

# ABSTRACT

## The epistemology of debunking arguments

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Arguments to the effect that a belief is unjustified because of its dubious causal history are often denounced as genetic fallacies (see e.g. Kim 1990). Citing Reichenbach's well known distinction between context of discovery and context of justification, it is held that the aetiology a belief is irrelevant from a philosophical perspective.

However, an increasing number of philosophers have recently expressed their advocacy of so called debunking arguments (see e.g. Cohen 2000, ch. 1; Leiter 2004; Ruse 1986; Singer 2005; Joyce 2006; Street 2006; Greene 2008). These philosophers draw on the findings of the empirical sciences in an attempt to debunk substantive philosophical positions by revealing their suspect causal history. Despite the intense recent interest in debunking arguments, the epistemology behind debunking arguments has remained largely unexplored. As Roger White rightly points out, "the topic has received surprisingly little sustained attention from analytic epistemologists." (White 2010, p. 611)

In my paper, I will contribute to closing this gap in the literature. The purpose of my essay is to assess the relevance that findings of the empirical sciences can have for philosophy. Although debunking arguments have also been applied in political philosophy (Cohen 2000, ch. 1; Leiter 2004) and philosophy of religion (see Thurow forthcoming), I will focus primarily on the debate surrounding debunking arguments in ethics and metaethics. I will address the question to what extent the findings of empirical moral psychology, neuroscience or evolutionary biology should be of interest to moral philosophers. How must debunking arguments in moral philosophy be structured in order to succeed, or can they succeed at all?

To settle this question, I will weigh against each other two individually plausible but mutually incompatible considerations. On the one hand, it is held that the origin of a belief is irrelevant for its justification. Whether, say, the Kantian is justified in her moral views should not depend on psychological or evolutionary facts but exclusively upon the *reasons* that her beliefs are based upon. On the other hand, it seems that if a belief can be shown to be the

product of an unreliable belief forming process, this certainly should reduce our confidence in this belief.

Among the questions that I must address to adjudicate between these two claims are the following: What is the target of the debunking argument? Does it attack the belief directly or does it attack the belief via attacking the premises or intuitions that the belief is based upon? How does the debunking method relate to the problem of peer disagreement? Is Roger White right in claiming that debunking arguments fail because debunkers conflate the effect of debunking arguments with the sceptical implications of peer disagreement (White 2010)? And how do psychological phenomena such as the confirmation bias bear on the topic?

I will conclude with a mixed assessment of the prospects of using findings of the empirical sciences to debunk ethical and metaethical doctrines.

#### **Cited literature**

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