



<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

The Scope of Woke: A Reply to Atkins

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Davidson, Lacey J. "The Scope of Woke: A Reply to Atkins." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 12 (4): 16–21. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-7Kj>.

The Conceptual Drift of “Woke”

A person needs only spend a little time on the internet or watching the news to observe that some people think it is bad to be woke. For example, from my home state of Indiana, Congressman Jim Banks pledged to organize an “anti-woke caucus” of Republicans in the United States House. According to Banks, wokeness is an ideology of tyranny aimed at punishing and limiting the rights of “so-called oppressor groups.” For Banks, for many of those who benefit from current social structures, any theorizing that aims to make visible the multi-faceted systems that constrain our lives is a threat to the status quo.

In this paper, I will offer a critical response to J. Spencer Atkins’s (2023) “Defining Wokeness.” First, I will give some context around the concept of wokeness, then I’ll review the main arguments given by Atkins, and finally I will offer three critiques focused on the scope the analysis given, epistemic appropriation, and base rate neglect as a primary mechanism for thinking carefully about our social world.

Within the conversative conversation space, in-person, on TV, and online, those in the woke Left are overly sensitive, intruding, stealthy, indoctrinating, and power-hungry. The aim of the woke white elite is to take away the hard-earned money and status of middle-class white people—by way of censorship and control of thought—so they can have this power for themselves, and moreover give it away to People of Color and recent immigrants.

We are likely not surprised that a term ideated and curated in Black English to identify that a person has developed and deployed an analysis of oppressive systems is now being used as an insult. As theorized by Charles Mills (1997), epistemologies of ignorance in matters related to race are so entrenched that any conceptual resources that work to uncover ways of unknowing, of unseeing the world, are an affront to psychological and social comfort, a threat to the most basic understandings of how the world was and will work, for white folks (including myself) who have systematically benefitted from systems of racial domination.

This shift from naming the development of an analysis to a general pejorative for those on the politically left has followed a familiar pattern, which I’ll understand here as *conceptual drift*. First, people who are oppressed given current social systems develop a conceptual tool for understanding their experiences, often resolving hermeneutical lacunas within their own communities (Pohlhaus 2012). The development of this epistemic resource may be the end of the process. But perhaps, second, this term is taken up by others and knowledge is produced and shared across lines of difference. This allows for a growing understanding among and between people who experience the systems of which they are a part very differently in virtue of their identities.

Third, if this term is taken up by those with more power within current systems of social relations, the concept and its use is likely changed through and by this uptake. At times, this is captured by the concept of “co-opting.” The change in how the concept is being used typically occurs through the “watering down” of the concept to make it less threatening and more palatable. Revolution but make it corporate. This step of conceptual drift results in the

harm of *epistemic detachment* as theorized by Davis (2018). When the “participatory role of marginalized contributors in the process of knowledge production is obscured” (epistemic detachment), the social, political, and cultural context that shaped the meaning of the word is obscured. Fourth, the changed or shifted concept is then taken up by the opposition—those who wish to maintain current power structures. The term, although misused and abused, is now used as an insult.

Of course, there are deep debates in the metaphysics of meaning concerning how the meaning of the concept is fixed and whether the meaning of the term changes through this process. I do not necessarily think that uptake and differences in use and description have the power to fix what is captured by the concept itself—I think we can still appeal to accuracy conditions that reference the cultivation of the term in its context (e.g. within Black English for *woke*). The misuse of terms has many of us repeating the refrain from Inigo Montoya: “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.” However, there is a notable change in the social use of the term and the meaning that is implied or inferred from its use in different contexts.

For example, if we take “intersectionality” to mean only that people have many identities, rather than as a way to identify that the intersections of two oppressed identities work together to produce complex experiences that cannot be reduced or explained by the experiences of either oppressed identity, then we have engaged in a change in the social use that does not reflect the full range of content as develop in the first context and use. For my purposes here, *conceptual drift* focuses on the drifting use of the concept such that its use is transformed from a meaningful epistemic resource to an often inflammatory, inaccurate, and imprecise use as a pejorative.

Main Arguments in “Defining Wokeness”

I take it that these processes of conceptual drift are the primary motivation for J. Spencer Atkins’s (2023) recent paper, “Defining Wokeness” published in *Social Epistemology*. In this paper, Atkins offers an account of wokeness as an anti-racist epistemological concept that can be consistent with standard views of epistemic justification. A large portion of the literature in epistemology is devoted to the analysis of the justification for our beliefs. The “standard view” is roughly that our beliefs are justified insofar as we believe in accordance with the evidence. The popularity of the standard view, as opposed to views like moral encroachment (a view that moral demands might influence what we can justifiably believe), motivates Atkins to give an account of wokeness that is consistent with the standard view.

In contrast, for example, Basu (2019) gives a brief account of what it is to be woke using a moral encroachment framework: “To be woke is to be aware of the moral demands of one’s environment. With regard to our epistemic practices, it is the demand to be aware of the moral stakes of our beliefs about one another.” Atkins themselves also identifies the virtue of wokeness within the moral encroachment framework as a way to avoid failures of recognition and responsiveness (as described by Lindemann 2014 as failures of holding).

Atkins’s standard view analysis of wokeness starts from Stroud’s (2006) work on partiality in friendship to then argue for a partiality-based analysis of what it means to be woke. The author argues that the woke person, through a series of mechanisms, is partial to members

of oppressed groups by giving them “the benefit of the doubt.” Just as one would, for example, “seriously scrutinize accusations against our friends” (as Stroud suggestions), the woke person seriously scrutinizes accusations against members of historically oppressed social groups. To Stroud’s original mechanisms of serious scrutiny, different conclusions, interpretive charity, and reason, Atkins adds inquiry degree (Bolinger 2020) and base rate neglect as a mechanism of the partiality involved in wokeness.

Atkins focuses on base rate neglect throughout the paper in connection to Gendler’s (2011) paper that argued that we cannot be both rational and meet our moral demands in an unjust world because our moral demands require us to engage in base rate neglect. Base rates refer to the percentage of a population with a particular characteristic. Tetlock et al. (2000) study and explore “forbidden base rates” in which the participants’ moral commitments cause the participants to engage in “base rate neglect,” which the author’s cash out as a form of irrationality. Gendler (2011) uses this concept to argue that in a world of social inequality and a cognitive system prone to racial bias, our commitments to racial egalitarianism mean we must engage in base-rate neglect and thus be irrational.

Atkins uses the concept to argue that the woke person will not form beliefs about individuals based on base rates. Specifically, Atkins argues that base rates are like stereotypes and that using base rate information to make a claim about a person counts as stereotyping them. For example, Atkins argues that a woke person cannot justify having a belief like, “Person x (who is a member of a historically oppressed group) has some negative feature (e.g. has done something wrong or possesses or has demonstrated some negative character trait) because of membership in group p.” Not stereotyping the person, for Atkins, then requires one to neglect the base rate information in making an assessment about the person. They write, “the work person concerns herself, I think, with withholding beliefs primarily” (6). Due to unjust social structures, one may justifiably use base rates in cases not involving members of marginalized groups. For example, in the assessment of whether a police officer is dangerous to a Black man who was pulled over.

Critical Analysis of Defining Wokeness

In this final section of the paper, I will offer three critical reflections on Atkins’s account of wokeness. First, I will question the framing of the paper as defining wokeness rather than as an account of epistemic partiality as a corrective for unjust social conditions. I will suggest that the account of wokeness is far from comprehensive in that it misses a defining feature. Second, I will raise some concerns about epistemic appropriation and the connection with our everyday epistemic practices. Third, I will give some reasons to think that base-rate neglect is not the primary mechanism for thinking carefully and critically about our social world.

In this paper, I take it that Atkins succeeds in offering an account of social group epistemic partiality that allows us to navigate an unjust world in more morally and epistemically responsible ways. This may be an especially useful account for those that are relatively new to thinking carefully about the social world. For example, what some might experience as active *partiality* may just be a corrective for ideologies that tell us only some people are to be

believed. In other words, adjusting for oppressive social practices requires active consideration that may feel like one is being partial but instead has an overall balancing effect. However, I don't think this paper succeeds in offering a comprehensive definition of woke, something that I think we might expect from a paper entitled "Defining Wokeness."

The most straightforward reason that I do not think this paper succeeds in its goal is due to the focus on belief formation in interpersonal contexts. In deploying the mechanism of base rate neglect and analyzing the belief formation of individuals, the concept of woke that is on offer ignores the ways in which being woke requires one to develop a systems analysis about why things happen the way they do. Understanding, for example, that the base rates of a given character trait in a population are products of racist and otherwise oppressive systems (especially when that base rate is the rate at which someone has access to institutions like the social club analyzed by Gendler (2011)) is an essential part of being woke. For this reason, I do not think the mechanisms involved in partially forming beliefs about individuals can constitute a comprehensive definition.

My secondary concern with the paper is the overall disconnect with cultural and epistemic practices. Although the author does frame the published version of the paper with respect to pejoratively describing progressive policies as "woke," the larger framing and connection to concrete epistemic practices is missing throughout the paper. This concern is present for me particularly in the very quick treatment of worries about appropriation of Black English. When it comes to concepts developed by historically oppressed groups to understand their own experiences (conceptual resources), the social and cultural context is always going to matter with respect to how the terms are deployed and even what they mean in a given context.

Further, the framing of the paper as contra right-wing media seems to indicate that we might learn something about what to do in the face of being called "woke" as an insult; however, the primary upshots in the paper are relevant mostly to epistemologists. In a footnote, the author writes, "I think we ought to genuinely reflect on this question [the question about whether or not we are epistemically appropriating and undermining the intimacy of social groups] before, say, we call ourselves woke or use the philosophical term in everyday life" (fn 3). These reflections are unsatisfactory for addressing concerns about epistemic appropriation and conceptual drift.

My third concern is the treatment of base rate neglect. Although it is certainly the case that many anti-oppression theorists reject Gendler's analysis of base rate neglect in that they do not agree that we must be irrational to be moral, I'm not sure their responses are consistent with the author's epistemic guidance to "engage in base rate neglect." My own preferred epistemic strategy is to re-conceptualize the problem of base rate neglect (Davidson 2017) and perhaps even to critically examine what it means to be rational. Although the author includes some responses to Gendler's claim that neglecting base rates is irrational, the author maintains that the answer for the woke person is to neglect base rates. I'm not convinced that very many of the theorists cited in the paper would conceptualize their responses in this way.

It seems to me that the author could pull in some of the other mechanisms like "Serious Scrutiny" to explain what an epistemically virtuous person would do in response to available

base rate information (even an appeal to something as simple as overgeneralization or worries about induction can help one navigate the application of base rates to individuals). An epistemically virtuous person knows that base rates don't tell the whole story. In addition, the epistemically virtuous person considers the fact that population-level patterns are the result of oppressive social conditions, as discussed above. This can be addressed with the serious scrutiny mechanism and/or other practices of epistemic diligence (Medina 2013).

In many cases, partiality isn't even required to avoid harmful and morally wrong beliefs, but rather epistemic diligence (see Medina 2013) and the desire to avoid forming false beliefs. From my perspective, an anti-oppressive lens allows one to see the world more clearly and doesn't necessarily require partiality (at least as it functions with respect to Stroud's friendship argument), but rather an acknowledgement of things like epistemic advantage (Toole 2019) and a systemic understanding of oppression. The recognition of epistemic advantage prompts us to pay attention to the analysis given by members of historically oppressed groups for epistemic reasons about access to evidence, rather than due to a moral demand on epistemic behavior.

Although the author leaves some room for this given that each wokeness mechanism is only partially constitutive of wokeness, it seems that one could be woke without being partial at all (given the presence of other epistemic practices like appreciation of epistemic advantage and a systems of analysis). These practices are also consistent with the standard view without needing a mechanism like base rate neglect specifically or partiality more generally.

In summary, we have reasons to be skeptical that Atkins has been successful in *defining* wokeness due to the scope of the defining authored, challenges of epistemic appropriation, and the use of base rate neglect as the primary mechanism of wokeness. The primary success of the paper is in providing a frame for thinking about epistemic partiality for members of oppressed social groups in interpersonal contexts within unjust social and political conditions.

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