

17. Street 2015: Debunking our values?

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I. Genealogies of beliefs

Sometimes learning of the causal explanation for a belief you hold can vindicate it; other times, can undermine it.

Suppose you find yourself having a strong hunch that Rutherford B. Hayes was the 20th U.S. President.

- Vindicating: you learn that you were taught this in history class.
- Undermining: you learn that you were hypnotized to believe this.

Explanatory reasons for belief: what led you to believe *p*?

Normative reasons for belief: what evidence is there for *p*?

Street's basic principle: a genealogy is vindicating if it reveals that your explanatory reasons were normative ones; it is undermining¹ if it reveals that they *weren't* normative reasons (and does not reveal any new normative reasons). Precisely:

¹ I.e. "debunking"

- A belief genealogy is *undermining* if you have no reason to think the causal process it describes would lead you to true beliefs.
- A belief genealogy is *vindicating* if it reveals normative reasons for that belief.

II. A genealogy of our values

Presumably you think the following are true:

- 1) It is good to survive.
- 2) It is good to be healthy.
- 3) It is good to help your children.
- 4) It is good to be altruistic.
- 5) It is bad to cheat and break promises.

Or: you *have reason* to survive; etc...

Compare to alternate, logically possible value judgments:

- 1') It is bad to survive.
- 2') It is bad to be healthy.
- 3') It is bad to help your children.
- 4') It is bad to be altruistic.
- 5') It is good to cheat and break promises.
- 6') The most important thing in life is to count blades of grass.
- 7') You ought to do cartwheels 74 times a day.

Or: you *have reason not* to survive; etc...

When framed this way, what's it's striking how *uniform* people's value judgments across time and space are.

Pretty much everyone agrees on (1)–(5), rejects (1')–(7').

Why? Street says: evolution by natural selection explains this.

Q: is this genealogy undermining or vindicating?

Street: it depends! Meta-ethical question: Are the basic facts about value² *mind-dependent* or *mind-independent*?

- **Mind-independent:** true, regardless of what we think or feel about them.
- **Mind-dependent:** truth depends on what we think or feel.

Suppose basic facts about value are *mind-independent*. Then, Street thinks, this genealogy is undermining.

→ We would've been selected to think survival is good, pain is bad, etc. *regardless* of whether it in fact they are good/bad/etc.

But if facts about value are *mind-dependent*, then the genealogy is vindicating (or at least, not undermining).

Q1: What does Street's reasoning imply about our *controversial* values or moral beliefs?

Q2: Is Street's principle about undermining vs. vindicating genealogies correct?

² E.g. pain is bad, happiness is good, survival is good, etc.

E.g. the fact that the Sun is bigger than the Earth; or the fact that kangaroos have tails.

E.g. that Kevin is well-liked, or that a dollar bill is worth more than a quarter coin.