

Epistemology of debunking III: White

RANDOM MUTATION. Another source of moral debunking is randomness. What are the odds that, due to random mutations, I could discover moral truths? The problem is specific to morality. With other truths, like perceptual truths, you could argue that selection pressures was able to remove creatures that get perceptual claims wrong. Perceptual truth has adaptive value. But do moral truths have adaptive value, too? 587

Thus randomness creates the sceptical worry, and selection pressure, in the case of morality, fails to alleviate it. One response is this. Broad evolutionary considerations don't tell us to expect that, say, people will play music, let alone create and conduct Mahler's symphonies. Yet that's what they do (at least on Earth). Why can't we have a parallel argument for moral truths? Evolution can't predict that we will have reliable moral judgement, yet we have them. 588

The discussion of Street's Bermuda story illustrates this response. *Ab initio* there is no reason to expect to get to Bermuda without any navigation aids. But once you *already* are there, you can recognise that you are there. 589

This response invites an immediate counter-claim. What if we sail to Bermuda surrounded by Bermuda replicas? How can we tell which one is real? You reached something that resembles Bermuda, but absent the evidence that you navigated to the *real* Bermuda, you have little reason that you have reached exactly that one. Similarly, we make moral judgements alright, but how 'real' are they, how well do they capture moral facts?

This suggests, so White, that the debunker's concerns have nothing to do specifically with evolution. They are rooted in general sceptical considerations familiar to us from other areas. In the first place, the very *knowledge* of evolutionary origins does not provide an additional piece of evidence to support debunking. If we were ignorant of evolution, we would not have been in a better epistemic condition with regard to our moral judgement—that is, it is not as though our moral judgement would have been more justified if we were ignorant. 590/595

The best we can say is that evolution works independently of moral facts. Street's talk of 'distortion' is misleading, since this suggests that *without* evolution, the moral judgement would have been on track. This is absurd. 590

Perhaps, however, moral beliefs have not the same fitness value as theoretical and perceptual beliefs. But even if this is so, this won't make any (great) epistemological difference. Suppose that Bill doubts evolution. Should he then put less credence into his everyday beliefs? Of course not. Evolutionary facts can add more credibility to our ordinary beliefs. But nothing more than that. 591

Moreover, if we undermine our everyday and theoretical beliefs, how could we ever get justified in our beliefs in evolution? So everyday/theoretical beliefs are not threatened by evolutionary debunking. Why should moral beliefs be singled out for doubt?

By the same token, evolutionary considerations don't allow us to predict that creatures with higher intellectual capacities could evolve on Earth. Yet they have. This may have intelligible neuroscientific explanations. Why can't moral beliefs and moral capacities be in the same boat?

In other words, we *do* believe that our theoretical success is far beyond anything to be expected from simple evolutionary considerations. But why, again, not say the same of moral beliefs? 592

White next considers the 'argument from surprisingness'. Some phenomena are surprising, 'crying out for explanation'. It would be strange if these phenomena were a result of an improbable accident. Now, having correct moral beliefs is surprising. It is strange how we could have them by accident. But since there is no evolutionary explanation of these beliefs, that's precisely what we have to conclude. Or rather, to alleviate surprisingness, we should conclude that our moral beliefs are *not* reliable. 592

White aims to show that, even if there is a genuine problem with believing in the randomness of our reliable moral beliefs, it doesn't serve the undermining debunker's purposes. When faced with a striking phenomenon, I tend to disbelieve it was random, because there are *alternative* explanations in the vicinity that make its occurrence more likely. So the overall dialectic of this discussion surprisingness is this: given the striking phenomenon, I will do my best to search for an explanation that makes it 593/595

non-random. Randomness is not, in general, a reason for me to doubt the reliability of judgement. That is, unless, as in the gone-for-lunch example, there is a particularly straightforward way to challenge its reliability. 594

PSYCHOLOGICAL ROULETTE. As just mentioned, the conclusion White draws at the end of 4.2 is that sceptical puzzles raised by the debunker threaten a wider range of beliefs. In this vein we now ask if contingency of the origins of belief, or luckiness in being right, are any reason doubt the justification of belief. 595 597

One very prominent line of resistance, coming from moral theorists (and realists to boot) is to dismiss the relevance of any such considerations. It is a *non sequitur*. When we ask for a justification of our moral beliefs, we ask for a *moral* justification of them. So any causal story about how you came to have these beliefs is irrelevant for the justification task. 598

White responds with the following scenario:

Coin in the head Suppose we are thinking and arguing about *P*. In fact, you defend *P*. We scan your brain and discover that your neural wiring leads to a box. In the box there is a coin tossing around. We poke the coin and observe that your arguments change. Indeed, as we go on, the direction of your reasoning, your assumptions that you regard as ‘plausible’ or ‘obvious’ also change. Now suppose two other things. Our poking of the coin was random too. And also, you learn about our experiments with the coin. Should you, after all that, continue to believe that *P*?

It seems that information about the coin flipping can undermine your belief that *P*.

Question 1. Link the ‘Coin in the head’ scenario to Haidt’s arguments.

Suppose we now place the coin outside the head. Then this is a good analogy to Cohen’s Oxford/Harvard example. As far as the truth of *P* is concerned, you chose your grad school by a coin flip (it was a ‘randomised’ choice).

But there is a major difference where the coin is located. If it is inside your head, then you *never* had good reasons. This serves the blocking debunking strategy. However, if the coin is outside of your head, then (White argues) it is possible that you *did* have good reasons to conclude *P*. All we are saying is simply (I think) that there is a path to truth, and there is a path to falsehood. It was, indeed, random who treads on which path. But since the coin is not interfering with *internal* processes of reasoning, knowing about the chancy choice (that, e.g., Cohen originally made) detracts nothing from the justification of your belief that *P*. 599 600