

# Genealogy of Belief

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TT 2015, Tuesdays 4-6, All Souls

Week Two: Genealogical Debunking Arguments

[http://users.ox.ac.uk/~corp1468/Genealogy\\_of\\_Belief.html](http://users.ox.ac.uk/~corp1468/Genealogy_of_Belief.html)

## 1. Preliminaries

*Genealogical debunking arguments* (GDAs) move from a premise about the causal origins of our beliefs (judgments, intuitions) in a domain, to a negative conclusion about the epistemic standing of those beliefs.

Some examples:

G.A. Cohen on the analytic/synthetic distinction; Naturalistic debunking of moral intuitions or moral realism (Harman, Joyce, Greene, Singer, Street, Rosenberg); Evolutionary debunking of theism (Dennett); Evolutionary debunking of naturalism (Plantinga, Nagel); Evolutionary debunking of metaphysics (Ladyman and Ross); Cultural debunking of religious exclusivism (Hick, Runzo); Experimental debunking of philosophical intuitions (Stich, Nichols, Weinberg, Machery)

Let X be some domain of discourse – e.g. ethics, religion, epistemology, math. An “X-belief” is a belief in a substantive thesis in the domain X, e.g. that slavery is wrong, that God exists, that knowledge is factive, that  $2+2=4$ .

Two kinds of GDAs:

**Sceptical GDA:** Our X-beliefs have such-and-such genealogy...and therefore our X-beliefs are unjustified (or, when we learn about their genealogy, our X-beliefs *lose* their justification) [propositional vs doxastic defeaters]

**Anti-Realist GDA:** X-beliefs have such-and-such genealogy... on the supposition of realism about X, our X-beliefs are unjustified (or, when we learn about their genealogy, our X beliefs *lose* their justification). But since our X-beliefs constitute knowledge, realism about X must be false (i.e. there must exist some constitutive connection between our X-beliefs and the X-truths.)

In other words, the proponent of anti-realism about X claims that the sceptical GDA debunks X-beliefs only if realism about X is true.

For the sake of simplicity let's just focus on sceptical GDAs. Can they be made to work?

## 2. Vindicating GDAs

### (a) Argument from Insensitivity

- (a1) Given the genealogy of your X-beliefs, for a given X-belief in  $p$ , even if  $p$  were false, you would still believe  $p$
- (a2) If it's the case that, even if your belief in  $p$  were false you would still believe  $p$ , then your X-beliefs aren't knowledge
- (a3) Therefore, your X-beliefs aren't knowledge

- *Worry 1:* sensitivity must be relativised to *methods*, and if in the actual world our method for forming X-beliefs involves being in touch with the X-facts, then the method we use in the world where there are no X-facts would be different

- *Worry 2:* (a2), in conjunction with a closure principle (if S knows  $p$  and deduces  $q$  from  $p$ , then S knows  $q$ ), implies wide-ranging scepticism.

e.g. BIV case: That I have hands entails that I'm not a handless BIV; so if I don't know that I'm not a BIV, then (assuming closure), I don't know that I have hands.

Some epistemologists accept sensitivity but deny closure (e.g. Nozick). Could the debunker do this? It might give the debunker results she doesn't like:

- *Slavery is bad* (insensitive therefore debunked)
- *Pharaoh's treatment of the Hebrews is bad because slavery is bad* (sensitive, so I can know this)

### (b) Argument from explanatory inertness

[*Suppose*] you make a moral judgment immediately and without conscious reasoning, say, that the children are wrong to set the cat on fire...In order to explain your making [this judgment], it would be reasonable to assume, perhaps, that the children really are pouring gasoline on a cat and you are seeing them do it. [But there is no] obvious reason to assume anything about “moral facts,” such as that it really is wrong to set the cat on fire...It seems to be completely irrelevant to our explanation whether your intuitive immediate judgment is true or false (Harman 1977, 7).

- (b1) The best explanation of your X-beliefs makes no mention of their (putative) truth
- (b2) When you learn that the best explanation of one of your beliefs makes no mention of its (putative) truth, then that belief is unjustified
- (b3) Your X-beliefs are unjustified

Worry 1: The genealogical explanation might be false (Mogensen on proximate/ultimate distinction for evo debunking arguments)

Worry 2: Our X-beliefs *might* be caused by the X-truths (e.g. Cornell realists on the cause of our moral beliefs)

Worry 3: There are *non-causal* explanations, e.g. the explanation for why we can't fit a square 2 inches wide into a circle of 2 inches diameter (also: interpretationism about belief, à la Dennett/Davidson; knowledge as more basic than belief)

### (c) Argument from Coincidence

[P]roficiency in inferring the large-scale and small-scale structure of our immediate environment, or any features of parts of the universe distant from our ancestral stomping grounds, was of no relevance to our ancestors' reproductive fitness. Hence, there is no reason to imagine that our habitual intuitions and inferential responses are well designed for...metaphysics (Ladyman and Ross 2007, 2).

[T]he fact that there are any good scientific explanations of our evaluative judgements is a problem for the realist about value. It is a problem because realism must either view the causes described by these explanations as distorting, choosing the path that leads to normative skepticism or the claim of an incredible coincidence, or else it must enter into the game of scientific explanation...(Street 2006, 155).

- (c1) Given the genealogy of our X-beliefs, there is no plausible explanation for how our X-beliefs could reliably co-vary with the X-truths
- (c2) If we can find no plausible explanation for how our X-beliefs reliably co-vary with the X-truths, then we're justified in believing that our X-beliefs don't reliably co-vary with the X-truths
- (c3) Our X-beliefs aren't justified

Worry: Proponents of (c1) tend to assume that the only plausible explanation for truth-tracking is *causal*. But in nature we have causally distinct phenomena that track each other because they are both governed by the same underlying mathematical structure (e.g. Amazonian rainfall vs Dutch commodity market). In such a case, to establish reliable co-variance, it's enough to explain why each phenomenon demonstrates a regularity.

Same in, e.g. the moral case<sup>2</sup>: natural selection selects for highly complex creatures who value social harmony and flourishing, and particular moral beliefs – our special duties, what we owe each other – can also be explained similarly by appeal to things that are of fundamental value (i.e. social harmony, flourishing)

### (d) Argument from Unsafety

SAFETY: S's belief in *p* is safe iff S could not have an untrue belief in a relevantly similar case

e.g. Johnny guesses that  $9+8=17$ , but doesn't know it, because in a similar case (where he is asked what  $9+10=?$  or guesses 18, not 17) he gets it wrong

- (d1) The genealogy of your X-beliefs shows that your X-beliefs are unsafe
- (d2) Safety is a condition on knowledge
- (d3) Your X-beliefs don't constitute knowledge

- *Worry 1*: Is the case in which your X-beliefs are different (i.e. where your genealogy is different) really "relevantly similar"?

- *Worry 2*: Safety, like sensitivity, must be relativised to methods. It's possible that one's genealogy gives one a *special* method (e.g. expertise, Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*) such that in any relevantly similar case one would have the same belief.

[An aside: we might want to combine the safety argument with a *contextualist* treatment of knowledge claims: at contexts at which the possibility of having a different genealogy is made salient (i.e. scientific contexts) one doesn't get to truly say that one has X-knowledge]

- *Worry 3*: Premise (d1) is too strong; at best we have *strong genealogical evidence* that our beliefs are unsafe. But this evidence might be *misleading*. So it's possible that our X-beliefs are safe.

### (e) Argument from Unsafety Defeat

- (e1) The genealogy of your X-beliefs constitutes strong evidence that your X-beliefs are unsafe
- (e2) Whenever one has strong evidence that one's belief is unsafe, that belief doesn't constitute knowledge
- (e3) Your X-beliefs don't constitute knowledge

Epistemic akrasia: what are the epistemological demands when it comes to conflicting lower-order and higher-order beliefs? What (if anything) trumps what?

*Long Deduction*: Ben is performing a long and difficult deduction whose premises he knows. He carefully and successfully completes the deduction and comes to believe its conclusion. He knows from past experience that with long deductions like these, he usually makes a mistake somewhere.

[Another aside: the debunker might argue that epistemic akrasia, even if consistent with first-order knowledge, is epistemically *unvirtuous*]

### Upshot to all this:

- The debunker risks self-defeat, since her epistemological premises (in, e.g., sensitivity, safety, &c.) are plausibly subject to her own argument
- Knowledge requires good luck – *genealogical* luck

### 3. The ethics of genealogical debunking

Often it seems that what is really motivating genealogical debunkers is a certain *ethical* queasiness:

Ethically, Religious Exclusivism has the *morally repugnant* result of making those who have privileged knowledge, or who are intellectually astute, a religious elite, while penalizing those who happen to have no access to the putatively correct religious view, or who are incapable of advanced understanding (Runzo 1988, 197-343)

In the absence of a principled argument about why philosophers' intuitions are superior, [analytic philosophy of language] smacks of *narcissism in the extreme* (Machery et al. 2004, 9)

Plantinga's response:

[A]m I really arrogant and egotistic just be virtue of believing what I know others don't believe, where I can't show them that I am right? Suppose I think the matter over, consider the objections as carefully as I can, realize that I am finite and furthermore a sinner, certainly no better than those with whom I disagree, and indeed inferior both morally and intellectually to many who do not believe what I do; but suppose it *still* seems clear to me that the proposition in question is true: can I really be behaving immorally in continuing to believe it? (2000, 179)

A question: If ethical rather than epistemological queasiness is the real motivation here, then shouldn't debunker's target be not the maintenance of genealogically contingent beliefs, but instead how we *behave* vis-à-vis those beliefs – and how we treat others' claims to knowledge?

### Works cited

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