



Ethics // Spring 2026

Handout 17

Epistemology of debunking II: White

EXPLANATORY RELEVANCE. Another *prima facie* plausible proposal for debunking might look thus: 582

Relevance: If I can reasonably believe that the ultimate explanation of my belief that *P* makes no mention of the fact that *P*, then my belief that *P* is not justified.

But, White argues, this fails spectacularly for beliefs about future events or beliefs about necessary truths. Though I can reasonably believe that the sun will rise tomorrow, the (causal) explanation why I so believe does not refer to this future fact. Same for necessary truths that will be no part of the causal explanation of belief.

The force of this argument is not clear to me. The case of future beliefs seems a special case of belief in general truths. And such truths may well feature in the explanation. As for necessary truths, this reasoning may be taken as a *reductio*, feeding into the nominalist narrative about the problematic nature of all such beliefs.

EXPLAINING BELIEF. White diagnoses the appeal of explanatory relevance and truth sensitivity by our search for an alternative explanation. Suppose I have evidence *E* for my belief *B*. Suppose that *E* is crucial for making *B* justified. But if I can explain *E* in such a way as to eliminate its relevance to *B*, then *B* will be undermined. 585

Question 1. Examine the gauge example...

White now argues that this reasoning, though sound for explaining natural events, is not sound for our concern with explaining (and undermining) belief. To make it work, the opponent must reason thus:

(17-1) *P*, and I believe that *P*. My belief is (additional) evidence for *P*.

Well, if this were so, then by explaining my belief in a *P*-independent way I would have undermined the evidence for *P*. Then my belief that *P* would also be undermined. But obviously, we are not reasoning like in (17-1).

SELECTION PRESSURE WORRIES. Here is the slogan of the debunking strategy in this case: 586

(17-2) We only hold moral beliefs (like the ones on the (1)–(6) list in Street) because evolution planted them in us.

This fact, if it is a fact, constitutes the debunking tactic. For we won't trust evolution with guiding us to true moral beliefs.

White considers this nice analogy:

Adam's party (revised): As we arrive at the party, Adam examines you to determine whether you believe that *P*. If he finds that you do, he lets you in. Later on we discover that Adam stood ready to shoot any one who (he found) did not believe that *P*.

Importantly, we don't know whether Adam ever used the gun. Perhaps every one invited believed that *P*. Or perhaps there are piles of bodies somewhere of those who believed that $\sim P$. The only evidence we have is that each of us at the party believes that *P*.

In this scenario, the limited evidence we have of Adam's plans won't explain why *you* happen to believe that *P*. You can tell why everyone at the party believes that *P*, also why you are at the party too. But your belief was formed before coming to the party, and whether it was justified has nothing to do with your admittance to the party. 586

If I want to use the party-evidence as a reason for or against *P*, other assumptions may be added. Perhaps Adam knows the truth value of *P* and also hates truth. Then your evidence is some support that *P* is false (Adam shoots any one with a true belief). But if, as the debunkers hold, evolution is truth-blind, then there is no reason to suppose one way or the other.

White notes another possibility. I might have asked the partygoers whether *P*. Suppose they all said that *P*. This would have given me a reason to believe that *P*. Now, when I learn of Adam's murderous policy, I could say: 587

(17-3) No wonder you *all* believe that *P*, otherwise you wouldn't have been here!

What I learn is that the consensus was fake. This might now reduce my confidence that *P*, but if so, this would be due to the possibility of a disagreement. But this problem is not at issue here.

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
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Remark 2. The distinction between the adaptive value of perceptual truth and moral truth is briefly sketched in Street, page 130.

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 593/595

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 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.

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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.

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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.

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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 3. 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*.

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