18–19. White 2010: You Just Believe that Because…

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I. Setup

"Why do you believe that?" can be asking about *justifying* or *explanatory* reasons. When do the latter serve to debunk our belief?

Example: Cohen's choice of grad school. If went to Oxford, would've believed P, if went to Harvard, would've believed $\neg P$. Went to Oxford; came to believe P.

Two ways in which such a story could debunk a belief:

· *Undermining debunker:* initially belief is justified, but learning of truth of genealogy leads you to no longer be justified.

E.g. believe wall is red; then learn is bathed in red light, so could be white.

· *Blocking debunker:* truth of genealogy (regardless of whether you know about it) undermines your justification to begin with.

E.g. only believe the wall is red because a hypnotist induced that belief.

Q: Does this sort of arbitrary influence on belief lead to a *distinctive* skeptical threat?

Distinct from the threats due to disagreement (as we've seen) and general risk of error (as we'll see soon).

Not at all clear. Compare:

White focuses on Street-style debunking. **Q** to keep in mind: what would this discussion say about Mills-style debunking?

· **Correlation:** The Cohen case as above, where belief in P correlated with Oxford/Harvard.
· **No Correlation:** 50% of philosophers believe P, 50% believe $\neg P$, with no discernible pattern.

Q: Is skeptical threat greater in first case than in second?
White is doubtful, but says it deserves a closer look.

Note: sometimes appeal to *inevitability* of the relevant belief; other times appeal to *chanciness* of relevant belief. Clearly *both* can't be sufficient for undermining. So be suspicious…

II. Inevitability?

Is the fact that Cohen's belief in P was *inevitable* the problem?

Inevitability in general isn't a problem. E.g. belief that 1+1 = 2.

Insensitivity: if P were false, you'd still believe it.

Note: different than (but related to) *safety*.

Is the problem with Cohen's belief that it's *insensitive*?

· *Every* false belief is insensitive, so since justified beliefs can be false, this can't suffice to be a blocking debunker.

If you believe P and P is false, then if P were false, you'd still believe it!

· Perhaps undermining debunker? Then need different principle:

Truth Sensitivity: If you're justified in believing that you'd believe P even if p were false, then you're not justified in believing P.

· Problem: this leads to general skepticism!

- Consider a case where you have overwhelming evidence that the defendant is guilty. The only way he could be innocent is if this was part of an elaborate conspiracy which generated all this evidence of his guilt. You're justified in believing he's guilty.
- But you know that if he were *innocent*, it would have to be because of a conspiracy—in which case you'd still believe he's guilty. So if Truth Sensitivity were true, your belief *wouldn't* be justified. Since it *is* justified, Truth Sensitivity must be false.

Different tack? Not about sensitivity but relevance: perhaps what's bad about Cohen's case is that the truth of P isn't needed in explaining how he came to his belief.

$\rightarrow$ That's not an issue in general (believe Hume born in 1711 because read it in a book), but maybe think about *ultimate/complete* explanations?

> Generalizes. Suppose you're justified in believing something—*anything*—P. Then you're justified in believing $D = P$, or you don't believe P. If D were false, then *not-P* and *you believe P* are true. Since you believe P, you also believe D. Thus: if D were false, you'd still believe it! You can do this reasoning, so you *know* that your belief in D is not sensitive. If Truth Sensitivity is true, this implies it's not justified after all.

> Why is it written in the book?

Explanatory Relevance: If I'm justified in believing that the ultimate explanation of my belief makes no reference to whether P, then my belief in P is not justified.

Two problems:

- Implies that beliefs about the future are never justified.
- If someone is justified in believing in God, how could they come to justifiably believe that the ultimate explanation of their belief makes no reference to God?

> Does the antecedent give us an *independent* lever on your belief?

White: the intuitive thought behind Truth Sensitivity and Explanatory Relevance is the **gas gauge case**.

> Gauge points to F so you infer that tank is full. Then realize that it's stuck, so would point there regardless.

But there's an important disanalogy. The fact that that Cohen *believes P* is not his evidence for P, so showing that he would believe it regardless (his belief is "stuck" on P) does not do much to undermine his belief.

III. Evolution?

Street's worry: random variation + selection explains why we have the moral beliefs we do. Since we can't expect this to be a good guide, it undermines belief in mind-*independent* morality.

Question: What's doing the work here?
White: it must be either *selection effects* or *random variation*.

Against selection effects:

> **Adam's Party:** At the door, Adam asks each of his guests whether eating meat is wrong. Turns out, all of us who end up at the party believe it is. Then we find out that Adam did away with everyone who said otherwise .

There's a selection effect—but it shouldn't undermine our beliefs!

Two different things to explain:

1) Why *everyone who's at the party* believes in God.

2) Why *you* believe in God, and why *Bill* believes in God, and...
(where you, Bill,... are all the people at the party).

The selection effect explains (1), and undermines the boost in confidence we get from consensus. But it doesn't undermine our original reasons.

Q: Is evolution any different?

Against random variation:

If objective randomness (chancy processes in world) is a problem, *subjective* randomness (personal uncertainty) should be just as much of a problem.

Consider when we were *completely ignorant* of the genealogy of our moral (and visual!) beliefs—so had no (independent) reason to think they were reliable. Were we justified in holding them?

But are our moral beliefs *worse* off than our visual beliefs, for lack of a coherent evolutionary story as to why they would be reliable?

White: *Maybe.* But not *by much*. After all, before Darwin people were still justified in believing their eyes!

Against *the combination* of selection and variation:

> **Planet X:** An Oracle (who you have every reason to trust) tells you there's a planet—Planet X—in which some critters have been undergoing Darwinian evolution for some time. As a result, you have come confidence they are able to form true visual beliefs about their environment; not much confidence they have true moral beliefs. "Oh, by the way", the Oracle concludes, "Planet X is Earth".

Should the fact that we wouldn't expect true moral beliefs purely on the basis of evolution make us doubt that we have them now?

Compare: we had no reason to expect Planet X would contain bassoon players; nevertheless, we shouldn't now doubt that it does!

Q: What's different about our moral beliefs?

A diagnosis

Contingency plus selection can *sometimes* undermine beliefs.

> **Coins in Heads:** All of us do apparently sophisticated moral reasoning about a variety of actions. Neurosurgeons poke around while we do, and discover there's a black box with a coin in it; whenever the coin lands heads, you think the action is permissible; when tails, you think impermissible. When they turn the coin over, you rethink your reasoning and come to the opposite conclusion.
> After learning this, you discover that all and only the people let into Adam's party were those who believed "abortion is permissible." Should you continue to believe that abortion is permissible?

What's doing the work here?

White: the "coin in the head" process is evidence that we're not

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Consider flipping a fair coin to determine whether your beliefs are reliable, vs. flipping a coin of unknown bias.

White: yes! If we weren't, could never have become justified in believing evolution in the first place.

really doing any moral *reasoning* at all—it has nothing to do with the truth.

If that's right, then to make a similar case using evolution, Street would have to argue that the amount of control evolution exerts over our moral beliefs is like this.

Q: Is it?