

Epistemology of debunking: White

THE PROBLEM. Sometimes, when I learn about the causal history of my belief that P , I may feel that the epistemic status of that belief has, in some sense to be explored, been ‘undermined’. Is this no more than a feeling? Under what conditions, if any, should causal information have epistemological relevance? Well, with some kind of causal information there is no mystery already at the outset. Causal information may include reasons for my belief. That is, a proposition Q may both be a reason for my belief that P , but also part of the causal explanation why I came to believe that P . The more difficult question is whether some causes that are *not* reasons for the belief that P may nevertheless influence the epistemic status of that belief.

574

573

COHEN’S EXAMPLE. We observe that Oxford graduates accept the claim that P (the analytic/synthetic distinction), and that Harvard graduates reject it. On the face of it, this undermines their respective claims. For we can say that they ‘only believe them because’ they went to a particular university. But it’s not that simple. It can also be the case, as indeed it is, that Oxford graduates and Harvard graduates both can argue for their positions, both can give reasons and justifications. Oddly enough, it doesn’t apparently change the distribution: Oxford for P , Harvard against P . White formulates the problem this way:

574

- (19-1) Supposing that you have formed and maintained your belief that P on the basis of reasons, what causal history of your belief will be a good reason to change your belief?

White immediately notes that we can’t simply divide causal information into ‘relevant’ and ‘irrelevant’. What is irrelevant would be any information not cited as a justification of P . Yet only a tiny bit of that would plausibly raise epistemological worries (as does the information about Oxford and Harvard).

Remark 1 (Haidt the debunker). We in our class already have one diagnosis of Cohen’s example coming from Haidt (though Haidt himself shows no ambition to extend his ideas to domains other than morality). The graduates’ reasons and arguments were serving an already fixed conclusion—which they either arrived at through something other than reasons (e.g., emotions) or at least continued to maintain through non-reason. White obviously doesn’t go for this sweeping diagnosis.

TWO DEBUNKINGS. One problem with your belief may be that, when you learn its causal origin, you see that your reasons for holding the belief are no good. Here, the causal information is a ‘defeater’ that ‘undermines’ your justification. This is the ‘undermining debunking’. Your belief is undermined *after* you have gathered certain information.

575

A different problem with your belief may be that its causal origin *eo ipso* disqualifies you entirely from holding the belief. When you learn about its causal origin, this is useful for your education. But you have never been justified in holding that belief to begin with. This is the ‘blocking debunking’.

Example 2. As I understand the distinction, it may be illustrated thus. You are told that Jones is murdered. You are also told that Smith hated Jones and publicly vowed to kill him the day before. You come to believe that Smith did it, and your belief is justified *then*. Later you are told that Smith was in a different city on the day of the murder. Your belief is undermined. It is no longer rational to hold it, though it *was* rational earlier. The causal origin of your belief was defective somewhat (it now turns out), since you didn’t gather all the relevant information to form it.

Suppose, on the other hand, what you are told later is that you spent the last two years in a coma. You are told that your declared beliefs about Jones and Smith are strange effects of the coma. Now you think that you have *never* had good reasons for believing that Smith was guilty (or even that Jones was murdered). Your block is blocked.

Remark 3. White says that, with blocking debunking, causal facts prevent you from ‘ever’ being justified. I’m not sure that’s right. Can’t I be justified in holding the same belief later on? Perhaps he means that, given the facts, I can’t acquire justification for my *past* belief, then and there.

DISAGREEMENT. White wants to isolate debunking from related phenomena. One is reassessment. Sometimes I say:

576

- (19-2) I only believe P because I was brought up a particular way.

What often goes on in such cases is that a thought like (19-2) prompts a reassessment of P on quite different grounds. So the causal origin information plays no epistemic role in these cases.

On other occasions, (19-2) is supplemented with a further claim:

(19-3) He believes $\sim P$, and he was brought up a different way.

The worry may be in the very fact of a disagreement. If two groups of people of comparable cognitive abilities and education come to believe two opposite things, this may present some ground for doubt (for each person).

But Cohen's example is not *just* about disagreement. There is also correlation in the disagreeing populations along the axis of their graduate schools. So unlike the case of a bare (no-correlation) disagreement, in Cohen's case we can identify a explanation candidate—namely, that the disagreement is due to causal origins. Then we can say:

577

(19-4) It is not the respective reasons for P and $\sim P$ that explain the disagreement, but rather the respective causal origins.

And this, I think, would be another way of saying that the respective reasons for P and $\sim P$ are themselves explained by causal origins (or: voicing those reasons are explained by causal origins).

Now White sounds sceptical about a straightforward explanation like (19-4). First, he says that we should assume 'crude' explanations of the sort 'The students slavishly follow their teachers.' Myself, I am a bit more sympathetic to the crude explanations than White. A close scrutiny of university practices might reveal support for crude explanations. Further, Cohen was not claiming that absolutely every graduate stuck to the belief dominant in his university. But the majority (I think he means) did, and this may well be explained by the 'crude' mechanisms.

577

White concludes, preliminarily, that causal information adds nothing valuable to the problem of disagreement. That's because, despite the evidence of correlation, you can say:

(19-5) I was lucky to get the true belief (or: Oxford was lucky to teach the true belief! etc.). Had I gone to Harvard, I would have been screwed!

Well, of course you *can* say that. But so far, we can't see why the causal origins explanation is any less convincing than the luck explanation.