Ethics // Spring 2023

Handout 13

Epistemology of debunking II: White

Inevitability and sensitivity. White considers another source of the epistemological disquiet arising out of Cohen's example. Perhaps what matters is a sense of inevitability. Having gone to Oxford, Cohen (or the majority of graduates per above) would have believed P even if P were false. So the problematic fact we discover about Oxford and Harvard is: 580

> *Insensitivity* If P were false, Cohen would still believe P.

Interestingly, it turns out that the blocking debunking strategy doesn't go well with Insensitivity. For, trivially, it follows that *every* false belief is debunked. Yet some false beliefs *are* justified, as in Example 2 in Handout 12.

We are left with the undermining debunking: when I learn that my belief is insensitive to truth, I lose my justification for it. So we have:

> *Truth sensitivity* If I'm justified in believing that I would have believed P even if it had been false, then I'm not justified in believing P. 581

But this also has an unwelcome consequence. Let's skip the disjunction argument and get to a more informative example.

Suppose you have evidence that Smith killed Jones. But this can't (at least usually) be *indefeasible* evidence. There is also a chance that some conspiracy is involved, for example. So you will have first to rule out the conspiracy in order to be justified in believing that Smith is guilty. But if the conspiracy *is* in fact involved, then you would have the same evidence as you have now. So, by Truth Sensitivity, you conclude that you are not justified either in denying the conspiracy or in holding Smith guilty.

White notes that this is a strategy of radical scepticism (the conspiracy is a prop for the sceptical assumption). You might try to pursue this strategy in some restricted domain, but this would be arbitrary.

Question 1. Evaluate the last claim.

Explanatory relevance. Another *prima facie* plausible proposal for debunking might look thus: 582

> *Relevance* If I can reasonably believe that the ultimate explanation of my belief that P makes no mention of the fact that P, then my belief that P is not justified.

But, White argues, this fails spectacularly for beliefs about future events or beliefs about necessary truths. Though I can reasonably believe that the sun will rise tomorrow, the (causal) explanation why I so believe does not refer to this future fact. Same for necessary truths that will be no part of the causal explanation of belief.

The force of this argument is not clear to me. The case of future beliefs seems a special case of belief in general truths. And such truths may well feature in the explanation. As for necessary truths, this reasoning may be taken as a *reductio*, feeding into the nominalist narrative about the problematic nature of all such beliefs.

Explaining belief. White diagnoses the appeal of explanatory relevance and truth sensitivity by our search for an alternative explanation. Suppose I have evidence E for my belief B. Suppose that E is crucial for making B justified. But if I can explain E in such a way as to eliminate its relevance to B, then B will be undermined. 585

Question 2. Examine the gauge example…

White now argues that this reasoning, though sound for explaining natural events, is not sound for our concern with explaining (and undermining) belief. To make it work, the opponent must reason thus:

(13-1) P, and I believe that P. My belief is (additional) evidence for P.

Well, if this were so, then by explaining my belief in a P-independent way I would have undermined the evidence for P. Then my belief that P would also be undermined. But obviously, we are not reasoning like in (13-1).

SELECTION PRESSURE WORRIES. Here is the slogan of the debunking strategy in this case: 586

(13-2) We only hold moral beliefs (like the ones on the (1)–(6) list in Street) because evolution planted them in us.

This fact, if it is a fact, constitutes the debunking tactic. For we won't trust evolution with guiding us to true moral beliefs.

White considers this nice analogy:

> *Adam's party (revised)* As we arrive at the party, Adam examines you to determine whether you believe that P. If he finds that you do, he lets you in. Later on we discover that Adam stood ready to shoot any one who (he found) did not believe that P.

Importantly, we don't know whether Adam ever used the gun. Perhaps every one invited believed that P. Or perhaps there are piles of bodies somewhere of those who believed that $\sim P$. The only evidence we have is that each of us at the party believes that P.

In this scenario, the limited evidence we have of Adam's plans won't explain why *you* happen to 586
believe that P. You can tell why everyone at the party believes that P, also why you are at the party too. But your belief was formed before coming to the party, and whether it was justified has nothing to do with your admittance to the party.

If I want to use the party-evidence as a reason for or against P, other assumptions may be added. Perhaps Adam knows the truth value of P and also hates truth. Then your evidence is some support that P is false (Adam shoots any one with a true belief). But if, as the debunkers hold, evolution is truth-blind, then there is no reason to suppose one way or the other.

White notes another possibility. I might have asked the partygoers whether P. Suppose they all 587
said that P. This would have given me a reason to believe that P. Now, when I learn of Adam's murderous policy, I could say:

(13-3) No wonder you *all* believe that P, otherwise you wouldn't have been here!

What I learn is that the consensus was fake. This might now reduce my confidence that P, but if so, this would be due to the possibility of a disagreement. But this problem is not at issue here.

YSB