

Moral Psychology // Spring 2021

Handout 2

Against debunking: Kahane

IN A BAD COMPANY? Kahane's initial worry is that EDAs may be in a bad company. They resemble the intolerable *genetic fallacy*, and hence are suspect. Genetic fallacy has this form:

- (i) A said that *P*.
- (ii) But A said that because *X*.
- (iii) Hence $\sim P$.

What's wrong with this argument? Everything, you might think. The conclusion simply doesn't follow. Consider: 105

- (i) Pat said, 'Charity is moral.'
- (ii) But Pat said that because he was interested in ethics.
- (iii) Hence charity is not moral.

We need to modify the premisses and the conclusion. First, the issue is the justification of belief. Second, the causes must somehow disable the purported justification:

- (i) Pat said, 'Charity is moral.'
- (ii) But Pat said that only because he loved Mary.
- (iii) Hence Pat's belief (assertion) is unjustified.

Here, Pat's motivating causes for believing that *P* undermine, or provide no reasons for, that very belief. But as Kahane notes, correctly, this is too weak. Although Pat's belief is unjustified by his love for Mary, it may be justified by some further fact, including some facts discovered by Pat later on. In general, even if *Pat's* belief, then and there, is unjustified, perhaps someone else's belief that charity is moral, even Pat's later one, *is* justified. 106

DEBUNKING ARGUMENTS. Is Street's argument against evaluative (moral) realism not a form of genetic fallacy? If evolution is a causal factor in our moral belief-formation, can't we say that moral realism may be vindicated by some other route? Clearly not. This is because the argument is global: *any* moral belief is initiated by moral attitudes, and the presence of these attitudes is an intrinsic part of the justification procedure. However, as we saw, these attitudes would be 'distorting' if themselves not based on an evolutionary mechanism. But if they are so based, then realism is false.

All the same, Kahane mounts two (tentative!) objections against Street's argument and gives one less tentative suggestion:

Does the argument prove too much? Can't we extend it to cover also realism about the external world, and not just about values? We mentioned this possibility in Handout 1 (see reference to Lorenz). If the question is whether the argument can be replicated 'as is' for the external world scepticism, then the short answer is, no. See Street's discussion in 130–131. But there may well be *another* version of an EDA, for a weaker conclusion, that is more successful. 117

Too ambitious? To echo the concerns raised in Handout 1 wrt the multiplicity of moral beliefs: Is Street claiming that all our moral beliefs are explained by evolution? This, Kahane says, is 'implausible'. But as we said, the claim is only that our *basic* attitudes are so explained. Evolutionary influence, as Street notes, is 'indirect'. 118

Immunity to EDA: For us, I think the most interesting point Kahane makes is whether *any* moral theory is susceptible to EDA. This is the concern raised earlier wrt Greene's argument. How is that utilitarianism is not threatened by the argument against deontology? That's because, we are told, we use cognitions, not intuitions, in our utilitarian judgements. But if we now add an EDA, can't we say that those cognitions too are distorted? We put this point earlier by saying that the principle of utility must itself have an intuitive appeal, even if its application is not intuition-driven. Kahane makes (I believe) essentially the same point with the blades of grass analogy (due to Rawls). 119–120