Evolutionary Debunking Arguments

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- “Evolutionary debunking arguments (EDAs) are arguments that appeal to the evolutionary origins of evaluative beliefs to undermine their justification” (p. 1).

- “If we are the products of blind natural selection, then morality and value are merely reflections of our subjective attitudes” (p. 1).

- “...the evolutionary origins of certain evaluative beliefs undermine their justification” (p. 1).

- EDAs consider epistemic claims about *justification* of particular evaluative beliefs, setting aside any metaethical (semantic) positions.
Epistemological Concerns

- “When certain conditions are met, the causal origins of a belief can reduce or even remove its justification” (p. 3).

- Example: “If someone decided whether or not to believe that p by flipping a coin, her belief would surely be unjustified; there is simply no connection whatsoever between this means of forming a belief and the truth” (p. 3).

- “What matters here is not whether a belief was shaped by a process that is literally random but whether it was shaped by a process that tracks the truth” (p. 3).
  - This is entirely irrespective of the truth of the belief.

- *Off-track* processes are not valid justification for belief.
Structure of Debunking Arguments

- **Causal premise.** S’s belief that $p$ is explained by X.

- **Epistemic premise.** X is an off-track process.

- Therefore, S’s belief that $p$ is unjustified.
Example 1: Pain with regards to time

- Parfit: It is irrational to prefer great agony further in the future to weaker pain sooner, or to prefer pain in the past to lesser pain in the future.

- We could easily try to explain this with evolutionary pressures.

- However, Parfit believes the epistemic implications of the evolutionary explanation are limited.

- A debunking argument doesn’t necessarily show that an evaluative attitude is unjustified, but it can show that the belief of justification is unjustified. (There could be another explanation, but the explanation given is insufficient)
Example 2: Selfishness

- Crisp: Being selfish is a normative principle which passes the test above.

- Rachels & Torin, “Evolution favors the selfish; animals that care about themselves will, on average, reproduce more than animals that do not”.

- However, this intuition tracks fitness, not truth - there is no additional philosophical insight to be gained, they argue.
Example 3: Trolley Cases

Greene/Singer use evolutionary debunking arguments against deontological intuitions.

- Greene: Up close & Personal aversion was selected for by evolution, whereas indirect is recent and illicits no such response.

- Singer: “What is the moral salience of the fact that I have killed someone in a way that was possible a million years ago, rather than in a way that became possible only two hundred years ago? I would answer: none.”

- Greene thinks that this shows that deontology is “a kind of moral confabulation”. Singer thinks it gives us grounds to reject appeals to intuition in normative ethics.
EDA Review and New Insights

- Causal Premise: We believe that $p$, an evaluative proposition, because we have an intuition that $p$, and there is an evolutionary explanation of our intuition that $p$.

- Epistemic Premise: Evolution is not a truth-tracking process with respect to evaluative truth.

- Therefore, we are not justified in believing that $p$. 
EDA Review and New Insights

- Kahane: the causal premise is ambitious. It is important to qualify that it only matters whether *some* evolutionary explanation is true, not whether a particular explanation is true.
  - Furthermore, we do not need to assume an adaptationist understanding of evolution. Explanations through genetic drift or other such processes would be worse for truth tracking, more similar to the coin flipping option.

- The epistemic premise, while only a claim about evaluative truth, is commonly accepted, so Kahane doesn’t go into further detail. However, to stay true to the argument he only refers to evaluative truth, not truth in general.

Meta-ethical issue: EDA’s seem to assume Objectivism (that our own life and happiness is the greatest good). According to Kahane, “These arguments have force only against objectivist opponents.”
Where Does Debunking Stop?

- If you cite an off-track influence, you must rule out that your own belief was shaped by the same or a similar influence.

- Greene’s example: “The only reason that faraway children fail to push our emotional buttons is that we evolved in a different environment in which it was impossible to interact with faraway individuals. Could we then stand by our common sense intuitions? Can we, in good conscience, say ‘I live a life of luxury while ignoring the desperate needs of people far away because I, through an accident of human evolution, am emotionally insensitive to their plight. Nevertheless, my failure to relieve their suffering, when I could easily do otherwise, is perfectly justified.’...I find this combination of assertions uncomfortable.”

- Major drawback - two possibilities would be left open. We might be compelled to generalise our altruism to all cases, or we might decide to care about none of these cases at all. In fact, evolutionary might point towards the latter.
Global Debunking Arguments

- Causal premise: Our evolutionary history explains why we have the evaluative beliefs we have.
- Epistemic premise: Evolution is not a truth-tracking process with respect to evaluative truth.
- Conclusion: Evaluative scepticism. None of our evaluative beliefs are justified.

- Effectively an extension of the standard (particular) debunking argument which attempts to generalize moral skepticism.
Pushing Back at Global Debunking

- “One way of resisting the global argument is to show that its conclusion can’t be true” (pg 15)
- Search for criteria to distinguish between beliefs “infected” with evolutionary influence and beliefs uninfected with evolutionary influence
- Reject meta-ethical objectivism
Global EDA: Proving the conclusion false

Show the evaluative scepticism is incoherent
  o Show that the global argument also applies to epistemic norms.
  o Claim that we simply know that certain evaluative claims are true.
Proving the Conclusion false Cont.

- Example of an evaluative claim: “It’s wrong to set cats on fire for fun”
- “And it might be claimed that we know this, and thus the falsity of the global argument’s conclusion, with greater certainty than we know the truth of any of its premises”
- Kahane states that this impression might itself have a debunking explanation.
Limitations of EDAs

- Only applicable to objectivist views
- Still leaves room to find independent justification for our moral intuitions
- Potentially leaves room for other objectivist views such as utilitarianism (though Kahane does not find arguments in this direction compelling)
  - Singher: Utilitarianism is non-adaptive and so not subject to evolutionary explanation, instead being based on “rational intuition” not subject to evolutionary history
  - Kahane: Reasoned extension in line with evolved dispositions should be suspect, even if the intuitions are “rational”
  - Accounts of well-being, including fundamental statements like “pleasure is good” and “pain is bad” seem like strong candidates for EDAs to undermine
Implications of EDAs

- If successful, some (for the localized EDAs) or all (for the global EDAs) of our evaluative beliefs are undermined.
- Will lead to a "radical upheaval" in our evaluative beliefs and discourse.
  - **Joyce**: Global EDAs establish moral skepticism, so if global EDAs succeed, then we only have pragmatic, subjective reasons to hold onto our moral beliefs.
  - Objectivism only pertains to moral discourse.
  - Our moral intuitions are reduced to *useful fictions*.
  - **Street**: Global EDAs would establish complete evaluative skepticism, so (given objectivism), if they succeed all of our evaluative beliefs (including our evaluative belief in objectivism) are questioned. Street sees this implication as a reason to reject objectivism.
- Potential for a version of Global EDA which would lead to global skepticism (if one held both objectivism to be true and that it pertains to all evaluative discourse.