One consequence is that you end up thinking that *modus tollens* is a valid argument form. Yet you might have easily become a Physical Education major and, if you had, you wouldn’t have accepted that *modus tollens* is valid. In the aftermath, you realize that if you had become a Physical Education major, you wouldn’t have believed truly about *modus tollens*.

Your belief that *modus tollens* is valid is causally arbitrary. If the coin had landed otherwise and you majored in Physical Education, you wouldn’t have accepted that *modus tollens* is valid; but the coin in fact led you to Philosophy and you’ve come to think that argument form is valid. Critically, rationality does not repel causal arbitrariness. Your belief is by all appear-
The Problem of Historical Variability

ances rational. Lucky for you, the major you picked reliably leads students to think rightly about modus tollens.

MAJOR tells us that a causally arbitrary belief may be rational. What’s the matter with your belief in FLIP? Maybe nothing. Add another detail to the case: that the proposition $p$ you believe is the coin landed heads and not-\(p\) is the coin didn’t land heads. And suppose you are looking at the coin. If it landed heads, you’d have evidence to believe $p$; if it landed tails, you’d have evidence to believe not-$p$. Heads makes it more likely than tails that $p$ is true; tails makes it more likely than heads that not-$p$ is true. Thus, given either outcome, you would have reason to think that the ‘up’ side of the coin is more likely than the other side to give you a true belief.

The lesson is that information about the relative likelihood of your now believing truly and not falsely, in the wake of events $e_1$ and $e_2$, may prevent causal arbitrariness from eliminating rational belief. A case will help to illustrate this idea:

**BATH**

Evelyn has two thermometers and the same good reason for thinking each one is reliable—they came from the same box. When she randomly picks one and dunks it in the bathtub, it reads 41°C. She comes to think that the water is 41°C. A moment later, she adds the second thermometer to the tub and it reads 51°C. She immediately realizes that had she initially tried the second thermometer, she would have believed the water is 51°C. Evelyn nonetheless persists in believing the water is 41°C.

Evelyn’s belief seems to be arbitrary and we will call the sort of arbitrariness in play causal arbitrariness+:

For a proposition $p$ and events (or states of affairs or facts) $e_1$ and $e_2$, $p$ is causally arbitrary+ for you only if (i) were $e_1$ to obtain, you would believe $p$ and (ii) were $e_2$ to obtain, you would not accept $p$, (iii) you lack reason to think $e_1$ makes it more likely than $e_2$ that you now believe truly and not falsely whether $p$.

(In place of the phrase “now believing truly and not falsely whether $p$,” I will occasionally opt for expressions like “gets $p$ right.”) Although BATH features causal arbitrariness+, something else is going on in MAJOR. In that example, you have reason to think $e_1$ (the flip that leads you to major in Philosophy) makes it more likely that you now believe truly and not falsely that modus tollens is a valid argument form than does $e_2$ (the flip that leads you to major in Physical Education). In BATH, Evelyn has no such reason to prefer $e_1$ to $e_2$. 
Does causal arbitrariness+ eliminate rational belief? That is, supposing you have reason to think your belief is causally arbitrary+, must your belief be irrational? It seems doubtful and a case shows as much:

**LOOKING**

A coin has just flipped. Green is looking at the coin and believes it landed heads. Let event e1 be the coin landed heads and Green is looking at it. Green has reason to think that e1 is such that if it obtains, then he believes the coin landed heads. Let event e2 be the coin landed tails and Green is looking at it. He has reason to think that e2 is such that if it obtains, then he does not accept that the coin landed heads. But Green apparently lacks reason to think e1 makes it more likely than e2 that he now gets it right whether the coin landed heads. That’s because he sensibly thinks the obtaining of either e1 or e2 makes it highly likely that he will get the matter right.

In LOOKING, Green has reason to think his belief that the coin landed heads satisfies causal arbitrariness+. His belief is perfectly rational nonetheless.

Having reason to think your belief is causally arbitrary+, then, is not enough to make that belief irrational. When you have reason to think that each of e1 and e2 make it highly likely that you will believe truly and not falsely regarding \( p \), having reason to take your belief in \( p \) to be causally arbitrary+ is of little rational significance. But in the cases of variability we are interested in here, you typically don’t have reason to think anything like that about e1 and e2. In BATH, Evelyn plausibly lacks reason to think that each of e1 (reading the first thermometer) and e2 (reading the second thermometer) make it highly likely she will get the temperature right.

So a new brand of arbitrariness is in view. I shall call it causal arbitrariness++. It is causal arbitrariness+ with an extra condition appended to the right side of the “only if”:

(iv) You lack reason to think that each of e1 and e2 makes it highly likely that you will believe truly and not falsely regarding \( p \).

I will recommend that having reason to think one of our beliefs is causally arbitrary++ makes that belief irrational for us. And that idea drives a new version of the variability argument. Here’s the conditional premise:

**P3**

If you have reason to believe that your belief that proposition \( p \) is such that (i) were event e1 to obtain, you would believe \( p \) and (ii) were event e2 to obtain, you would not accept \( p \), and (iii) you lack reason to think e1 makes it more likely than e2 that you now believe truly and not falsely whether \( p \), and (iv) you lack reason to think that each of e1 and e2 makes
The Problem of Historical Variability

it highly likely that you will believe truly and not falsely regarding $p$, then your belief that $p$ is irrational.$^{25}$

We can label P3’s antecedent ‘P4’. Of course, P3 and P4 together entail C. I will refer to this as the Arbitrariness Argument.

What should we think of these premises? To understand why P3 is reasonable, ruminate on examples along the lines of BATH. Evelyn’s belief that the bath water is 41°C is plausibly taken to be irrational. So, the consequent of P3 is true. When considering the example, we judge that Evelyn is irrational only after she realizes that the two thermometers conflict. She has reason to think that her belief is causally arbitrary++. That is, Evelyn appreciates that had she initially used the second thermometer, she would have instead believed the water is 51°C. And she knows that she is without reason to think using one thermometer rather than the other makes it more likely that she will get the water’s temperature right. She also knows that she lacks reason to think using each thermometer makes it highly likely she’ll get the temperature right. This implies that P3’s antecedent is true. By reflecting on such examples, we will want to generalize to P3.

What of P4? Why should we think it is true with respect to our controversial beliefs? As we start towards an answer, I can do no better than quote Peter van Inwagen. He compares the way we actually adopt our philosophical opinions to opening a book that lists “a thousand mutually inconsistent points of philosophical equilibrium” and then choosing one at random. It wouldn’t be rational to believe what we randomly chose from that book. Yet, by van Inwagen’s reckoning, something like using that book is pretty much what nature and nurture have done with me.

The point of philosophical equilibrium I occupy depends . . . (very likely) on what my parents taught me about morals and politics and religion when I was a child, and (certainly) on what university I selected for graduate study in philosophy, who my departmental colleagues have been, the books and essays I have read and haven’t read, the conversations I have had at APA divisional meetings as a result of turning right rather than left when I was wandering aimlessly about at a reception. . . Other philosophers have reached different points of philosophical equilibrium simply because these factors have operated differently in the course of the formation of their opinions. These reflections suggest—and the suggestion is quite strong indeed—that I ought to withdraw from the point of philosophical equilibrium I occupy and become a sceptic about the answers to all or almost all philosophical questions. (2004: 342)

Van Inwagen is thinking of particular backgrounds as leading to particular philosophical opinions. That’s just historical variability. P3 and P4 account for why reflecting on the series of events in one’s background, alongside the alternative events that might have been, carry the “suggestion” of skepticism.
Meditate on your actual background—what you were taught as a child, where you went to school, the books and essays you’ve read, and so on—and think of it as consisting in a rather complex event, e1, which has led you to believe p. Then you realize the untold other ways your history might have gone. Call an alternative background any event that leads you to not accept p. And so you see there is an alternative event, e2, such that if it had obtained, you would have wound up not accepting p. So far, all of that is only causal arbitrariness and, as MAJOR indicates, that is consistent with rational belief. But causal arbitrariness++ pushes skepticism: given the above reflections, (a) if you have no reason to think e1 makes it more likely than e2 that you get p right and (b) if you have no reason to think each of e1 and e2 make it highly likely that you will get p right, then your belief that p is irrational.

When it comes to knowing what to say about P4, the real action lies in determining whether our situation—what we think of ourselves and our counterfactual selves, I mean to say—is more like BATH than MAJOR. (To simplify the discussion, I’ll assume that we don’t usually take ourselves to be in a situation like LOOKING when it comes to controversial propositions. That is, we don’t have reason to think that our background and some alternative background make it highly likely that in each one we’d get the matter right.) The question is whether our situation features mere causal arbitrariness or the ‘double plus’ variety. Shall you trust your background as more likely than any alternative to help you get p right? For plenty of controversial propositions, to be sure, most of us will grant that our controversial beliefs are causally arbitrary. But many will deny those beliefs are causally arbitrary++. The following proposition will help to focus our discussion:

**NR**

You lack reason to think that event e1 makes it more likely than event e2 that you now believe truly and not falsely whether p.

NR will be familiar. P4 requires that we have reason to believe that a belief of ours is causally arbitrary++. If P4’s antecedent is satisfied, we should judge that we lack reason to think e1 makes it more likely than e2 that we’ll get p right. That is the affirmation of NR. Supposing we think a belief in p is variable in relevant sense while also accepting NR, the Arbitrariness Argument goes through and renders believing p irrational.

The remaining possibilities for rationally believing p are these: disbelieve NR or withhold judgment with respect to it. I will argue that neither option is promising.

Suppose first that you withhold judgment regarding NR. The idea is that you just can’t tell whether you do or don’t have reason to think e1 puts you in a better position than e2 when it comes to getting p right. An analogy will show why this will not do. Imagine that McCoy has a pair of thermometers, X and Y. When the thermometers conflict, McCoy accepts X’s reading.
Then we ask why she trusts X against Y. She confesses that she is unable to tell whether she has reason to think X makes it more likely than Y that she will get the temperature right. This admission opens McCoy’s belief to due criticism. The natural reaction is that her belief in X’s reading is irrational, absent some reason to prefer X to Y. Similarly, if you think your belief in \( p \) is variable, it is irrational for you to retain it by withholding judgment with respect to NR. Though withholding on NR allows you to circumvent the Arbitrariness Argument, the evasion also ends with irrationality.

Turn to the possibility of disbelieving NR. Here, you will think that \( e_1 \) (your actual background) puts you in a better position than \( e_2 \) when it comes to getting \( p \) right. This enables you to reject P4. Is it ever reasonable to disbelieve NR? Surely it is. You think, for instance, that like cases should be treated alike. Yet had you grown up in certain dire situations, you likely wouldn’t now hold that conviction. In such cases, though, we will want to insist that variability is not relevant. We have reason to think that your actual background puts you in a better position than the alternative backgrounds—your background makes it more likely than the alternative that you get the matter right. Other variable beliefs are sensibly handled the same way. We should not shudder at the realization that many our beliefs are variable. Take our convictions in a heliocentric universe, a spherical and ancient earth, a manned moon landing, the wrongness of killing innocents, the existence of other minds and microorganisms and our hands, and so forth. For such matters, we’re better off than our dissenting counterfactual selves and we know or reasonably accept it—in precisely the way we know studying Philosophy better positions us than Physical Education would have to correctly believe that modus tollens is a valid inference.\(^{26}\) It’s not always easy to figure out which of our beliefs are like this—such that our actual background positioned us better than other backgrounds would have—but I’ll assume for now that we can reasonably disbelieve NR with respect some variable beliefs.

But can we sensibly deny NR for all of our variable beliefs? I doubt it. In a wide sweep of cases, we should believe NR.

Handling these issues in the abstract is tricky, but here is an argument sketch to favor accepting NR. It begins with actual disagreement over difficult and controversial propositions from politics to history to metaphysics; such topics do not typically admit of conclusive, knockdown arguments. For topics like these, a plausible starting assumption is that many of the sensible, careful thinkers who reject your belief that \( p \) have alternative backgrounds which led them to not accept \( p \). For all that, these people are normal and healthy. They suffer from no cognitive dysfunction or obvious bias. They are subject to no intellectual, moral, or personal failure greater than your own. Reflecting on these alternative backgrounds, where would you locate their ‘mark of failure’? You should point somewhere if you deny NR; you really ought to be able to say where or how their background failed them and yours prospered you. You need reasons here. Mere assertions or
speculations of their failure and your success won’t do. What lies in their past that holds them back from attaining your position with respect to getting $p$ right? Ruminating in this way, it appears doubtful that you have reason to think your position is better than theirs. But then you lack reason to think $e_1$ makes it more likely than $e_2$ that you get $p$ right, and so you have reason to accept NR.

Not everyone will be moved by such considerations to accept NR. Indeed, I anticipate that some among us will disbelieve NR—even when it is specified to difficult and disputed propositions. Here is a general strategy for denying NR. First off, consult your evidence for believing $p$. You see that your (total) evidence supports $p$. Given that you have reason to think $p$ is true, you have reason to think $e_1$ is more likely to ensure you now believe truly and not falsely than $e_2$, which leads to not accepting $p$. But now you have a reason to deny NR. By simply checking your evidence for $p$, you can see that $e_1$ makes it more likely than $e_2$ that you will get $p$ right.

This bit of reasoning seems unsatisfying. Suppose you are genuinely in doubt about whether NR is true. And suppose your evidence for $p$ doesn’t entail $p$. Then, clearly enough, your question about NR must be settled with more than your evidence for $p$. For one, the reasoning at issue assumes too much about $e_2$. From the confines of your own perspective, you often will not possess the epistemic resources bestowed by $e_2$. How then can you know whether $e_1$ makes it more likely than $e_2$ that you’ll get $p$ right if you don’t even know how things look over at $e_2$?

There is a further difficulty with this general denial of NR: it conflicts with a plausible principle for evaluating evidence. David Christensen (2007, 2011) and Adam Elga (2007) each propose something like the following principle: in evaluating the epistemic credentials of another thinker’s expressed belief about $p$, in order to determine how (or whether) to modify your own belief about $p$, you should do so in a way that doesn’t rely on the reasoning behind your initial belief about $p$.27 We can refer to this principle as Independence. The motivation for Independence is simple: it prevents blatantly question-begging rejections of evidence provided by disagreement from others.28

Reflecting on the way to deny NR suggested above, we can see it runs afoul of Independence. Denying NR is your route to ensuring that the information provided by your dissenting counterfactual self doesn’t push you to modify your belief that $p$. But in doing so, you deploy reasoning that is not independent of your initial reasoning for your belief. You beg the question on your counterfactual self.29

There are also some less general, piecemeal ways to deny NR. Suppose you pick a disputed proposition and just insist it is obvious there’s no alternative background which would make it more (or equally) likely than your background that you get that matter right. Well, isn’t it especially lucky that you have come out on top? Even if there is no irrationality in such high-flying self-confidence, surely credulity is strained (cf. Sher 2001: 75). Trying
to envision all of the alternative backgrounds that might have been yours, can you really believe you are in a better position than all of these dissenting counterfactual selves? Are you the best possible you?

5. CONCLUSION

We have been trying to turn some worries about historical variability into an argument. In the end, we have two interestingly different and plausible arguments. The premises are reasonable, I’ve argued, and resisting them will take effort. If we were unsure what to think about inchoate formulations of the historical variability problem, we will now see more clearly why it is a problem. Though I haven’t given knockdown arguments here, these arguments help us count the cost of rational confidence in controversial beliefs. I don’t say there aren’t other ways to draw out the problem, but these two arguments help us better understand it.

Before I conclude, notice a couple of key differences between the two arguments. First, the Arbitrariness Argument seems to apply to many more controversial beliefs than the Symmetry Argument—on the former, but not the latter, you and your counterfactual self may well have entirely dissimilar evidence and cognitive skills. Second, the Arbitrariness Argument raises a new and challenging question, one not presented to us by the Symmetry Argument. The Arbitrariness Argument asks whether all of the epistemic resources bequeathed to you by your background—lessons from parents and teachers, books and billboards you’ve read, the overt and subtle nudging of culture and friends, among a thousand other things—whether this magnificent series of events that is your history better equips you to get right than the resources that would have been bequeathed to you by an alternative background. I remarked earlier that the Arbitrariness Argument goes one ‘up’ on the Symmetry Argument. Focusing on bits of evidence and specific cognitive skills, you may find asymmetry between you and your dissenting counterfactual selves. It is easy to accept that asymmetry at the first level: perhaps you and your dissenting counterfactual selves are different. But move up a level and ask yourself whether your personal history better positions you to get right than some alternative background. Here, your nerve may fail along with your reasons. If you reflect on your history and the plethora of alternatives, the idea of rejecting NR may even seem a touch preposterous.

So what’ll it be? You might accept the Symmetry Argument and end up judging that your disputed beliefs are irrational. Or perhaps you will accept NR and be drawn into the Arbitrariness Argument. Maybe you will figure out how to resist both arguments and continue on with your controversial convictions. It may be, too, that neither of these arguments fully capture your worries about variability, and that some other argument does better. As for myself, I am more troubled by variability than convinced that this pair
of arguments will withstand scrutiny. And that is appropriate, I surmise, if one lesson of variability is that we shouldn’t be too confident about difficult and disputed matters.31

NOTES

1. A few exceptions: Plantinga (1995), van Inwagen (1995), Cohen (2000: ch. 1–2), and Sher (2001). But even these arguments are not detailed enough to tell us whether the variability problem really is a problem. (Since finishing this essay, I’ve found that others have more recently written on what I call variability: Schellenberg (2007), Davis (2009), and White (2010), among others. I was tempted to discuss some of this newer work in relation to what I’d written, but doing so would have made the present essay too long. That said, I hope to write again on variability. See Ballantyne (forthcoming) for discussion of a related problem.)

2. See Annas & Barnes (1985: ch. 13). Celsius, the early critic of Christianity, may have raised the variability problem, too; his work (177–178 CE) survives in fragmentary form in Origen’s Contra Celsum.


5. For a survey of Renaissance and early modern skepticism (“from Savonarola to Bayle”), see Popkin (2003); variability played a serious role here. For more on skepticism in this period, see the papers in Neto & Popkin (2004). In the medieval period, I’ve found mention of variability in Peter Abelard’s Dialogue between a Jew, a Christian, and a Philosopher—a work which, uncharacteristically for its time, takes seriously the fact of intellectual diversity. Rosen (2001: 84–85) (who credits Stephen Menn for the lead) notes a fascinating passage on variability in Al-Ghazali.


8. For instance, Mill highlights awareness of variability: “Nor is his faith in this collective authority at all shaken by his being aware that other ages, countries, sects, churches, classes, and parties have thought, and even now think, the exact reverse” (emphasis mine).

9. Plantinga discusses and rejects the following related premise: “If S’s religious or philosophical beliefs are such that if S had been born elsewhere or elsewhen, she wouldn’t have held them, then those beliefs are produced by unreliable belief-producing mechanisms and hence have no warrant” (1995: 212).

10. Conversation with lan Evans and Sydney Penner was helpful here.

11. Since we are keeping fixed p’s truth value across different backgrounds, we’ll assume that the believed proposition is not something about the coin itself—e.g., that the coin landed heads.

12. More carefully: suppose you’ve reason to think that in close worlds the only circumstances in which you wouldn’t have accepted p include some cognitive deficit on your part that’s relevant to rationally believing p.

13. More carefully: suppose you’ve reason to think that in close worlds the only circumstances in which you wouldn’t have accepted p include your failure to use the relevant evidence and cognitive skills.


17. Van Inwagen may deny as much. See his (1996: 138), where he opines he has, or possibly has, some “(incommunicable) philosophical insight . . . that, for all his merits, is denied to Lewis.” Of course, such an insight would make for an evidential difference between the two philosophers.
18. Van Inwagen remarks that “if I and some child born in Cairo or Mecca had been exchanged in our cradles, very likely I should be a devout Muslim. (I’m not so sure about the other child, however. I was not raised a Christian.)” (1995: 238). Cohen (2000: 8) discusses cases of identical siblings separated at birth, though this is really a device to focus our attention on cases featuring a kind of epistemic symmetry. In an unpublished essay, I explore the potential rational upshot of “twin studies” in behavioral genetics for our controversial beliefs.
19. Space won't permit discussion of the allegation that variability arguments are self-defeating (see Plantinga 1995). Perhaps, once aimed at P2a (as opposed to the conditional premise discussed by Plantinga; see note 9 above), this objection either fails or stands inconclusive. Briefly: it may fail because, for the objection to work, we must suppose that your belief in P2a, the conditional premise, satisfies its own antecedent, P1a. But, at least arguably, even if your background had differed in certain respects, you still would have believed P2a had you used the same relevant evidence and cognitive skills you actually have. So, plausibly, your belief in P2a doesn’t satisfy P1a. Alternatively, the objection is inconclusive: even if your belief in P2a is variable and thus irrational to hold, that is consistent with P2a being true. The fact that P2a is irrational to hold may be a paradoxical but acceptable feature of a good variability argument. (Compare to Christensen (2009: 763) on the self-defeat of conciliationism regarding peer disagreement.) There is of course much more to say about this sort of objection, but I will not say it here.
20. Here marks a plausible difference between rational belief and rational action: it can be sensible to base an action on something arbitrary, like a coin toss before a game to decide who goes first, but the same doesn’t go for rationally believing. White (2005) takes such assumptions to favor “rational uniqueness.” But not all will accept that assumption: see Lehrer (1983) for some discussion.
21. I explore issues raised by our learning there is evidence we don’t have in an unpublished essay.
22. The worlds must be close to the actual world because in discussing the Symmetry Argument we have kept fixed p’s truth value across different backgrounds. I will drop that assumption shortly.
23. By “you would not accept p” I mean, as above, that you would disbelieve p or withhold on p.
24. I am grateful to E. J. Coffman and Thomas Crisp for discussion here.
25. I am tempted by an alternative formulation of (iii): e1 does not make you more reliable with respect to p than e2 (where the reliability at issue is statistical).
26. Compare to Rosen: “If I had been raised by Ghengis Khan, I would have been much more tolerant of deliberate cruelty than I am . . . But this does not shake my confidence that deliberate cruelty is contemptible, and I don’t think it should” (2001: 85). And compare to Cohen: “When the round-earther reflects that, had he been brought up flat-earthly, he would now believe the earth to be flat, that need not give him pause, for he can reasonably say that his grounds for believing it to be round are overwhelming. Round-earthers (justifiably) think they can prove their position” (2000: 10–11).
27. I have closely followed Christensen’s statement of Independence.
28. The point requires care, as E. J. Coffman reminded me. Begging the question is a problem with arguments. But here you aren’t, or at least needn’t be, arguing
with anyone. So while there may be a problem akin to begging the question with the line of reasoning in question, it might not be what we ordinarily call “begging the question.”

29. Some theorists have expressed doubts about Independence: Jennifer Lackey (2010) and Ernest Sosa (2010) have each proposed counterexamples for it. In cases where you have exceedingly strong reasons for \( p \), they say, it’s rational to downgrade another thinker’s expressed belief—even though doing so bites a thumb at Independence. (Christensen [2010] responds to such examples in defense of Independence. See Nathan King’s chapter in this collection for further discussion.) But even if you don’t endorse Independence, there’s still a palpable sense in which this route to denying NR is unsatisfying when your initial reasons for \( p \) are not especially strong. Absent strong support for \( p \), then, this kind of reasoning won’t do. In the cases I’m trying to explore in this essay, our initial grounds won’t typically be so strong.

30. As mentioned in note 1, others have recently developed variability-based arguments and I hope to return to the issues later. But see another essay of mine Ballantyne (forthcoming) for discussion of a related problem.

31. I first discussed variability in a paper on peer disagreement presented at University of Texas at Austin in April 2007: thanks to the audience and John Bengson, my commentator, for discussion. Ancestors of the present essay were read at Lewis & Clark College and Brown University in Fall 2007 and the American Philosophical Association Pacific meeting in March 2008. Thanks to the audiences on those three occasions and to my commentators: Daniel Howard-Snyder, Andrew Rotondo, and Peter Murphy. For conversations and comments, I am grateful to Jennifer Ballantyne, Tomás Bogardus, David Christensen, E.J. Coffman, Stew Cohen, Thomas Crisp, William Dyer, Ian Evans, Byran Frances, Chris Freiman, Terry Horgan, Rachana Kamtekar, Nathan, King, Keith Lehrer, Diego Machuca, John Pollock, Daniel Sanderman, Mark Timmons, and Benjamin Wilson. Finally, I’d like express my gratitude to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for support.

REFERENCES


The Problem of Historical Variability


