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What can preemption do?

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Abstract

Evidential Preemption occurs when a speaker asserts something of the form "Others will tell you Q, but I say P," where P and Q are incompatible in some salient way. Typically, the aim of this maneuver is to get the audience to accept P despite contrary testimony of others, who might otherwise be trusted on the matter. Phenomena such as echo chambers, conspiracy theories, and other political speech of interest to epistemologists today, all commonly involve evidential preemption, so the question arises: What effect, if any, does evidential preemption have on the audience's epistemic situation? In a widely discussed paper, Begby (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 2021, **102**, 515) argues that evidential preemption can change the audience's epistemic situation in such a way that future testimony that Q, which would otherwise have been persuasive, can be rationally discounted to a significant degree. If so, evidential preemption is not a mere rhetorical flourish, but rather results in a *rationally* insulated belief that P. Since evidential preemption is a common feature of echo chambers and conspiracy theories, this would be a disturbing result. We bring good news: it is not so, at least not in the way Begby suggests. If evidential preemptions can change one's epistemic situation in a worrying way, it is a mystery how.

Much of the recent literature on echo chambers and conspiracy theories seeks to explain how they can lead to irrational or unjustified beliefs. But one recent contribution takes a different approach, aiming to vindicate, rather than diagnose what is wrong with, at least one common aspect of these phenomena. Begby (2021) introduces the notion of evidential preemption: when presenting a claim to an audience, a speaker subsequently also warns them of future confrontation with contrary testimony, suggesting that this contrary testimony is misleading or irrelevant. Evidential preemption does seem to be a common feature of echo chambers and conspiracy theories. But Begby's surprising conclusion is that evidential preemption not only has a *psychological* effect on the audience but can also change their *epistemic* situation in a "dramatic way" making it rational for listeners to discount future, contrary testimony. If this is right, then it is "clearly troubling," so we would do well to understand how preemption produces this epistemic change (2021, 4). In these troubling cases, we should not approach phenomena such as echo chambers and conspiracy theories as problems of rationality per se, since irrationality is not the inevitable outcome for the trusting listener after all. If Begby is right, then given that evidential preemption plays a major part in our information environment today, the growing literature on the topic is headed in the wrong direction.[1]

But it is not so. While evidential preemption may indeed be an important theoretical notion for understanding the relevant phenomena (echo chambers and conspiracy theories), we argue that it cannot result in a *rational* dismissal of future testimony in the way Begby suggests.

One clarification at the outset is important: it is certainly the case that learning some information via a preemption can change one's epistemic situation. This is because learning some information can always change one's epistemic situation. But the fact that the very speaker who says one thing, also says that others say contrary things, does not change the epistemic significance of the information that others say contrary things. Accordingly, our conclusion is that preemption itself, as a rhetorical move, *qua* preemption, cannot be epistemically significant—at least, not in the way Begby has argued.

1 | WHAT IS EVIDENTIAL PREEMPTION?

Begby introduces evidential preemption as a "sort of argumentative maneuver" that is often expressed in the following form: "My opponents will tell you that q; but I say p" (2021, 2). He claims that by not only expressing their own view (that p) but also stating that the conflicting point of view (that q) exists, the speaker seeks to undercut the opposing view rather than just explain that multiple views on the matter exist. His thesis is that through this maneuver the audience's epistemic situation, and how they can rationally respond to the future disclosure of contradicting evidence, can be successfully altered. He distinguishes two modes through which evidential preemption works: neutralization and source discrediting (Begby, 4). We focus mostly on the former but address the latter toward the end of the paper. The claim that evidential preemption neutralizes future testimony is supported by a probabilistic and an informal argument, so we take each up in turn.

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[1]Sunstein and Vermeule (2009), Cassam (2019), and Avnur (2020), for example, aim to show how our current environment is conducive to irrationality, and this seems to be the general view in the popular media as well. But not everyone writing on such topics thinks that the relevant phenomena necessarily lead to irrationality. See Dentith (2018) and Coady (2012) on conspiracy theories, for example.

2 | THE PROBABILISTIC ARGUMENT

Begby supports his account of neutralization with an application of Bayesian Confirmation Theory, according to which "the significance of new evidence can only be determined against the background of the information that we already have in our possession" (our prior probabilities; 2021, 7):

> If I were merely offered testimony that p, then subsequent testimony that q would constitute low-probability evidence, which would have a potentially significant impact on my confidence in p. By contrast, if I am offered testimony that p plus a warning that others will say q, then subsequent testimony that q constitutes high-probability evidence, which will have minimal (if any) impact on my confidence in p. In effect, I am not learning anything new – not acquiring significant new information – when others say that q.

The probability of a new piece of evidence is determined by one's prior state of information. The lower the probability of a new piece of evidence, the bigger the difference it makes to what one should believe in light of the new evidence. Conversely, higher probability new evidence does not require updating one's belief in a significant way. For, the higher the probability of a new piece of evidence, the more it was already predicted by one's prior state of information and therefore the more compatible it is with one's prior beliefs. Begby claims that evidential preemption seeks to "adjust an audience's assignment of probabilities to specific bits of future evidence in such a way as to neutralize their potential significance" (2021, 7). Because the speaker already issued a warning that others will say that q, the future disclosure of q is now a high probability piece of evidence—it has already been predicted. Therefore, when the audience later hears testimony that q, it is not required to update their beliefs in any significant way.

3 | OBJECTIONS TO THE PROBABILISTIC ARGUMENT

Let us first consider a very general, generic preemption. For example, suppose that Donald Trump states, "Other people will say I lost, but I am the true winner of the election." So, the preemption contains only the prediction that other people will say Trump lost.

There is some question whether such a blanket preemption should be considered a prediction at all. Napolitano (2021) addresses this question in her argument against the rationality of evidentially self-insulating conspiracy theories. What she calls "cover up claims", which are in many ways similar to preemptions, often work in this way, offering *overly* general predictions. Not knowing exactly what evidence the audience will hear, the speaker has to stick with the very vague warning that some testimony will be presented that argues against a given view, leaving out what exactly the content or the argument of that testimony will be. And, Napolitano reasons, such vague warnings seldom amount to genuine predictions due to their indeterminacy, or lack of actual predictive power. As she puts it: "We would not say that a scientific theory makes predictions if it claims that at some point some evidence in favor of it will come up. Making genuine predictions requires more than this" (17). Likewise, general evidential preemptions fail to genuinely predict any specific testimony, and instead provide a sort of blanket placeholder for any future testimony that contradicts p. The only feature of the future testimony predicted here is that it would otherwise count as significant evidence for q—nothing more.

We can explain and support Napolitano's idea as follows. First, it is a priori plausible, on most matters, and certainly contentious political ones that are the target subject matter here, that there will be plenty of testimonial evidence both for and against most claims out there, or that people will disagree. Before you heard the preempting speaker, you should have already thought that, probably, someone will say q, and someone will say p. So, this preemption, that someone will say q, should not drastically change your prior assignment of probability to the proposition that some will say q in most relevant cases. The preemption seems, instead, to be evidentially redundant in the first place. This applies to our example above: most audiences already know, and should already believe, that some have said, and will say, that Trump lost.

Second, a general preemption does not make any *specific* testimony for q much more probable than it was before. But if the preemption is going to decrease the impact of some specific testimony, it must make the probability of that *specific* testimony higher. For example, that someone will say that Trump lost is far more probable than that Jake Tapper, tonight on CNN, will say that Biden won, or that he will cite independent, bipartisan courts, including ones presided over by Trump appointees, which dismissed the various charges suggesting that Biden was not the winner. Jake Tapper's specific testimony is highly improbable, even given the preemption that "someone will say that Trump lost." So, Begby's account would not apply to this case, though it is exactly the sort of case it is meant to apply to. No very general preemption will have the effect Begby needs it to have on some specific testimony, because most testimony that is meant to be preempted will in fact remain highly improbable, even given the preemption. (Similarly, although it is probable that someone someday will surprise you, it may well still be the case that, when someone actually surprises you, it was improbable (an instant before the surprise) that that person would do so, at that time and in that manner. Hence the surprise.)

To make things clear, consider the probability that

> (S) (for "Specific") Person C will say that q under specific circumstances citing evidence e in favor of q.

The probability of (S) remains low even after a general preemption is heard. That general preemption is effectively a vast disjunction:

> (G) (for General) Someone, C, or D, or E, or F...etc. will say that q under some circumstances and support it with some evidence, e, or f, or g....

Our objection to Begby above is twofold. First, the probability of (G) should be high even without any preemption to the effect that "p and (G)," because (G) seems probable for most politically relevant propositions like q. So the preemption makes no significant difference to the probability of (G). Second, that the probability of (G) is high is compatible with the probability of (S) being low; raising the probability of (G) does not significantly raise the probability of (S). So a general preemption of the sort currently being considered does not work the way Begby claims. According to Begby, the probability of (S) is raised significantly by the preemption, so that when one hears person C claim that q, that is already a high probability event. But a general preemption to the effect that (G) does not significantly raise the probability of (S). In other words, when the preemption is general, no specific, preempted testimony thereby becomes a significantly higher probability event, so no general preemption like (G) will have the structure Begby claims.

Recall that Begby claims that evidential preemption "adjust[s] an audience's assignment of probabilities to specific bits of future evidence in such a way as to neutralize their potential

significance" (2021, 7). "Specific bits" suggests that an effective preemption will not be as generic, or general, as the kind we have been discussing. So let us now turn to more specific preemption.

If the preemption is specific, for example, if Trump says, "Pelosi will say I lost, but I won," this might indeed neutralize the effect of the audience later hearing Pelosi say that Trump lost. But in any such case, evidential preemption is simply playing the role of evidential disclosure: Trump's testimony is simply informing the audience of what Pelosi will say, and the audience will be able to judge for themselves the merits of the predicted testimony. The case for q is no longer in the "black box" of the preempting speaker's private considerations. The audience can now gauge for themselves, for example, whether Trump is a more reliable source than Pelosi. If one thinks Pelosi is equally reliable to Trump before hearing Trump's testimony, then Trump's testimony (preemption included) gives reason to suspend judgment on, rather than believe, p. This need not have been the case if the preemption were vague, or general, since in that case, the only substantial evidence one learned is that Trump claims he won. Suppose instead that the audience thinks Pelosi is a little more reliable than Trump. In that case, the preemption should backfire: hearing (through Trump) that Pelosi will say he lost should convince one that what Trump says, that Trump won, is false.

To take a third case, suppose that the audience thinks, prior to any of this testimony, that Trump is more reliable than Pelosi. When they hear Trump's preemption, they should presumably be more confident that he won than that he lost. And they should of course discount, to some great extent, Pelosi's later testimony. But the preemption had nothing to do with this except to inform the audience that Pelosi will disagree. In this case, had Trump only declared victory, without preempting Pelosi's testimony, the audience would still, after hearing Pelosi say that Trump lost, believe Trump, and to the same degree, since they trust Trump more. One might object here that the fact that Trump thinks he won *even though he realizes Pelosi thinks he lost*, which is conveyed by the preemption, significantly raises the degree to which his testimony supports the conclusion that Trump won. But Begby's probabilistic argument does not appeal to this idea, nor to an asymmetric assignment of priors to the speakers' reliability, *and for good reason*. We explain this point below.

In general, when preemption is specific enough to be informative about what future testimony one will receive, the audience should judge for themselves, on the basis of their background beliefs, whether the speaker is more trustworthy than the source whose testimony is being preempted. And those background beliefs—not the preemption—will determine which claim it is now rational to believe. In other words, the probability one should assign the proposition that Pelosi will lie, once one hears Trump's preemption, must be a function of the prior probabilities one assigned to the propositions that Pelosi would not lie and that Trump would not lie. This is standard updating; nothing more than the weighting of sources according to one's priors is prompted by the preemption. While Begby is right that preemption can raise the probability of future testimony (thereby "neutralizing" it), this is simply a matter of informing the audience of some evidence, whose effect is the same even if the audience learned of this evidence in some other, non-preemptive way. As we will see below, this conclusion is further supported by the fact that the order in which one receives the relevant information makes no rational difference.

To sum up, a preemption that makes a significant difference would have to make a specific prediction, thereby significantly altering the probability of some specific future testimony, but without leaving it solely up to the audience's priors to determine what to make of this new evidence about future testimony. We have seen that the probabilistic argument is not decisive because it does not show that there is such a case.

4 | THE TARGET CASES

In this section, we explain what it would take to establish that preemption can be epistemically significant. Then, we will consider Begby's informal account of how there could be such cases and offer objections to it. By "significant," we mean to follow Begby's own usage (see quotes above) and understand this as a degree which would vindicate the claim that the effect of preemption is "troubling."

If evidential preemption is sometimes epistemically effective in a troubling way, then it changes one's epistemic situation in a way that puts the agent in a position to rationally discount future evidence *which would otherwise have rationally required a change in belief* (6–7). In other words, the following two conditions both have to hold in these cases:

> (a) When the audience hears A say "Though B says that q, I say p," they rationally believe p and can rationally discount B's future testimony that q to a significant extent.

> and

> (b) Had A *not* said "Though B says that q," the audience would not have rationally discounted B's later testimony that q to that extent.

This is a matter of discounting B's testimony that q to a *significant* extent, because otherwise this phenomenon is not troubling, as Begby claims. As we have seen, (a) would not be surprising, or troubling, if the audience begins this scenario already rationally thinking that A is more reliable than B. In such a case, the preemption makes no significant difference, because (b) will not hold—the audience would rationally discount B's testimony that q to some extent anyway, given that A says p. In any case in which (b) is satisfied, the audience does not already, prior to A's preemption, place *significantly* more confidence in A than B on the relevant matter. No case in which the audience already has significantly more confidence in the reliability of the preempting speaker, A, will be one in which the preemption itself makes a significant difference in whether the audience later discounts the testimony of B.[2] This applies to the special case in which the audience had never heard of B before A's preemption of B's testimony and takes A to be at least somewhat reliable. There, (b) is satisfied, but the preemption again makes no difference to the outcome, since one should arguably be more confident in what A says than what someone they have never heard of says even without preemption, given that A is reasonably considered somewhat reliable.

Relatedly, Begby's account is explicitly meant to be compatible with both reductionist and non-reductionist views in the epistemology of testimony. On the non-reductionist view, one is immediately justified in forming a belief based on the testimony of another, while on the reductionist view one is required to do "some previous bit of epistemic legwork" (2021, 4) such as establishing a high degree of confidence in the speaker's competence and sincerity. What

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[2]Arguably, in this case the audience will discount B's testimony to a *greater degree* than they otherwise would, if A preempts B's testimony, because the audience now also knows that A has taken B's view into account, thereby arguably making A seem especially informed. But even granting this for the moment, the additional information provided by the preemption cannot make the difference between being more confident in B's testimony than in A's, or suspending judgment; only those already inclined to believe A's testimony over B's, without any preemption, will be susceptible to this effect. So this does not show that preemption can have the sort of disturbing significance claimed by Begby.

matters for Begby's account is that the evidence needed to support one's assessment of the speaker can be "quite weak" in the absence of apparent defeaters, which almost all theorists can agree on (2021, 5). That is, neutralization appeals only to the idea that one's justification for believing the speaker's claim that p automatically implies one's justification to trust that the speaker has correctly assessed their available evidence that p hinges on. In the cases at issue here, this includes justification to believe that the speaker has correctly assessed the significance of the testimony they preempt. But this is fully general: it should apply to A just as well as it does to B. The significance of preemption cannot rest on the audience's thinking that the speaker is antecedently more knowledgeable, or more generally trustworthy, than the future testifier who is being preempted.

Begby offers an informal account of how a case could satisfy (a) and (b), which we describe next.

5 | THE INFORMAL ACCOUNT

According to Begby, by disclosing the existence of contrary opinions on the matter (that q) along with the claim that p, the speaker, A, conveys that whatever information could be gained through the disclosure of contrary testimony has already been taken into account in their formation of the belief that p (2021, 5). And, if the audience trusts A enough about p, they should also trust A about the weighing of the evidence, or the matter of B's testimony that q. So, the audience is led to believe that, overall, the evidence ultimately supports p. To be clear, the audience is justified in accepting this because, first, they are justified in believing the testimony that p in absence of apparent defeaters and, second, this justification (to believe p) implies a justification to belief that the speaker has properly assessed the available evidence, including the case for q (and that B says q). Thus, future disclosure of the testimony that q is neutralized and can no longer rationally raise justified, significant doubts about p for the audience (2021, 5).

6 | OBJECTIONS TO THE INFORMAL ACCOUNT

According to the informal account, evidential preemption informs the audience that A has taken B's testimony (and the relevant evidence) into consideration, and despite this concluded that p. This goes beyond the probabilistic argument by positing that the preemption gives the audience a window into A's thinking, and that this constitutes additional information. It is this additional information, conveyed by preemption, that explains why (a) and (b) hold in some cases. But, if the audience does not already assume that A is significantly better informed than B (as is required if (b) holds), how does A's having taken B's view into consideration provide evidence that makes B's testimony less significant (as required by (a))? Our first objection is that it is unclear how the informal account is supposed to explain this; our second objection, which is independent of the first, is a positive argument that it does not explain it.

To begin, let us consider how the preemption is supposed to rationally downgrade B's testimony. We are told that A has considered B's view, but we are not assuming that A is better informed, or more reliable than, B. One idea is that, since we are somewhat confident in what A says, and A says that B is wrong on the matter of p versus q, we should increase confidence that A's case for p is stronger than B's case for q. (And we can imagine a case in which, when we hear from B, later, B does not say anything about what A said, or the case for p.) Much of Begby's discussion seems to suggest this explanation. However, typically, when someone

tells you something, this automatically implies that anyone else who contradicts that thing is wrong about it, and that the case for it is stronger than the case against it. It seems disingenuous (and possibly Moore-paradoxical) to state, "p, but the case against p might be better than the case for p." (In some cases, the speaker might have never considered the case against p, but such a speaker is not sincere and knowledgeable on the matter.) There is no substantive difference, in other words, between saying "p" and "p, and anyone who disagrees is wrong about this," or "p, and the case for p is stronger than the case against p (or the case for q)" Another way to see this is to ask, if we do not start out trusting A significantly more than B (which we must not in order to satisfy (b)), why A's testimony should increase our confidence that B is mistaken, rather than the other way around? Merely by stating q, B implies that the case for q is better than the case against p, too. Surely the *mere* fact that we heard A speak on this first, before B, does not make any difference to what we should conclude. So, why trust A's assessment of the available evidence, rather than B's?

This leads to a more general problem for the informal account: The order in which one hears testimony should not itself matter to what one ultimately believes. Begby's informal account seems to imply that it matters to what you rationally believe which testifier you heard first, and this is itself implausible. As Kelly (2008) puts it, while discussing Kripke's dogmatism paradox[3]:

> If we suppose that E1 and E2 consist of the conflicting testimony of two equally reliable authorities, what I end up believing [according to the view Kelly is criticizing here] will depend upon which of the two authorities I consult first and which second. (Even if my decision of whom to consult first was based on whose office happened to be closer to my home, or on the flip of a coin). Moreover, if I'm self-aware of my own practice, I would have knowledge of the following form: 'Because I came across evidence E1 before I came across evidence E2, I now believe that the hypothesis H is true. But if I had come across evidence E2 before evidence E1, I would now believe that H is false.' It seems implausible that historical facts about the order in which evidence is acquired might make such a dramatic difference to what one is justified in believing. Indeed, many take it be a criterion of adequacy on any account of rational or justified belief that the order in which pieces of evidence are acquired makes no difference at all to what is reasonable for one to believe.

Intuitively, what I am justified in believing, on the basis of testimony that p and testimony that q, should not be a matter of which speaker I hear first. Rather, it should be a matter of my total evidence. After all, if the two speakers are assumed to be equally trustworthy, why would not a "post-emption" by the second speaker, for q, against the speaker for p, have the same effect that Begby describes in neutralizing the original speaker? To see that order matters on Begby's view, consider a case in which both testifiers, A and B, state that the other disagrees about the matter. If Begby's informal account is right, then had I heard B first, and then heard A, B's testimony would *not* be retroactively neutralized; in fact, A's testimony should be neutralized, because A's disagreement with B should now be taken as evidence that A has it wrong on the matter.

Begby (2021 fn. 20) raises this issue himself in connection with formal accounts of rationality but sets it aside as an issue too complex to settle. And, of course, it is too complex to settle

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[3]Nguyen (2020, 16) helpfully discusses the same issue, also citing Kelly, in connection with echo chambers and their self-reinforcing nature. Our view on this is largely in line with his discussion.

here, too. However, it *still* presents a serious problem for his account. To begin with, the point that total evidence, not order of evidence, is what matters can be made independently of any formal or probabilistic features of rationality, just as Kelly does. The debates Begby acknowledges (which are about whether Jeffrey conditionalization entails order invariance) all assume that the default position is that it would be bad for a theory of rationality if order made a difference. So, the controversy is *premised on the widely held view* that order does not matter. And Begby offers no objection to this widely held view. Given that his informal account implies that order *does* matter, then, we would need some reason to think that the intuitions and arguments for the widely held view are mistaken. Below we will offer one diagnosis for this situation, namely that cases in which order seems to matter can be seen as such because of a conflation of prima facie and all things considered justification.

So far, we have suggested that, given that A is not assumed to be significantly better informed than B, as required by (b), it remains a mystery how (a) could be the case *due to preemption* as Begby's informal account describes it. One takeaway from this is that Begby's conditional claim—if the audience is justified in believing A (about p and about the preemption), then the audience is justified in discounting B's later testimony to some extent—can still be, technically, correct. It is so *only* because the antecedent is never satisfied in the cases in which preemption could ever be epistemically relevant. That is, there seems to be no case in which both (b) is satisfied, and the audience is justified in believing all of what A says (that p even though B says q). Instead, the audience should have serious doubts about p in this case, having learned at the same time (from A) that B disagrees (unless, again, the audience learns in some further way that B is less informed than A).

Suppose (b) is true. That is, suppose that the audience does not significantly discount B's testimony even when there is no preemption by A. Then either the audience trusts B more or they trust A and B roughly equally—close enough to equal so that the difference is not *significant*. In the first case, preemption should backfire. If Trump says, for example, that job growth is good this month, we might believe him. If he says, instead, that though Democrats claim job growth is bad, it is actually good, we will probably not believe him, because we trust the Democrats more than Trump (as it happens). In the second case, while the preemption might not backfire, it surely could not lead to the audience significantly discounting the Demorcrats' testimony. My judgment of whom to trust more, between Trump and the Democrats, should not be determined by whether I first learned of the Democrats' view through a Trump tweet intended to undermine them. What I've learned is that the Democrats say q, Trump says p, and Trump is aware of this disagreement. If I trust each of the sources roughly equally, it seems it would be irrational for me to (contrary to this antecedent) trust Trump significantly more. (As we discuss below in Section 9, Trump's preemption may in some cases lead to an upgrading of how much we trust him. This is arguably a separate issue, having to do with Begby's so-called "source discrediting account.") So either way, (a) is not satisfied if (b) is satisfied. In both cases in which (b) is satisfied, one's rational response is simply a function of one's total evidence, including how trustworthy the various sources are. So there is no case of the sort that Begby attempts to describe, which satisfies (a) and (b).[4]

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[4]Do our objections lean too heavily on a reductionist theory of testimony? It seems not, for any theory of testimony must contend with cases in which one receives contrary testimony from different sources, and any such theory better not have the implication that the audience should always go with the first speaker they hear, even if they (implicitly) trust both speakers equally. This latter, overly deferential view of testimony is the only one that can save Begby's informal argument. But it is implausible for the reasons described above, and, at any rate, it is a rather idiosyncratic view of how testimony works, which is contrary to Begby's goal to vindicate preemption without assuming any particular theory of testimony.

7 | DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM WITH NEUTRALIZATION

What went wrong with Begby's account of neutralization? Here is one diagnosis.

It seems that the prima facie justification has been conflated with an all things considered justification. That Trump communicates that the evidence that he won outweighs the evidence provided by Democrats' testimony is, all else equal, prima facie justification to discount Democrats' testimony, insofar as Trump's testimony itself provides the audience with justification. Begby is right about this. But notice two further things. First, this is not an all things considered justification. The audience also now possess evidence that Democrats say that Biden won. And, assuming that the source whose testimony Trump is preempting is at least as knowledgeable as he is, the audience assumes that, just as Trump has taken the Democrats' testimony into consideration, the Democrats have taken Trump's testimony, or perhaps his source, and certainly his view, under consideration. Any case in which this is *not* the case is not one that satisfies (b). If you cannot find any independent way to adjudicate which of the two sources is right, and if you assume them to be roughly equally trustworthy, then surely you should suspend judgment, instead of being more confident in what whoever you happened to hear first says. Trump's testimony provided some prima facie neutralization of contrary evidence, but that contrary evidence itself also provides prima facie justification to discount Trump, even if one first learns about it from Trump's own preemption. Though Trump's testimony gives you some prima facie justification, it does not amount to all things considered justification. The mistake was to focus on only part of our total evidence.

In this connection, it is helpful to note that *any* evidence, not just testimony, and not just testimony that contains a preemption, will have a similar feature. Any evidence for p is some prima facie evidence that sources that suggest not-p are misleading. What happens when one then receives some contrary evidence, for q in Begby's example, is that one should reassess the *total* evidence anew. The question becomes, then, whether the source of the prima facie evidence that undermines the source of evidence for q is more trustworthy than the source of evidence for q. In other words, the rational thing to do is always go by the total evidence available, without favoring one over the other merely because it appeared first (unless, of course, the order of appearance has some bearing itself on the truth of the proposition in question).

So, it is true that preemption gives *some* reason to discount future testimony (just not all things considered reason). That was the first explanation of what went wrong. Second, when thinking through cases of preemption, we might expect ourselves (and others) to give the preempting speaker's testimony more weight. That is, we think through cases as an audience and expect that we would indeed tend to discount, to some degree, the preempted testimony. This is because preempting testimony may well be an effective way to get an audience to become entrenched in the speaker's view, even if this is not rational. We do not dispute the rhetorical power or effectiveness of preempting some future testimony; our view is that it cannot lead one to *rationally* discount some future evidence in the way Begby proposes. It is easy to conflate "normal" or "expected" with "rational," as we typically assume ourselves to be rational, so this distinction can initially be obscured.

8 | SOURCE DISCREDITING

According to Begby, the second way in which evidential preemption affects the audience's epistemic state is via the more "blunt" process of source discrediting. That is, the preemption can

serve to discredit future sources of information, rather than merely neutralizing some specific testimony they offer. The difference here is that source discrediting "also preemptively provides me with higher order evidence about the credibility of a range of sources that would seek to contradict those propositions." (10) This is an important difference because the presence of such higher order evidence has a significance beyond the alleged neutralizing effect of preemption discussed so far.

While we think, for the reasons given above, that evidential preemption fails to neutralize future testimony, we recognize that there may be cases in which testimony leads to source discrediting, due to higher order evidence conveyed *about* those other, opposing sources. However, cases in which a preemption effectively discredits a source, sufficiently to lead one to rationally discount that source's future testimony, seem to do more than *merely* preempt. This can be seen in Begby's own example of evidential preemption, from Newt Gingrich:

> Washington is developing plans for your retirement savings .... They will tell you that you are 'investing' your money in U.S. Treasury bonds. But they will use your money immediately to pay for their unprecedented trillion-dollar budget deficits, leaving noth- ing to back up their political promises. (2).

Here the speaker offers evidence, or at least a hypothesis, serving to explain why Washington is untrustworthy in this instance. But notice that Washington's untrustworthiness is explicitly described here. That would explain why, if you were to trust Gingrich's testimony, you might not take Washington's opposing testimony as seriously afterward. It is this further, higher-order evidence that makes this testimony more successful. Notice that if it is not explicitly stated, but rather part of one's background information, that Washington politicians tend to be untrustworthy, then it would be this background information, rather than an explicit explanation of the sort Gingrich provides, that does the work of discrediting the preempted source; in such a case, (b) does not hold.

Such effects are compatible with what we have argued here. They are due to evidence that the speaker gives, even if implicitly, that opposing sources are unreliable; they do not follow from preemption itself, at least not any more than any evidence for p implicates the unreliability of sources that report not-p. And notice that, when such further evidence is given by the speaker, the order in which you receive this does not matter for the epistemic upshot. Gingrich's speech, if it was effective in the first place, would have been effective in the same way had you already heard what Washington has to say. What matters is that the other source, Washington, the one testifying that q, is directly discredited by further evidence, and this can happen either before or after you have heard from Washington.

9 | ANOTHER PROPOSAL: SOURCE ACCREDITING

There may be a better way to argue that preemption succeeds via second-order considerations. Rather than focus on how second-order considerations can *dis*credit the preempted speaker B, perhaps we should focus on how such considerations can add to the credit given to the preempting speaker A. Since A's preempting testimony conveys that A has taken some evidence for q into consideration, we now have some evidence that A is better informed and has more evidence than B. So, the suggestion might go, we should trust A and discount (to some extent) B's testimony, so long as B does not also disclose that B has considered A's testimony. This is not a matter of downgrading B's reliability, but rather upgrading our assessment of A's reliability. A has, in

effect, signaled that A is more knowledgeable or better informed than B, and done so merely by conveying that they have considered B's view.

Though this seems a more promising route to vindicating the epistemic significance of pre-emption than what Begby offers (that is, more promising than appealing to the *downgrading* of B's reliability), there are still some serious problems with it. First, this account does not go very far. It seems that such cases are not so "troubling," since they are merely cases of a speaker of-fering reasons for the audience to think that the speaker is reliable on this matter. This is hardly "grooming" or manipulation, as Begby advertised, and at any rate insofar as one is rational in discounting B's future testimony, it is only in virtue of disagreement with A, and this is a general and widely recognized phenomenon of disagreement. One does not become "inoculated" against future contrary evidence, but rather is convinced that A has done their homework to some extent greater than what one might have assumed before.

Convincing the audience that A is better informed than B through A disclosing that A has considered B's view can happen *after* B's testimony instead, with the same result. For example, suppose you hear B say q first, and then hear A say that, though B says q, p. Then you have learned the same thing as you would in the preemption case: A is better informed than B. So having heard A *first* makes no difference. In fact, you could learn that A is better informed than B from some other source entirely and the result in the end would be the same: you should be more confident that p. So, A's preemption does not neutralize future testimony *qua* preemption, because the order of presented evidence matters for preemption as described by Begby. Rather, it does so by informing the audience that A is better informed than B. There is nothing especially "troubling" about this, and nothing special about preemption.

A similar effect could be achieved, not only by changing the order of when you hear A and B, but by having A drop the preemption altogether and merely say: "I've thought about it a lot..." "I'm more of an expert than you have assumed..." "I've considered other people's views..." On the current suggestion, these statements should have roughly the same effect as preemption; preemption does not do more than the statements above. But, we take it, such statements do not *substantially* upgrade a speaker's perceived reliability. After all, when you later hear B's testi-mony, why should you ignore the possibility that, all else equal, the only reason B did not make such an additional statement is that B is less talkative, more direct, less manipulative, or more shy about remarking on their own relative reliability or what considerations went into their rea-soning? And if you were to ask B whether they have considered A's view, all B would have to do to neutralize the effect of the preemption is to say "yes, I've considered A's view."

Another way to see the point above is to consider how, exactly, A signals, by preempt-ing B's testimony, that A is more reliable than you thought before. That A has considered B's view is evidence that A is better informed than you were assuming only if you assumed, before A's testimony, that A has not considered such things. But in the sorts of cases we have been considering—Trump's testimony about the election, pundits and politicians opining on current issues, conspiracy theorizing—it is surely already assumed that everyone knows that there are opposing views out there, from opposing camps. So, even if merely preempting another's testi-mony is, in some case, enough to increase the speaker's perceived reliability (for the audience), it is hard to see how this would be a "troubling" phenomenon, as preemption is supposed to be on the view we have been criticizing. Preemption can only be informative in this way if we had quite minimal prior expectations of the speakers' knowledge about the matter (in which case one could question whether we should be taking the testimony at face value in the first place).

Let us sum up. The current suggestion is that A signals, by preempting B's testimony, that A is better informed, and thus more reliable, than B (so long as B does not also signal that B has

considered A's testimony too). As far as we can tell, this may be the best account of how preemption might succeed. But, we have offered several reasons to think that such signaling, merely by preemption, cannot make a substantial or troubling epistemic difference, and there is nothing unique about *preemption* per se on this account.

10 | WHY EVIDENTIAL PREEMPTION STILL MATTERS

While evidential preemption does not have the epistemic significance that Begby argues for, it may well play an important role in explaining our current epistemic environment and its potential hazards. Evidential preemption does seem to be a common feature of echo chambers and conspiracy theories, and it does plausibly play a role in the mechanism that leads audiences to accept apparently irrational belief systems. Preemption's epistemic insignificance is compatible with *psychological*, explanatory significance.

For example, in rejecting the idea that the order in which one receives evidence matters to what one *should* believe, we do not mean to suggest that the order cannot have an effect on what one *does* believe. Indeed, various cognitive biases (such as entrenchment bias and other forms of motivated reasoning powered by one's desire to not have been duped) might work to incline one to believe the view one already holds, despite equal or greater evidence that comes along later. And given how predictable such biases are, a clever speaker might use them to manipulate audiences into discounting future, opposing testimony. Being biases, of course, these are non-ideal, psychological mechanisms that dispose us to fall short of our standards for belief, so this is not a *justifying* explanation.

Begby's explicit aim, though, is not (only) to explain why one might come to believe the preemptor, but to show that this can be justified. This focus on vindicating such beliefs can seem puzzling, if the goal is to understand preemption and its role in echo chambers and conspiracy theories. Is it not enough, if we want to understand why people trust preemptors, to explain the cognitive mechanisms that facilitate this? From this perspective, it would seem more promising to pursue approaches that appeal to the cognitive biases and political motivations at work (e.g. Avnur, 2020; Cassam, 2019; Napolitano, 2021, 21), in order to understand the role of preemption.

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