

EVOLUTIONARY DEBUNKING: JOYCE

GENEALOGY CLAIMS. Every belief has a causal history, but this fact alone does not disqualify the authority of that belief. Why not? Because in some cases we arrive at the belief (note the ‘arrive’ terminology) in a proper, *canonical* way. Thus my belief ‘SB is sitting now’ is formed on the basis of sufficient evidence. Certain observations and certain facts of my past history caused the formation of that belief. And your question ‘How did you come to believe that *p*?’ does not automatically cast doubt on the correctness of my belief that *p*.

Yet sometimes just the fact that a belief does have a causal history may undermine the correctness of that belief. Sometimes my belief comes packaged together with another belief about the certainty of that belief. I believe that $1 + 1 = 2$ not as another empirical fact. I believe it as a necessary fact. And if you give me an account of how I, or more interestingly, the mathematical community at large, has come to believe the truths of arithmetic, if everything in this story is contingent and empirical, invoking no supernatural abilities, no mention of necessity at all—if, that is, you sketch a *natural history* of arithmetic, then my initial belief would be undermined.

More cautiously, it will *appear* to be undermined. Because I will reply that such history has no bearing on the nature of mathematics. I will draw a distinction between the way I discover truths and the way I justify them. And I will insist that only the account of justification must be free of empirical, contingent claims—although the account of discovery may be as contingent as you wish.

These reflections help to clarify what’s going on in Joyce’s example of the belief pill. If I discover that a certain pill caused me to believe that Napoleon lost Waterloo, then my belief is unjustified. This is because there should be a canonical way of forming beliefs about Napoleon. Taking a pill is not such a way.

But having undermined your belief you have not thereby shown that Napoleon did not lose Waterloo (or that there was no Waterloo to begin with). He may have lost it alright—and also, there may be a canonical way of justifying your belief that so far has eluded you.

TRANSITION TO MORALITY. So the speculation is that our moral beliefs are planted in us by natural selection (generally speaking, evolutionary forces). At the same time it remains an open question whether these beliefs happen to be true, and whether there is somewhere a canonical (=proper) way of justifying them. But even though there is that open question, in our present epistemic situation it is rational to remain agnostic about moral facts or anything that might correctly justify moral beliefs.

Before proceeding further, Joyce is careful to respond to a couple of objections. (a) Evolution does not plant beliefs in us in isolation from environment (unlike the belief pill that works autonomously). But this does not mean that moral beliefs are not planted in us. It only stresses the role of environment as a trigger for implanting those beliefs.

(b) Moral beliefs cannot be implanted. They have to be learned. You cannot have a belief ‘Torturing cats is bad’, since the concept ‘cat’ clearly has to be learned. This is a point discussed at some length already in Aristotle. Still, it is possible that a very general form of moral beliefs *is* implanted. Consider the concept of reciprocity. Of course you do not have the belief that a cat torturer should be punished. Yet you may have a general disposition to respond with good for good, and with bad for bad. You then declare these responses ‘just’ and ‘right’.

MAIN OBJECTION. Even if evolution has planted moral beliefs, it is still possible it has only planted *true* moral beliefs. Precisely for evolutionary reasons it was essential, one might argue, that only true beliefs were planted in evolutionarily successful individuals. Those individuals that had false moral beliefs have perished.

This is an independently plausible view. Its roots can be found in Plato himself. When you have no moral beliefs, you tend to violate (what others think are) moral rules. So you engage in (what others think are) murder, thievery, debauchery. But moral rules tend to increase cooperation, or generally promote survival and reproduction in some way. So immoralists tend to die out, eventually.