

Diego E. Machuca (ed.), *Evolutionary Debunking Arguments: Ethics, Philosophy of Religion, Philosophy of Mathematics, Metaphysics, and Epistemology*. New York: Routledge, 2023. Pp. xi + 368. ISBN: 978-0-367-45844-7.

Debunking arguments are arguments of the form ‘You just believe that because ...’ (White 2010). The proponent of a debunking argument seeks to attack a belief (or set of beliefs) by showing the belief to have a problematic genealogy. Debunking arguments consist of an empirical premise detailing the genealogy of the targeted belief, and an epistemological premise to the effect that the identified genealogy has an undermining effect on the justification of the targeted belief. Characteristically, debunking arguments are based on undercutting defeaters. Among debunkers, evolutionary explanations are particularly popular. According to evolutionary debunkers, certain beliefs are epistemically dubious because they were evolutionarily selected for, or are a by-product of, natural selection. These debunking arguments thus have the form ‘You just believe that because the forces of evolution have made you believe it.’ Since evolution is not a truth-tracking process with respect to the relevant facts, awareness of a belief’s evolutionary origin undermines its justification, or so evolutionary debunkers argue.

The volume *Evolutionary Debunking Arguments*, edited by Diego E. Machuca, brings together 14 new contributions on this topic, plus an introduction by the editor. As the subtitle reveals, the chapters printed in the volume cover the variety of philosophical disciplines in which evolutionary debunking arguments have been advanced and discussed: ethics (part 1 of the volume), philosophy of religion (part 2), philosophy of mathematics (part 3), as well as metaphysics and epistemology (part 4).

Instead of summarizing all 14 contributions at this point—which the editor already does in the helpful introduction—I would like to cover a selection of chapters to document a trend that runs practically throughout the entire edited volume. With some exceptions, most of the contributions are characterized by a debunking-critical stance. In these chapters, attempts are made to demonstrate that evolutionary debunking arguments do not work or are less devastating than assumed.

Neil Sinclair and James Chamberlain, for instance, offer an optimistic take on whether quasi-realists can address the reliability challenge, which consists in explaining why our moral beliefs are generally true. The idea that carefully formed moral beliefs are generally true is one of the key aspects of realist moral practice that quasi-realists seek to vindicate. Much like realists, then, quasi-realists owe us an explanation of why we are entitled to assume that moral beliefs, when formed in a well-informed and impartial way, are generally

true. Sinclair and Chamberlain proceed by engaging with and expanding on Camil Golub's (2017) recent attempt to come to terms with this challenge. Their proposed solution is that quasi-realists can plausibly claim that careful reflection on the non-moral properties that ground moral truths makes us aware of these grounds and makes us likely to form the appropriate moral beliefs in response to these grounds. They take it that this solution is not threatened by evolutionary accounts of the origins of our moral beliefs.

Andreas Mogensen outlines an optimistic response to Sharon Street's famous Darwinian Dilemma for realism (2006). Street has argued that it would be a striking coincidence if our moral beliefs turned out correct, given that they are likely the result of evolutionary pressures. Mogensen's discussion focuses on the notion of 'coincidence'. He suggests that the most promising way to spell out the Coincidence Problem for realists is to assimilate it to the well-known Fine-Tuning Problem in the philosophy of religion. According to Mogensen, however, constructing the Coincidence Problem in analogy to the Fine-Tuning argument leads to a number of problems. For one thing, the Coincidence Problem inherits some problems known from the debate surrounding the Fine-Tuning Problem, including problems with the Principle of Indifference, the Normalization Problem and the Coarse-Tuning Problem. For another thing, and somewhat ironically, invoking the Fine-Tuning argument would commit one to theism, which yields an independent reason to be optimistic about the reliability of our moral belief forming processes. Since the most promising interpretation of how there might exist a problematic coincidence that realists need to account for, Street's Darwinian Dilemma seems to fail to pose a threat to realism.

Michael Klenk, expanding on previous work (Klenk 2022), even reaches the surprising conclusion that evolutionary findings regarding the origins of our moral beliefs *enhance* their epistemic status. His discussion centers around the dynamics of epistemic defeat. A commonly held view in the literature is that (1) evolutionary accounts of morality do not demonstrate that our moral beliefs are insensitive or unsafe, and (2) undercutting defeat requires demonstrating insensitivity or unsafety. Inspired by the virtue-epistemological approach, Klenk argues against this view, claiming that a belief can also be undercut by showing that its truth is not creditable to cognitive achievement. This initially seems like good news for evolutionary debunkers, as it opens up the possibility of a successful evolutionary debunking argument against beliefs that meet the criteria of sensitivity and safety. However, Klenk maintains that evolutionary findings do not suggest that the truth of our moral beliefs is not creditable to cognitive achievement. On the contrary, they enhance the creditability of our

epistemic success by providing us with a better understanding of the grounds on which we hold our moral beliefs.

Turning to the philosophy of religion, Joshua Thurow finds fault with empirically informed attempts to debunk religious belief. Findings from the cognitive science of religion (CSR) have recently produced a number of entirely naturalistic (e.g., evolutionary) explanations of religious belief, which seem to cast doubt on the rationality of belief. Thurow addresses this concern by engaging with what he takes to be the strongest version of a CSR-based debunking argument against religious belief. The reasons that believers cite in support of their religious beliefs, the argument goes, are really just haphazard rationalizations of the natural proclivity towards believing, identified by CSR (see Leben 2014). As such, they fail to render these beliefs justified. Thurow acknowledges that there are various factors that might indeed encourage religious rationalization, e.g., people's tendency to engage in confirmation bias and to avoid cognitive dissonance. However, he maintains that this CSR-inspired argument from rationalization fails, as there are positive reasons to believe that the reasons on which religious beliefs are based are not epistemically defective rationalizations. These reasons have to do with testimony in support of religious belief, the epistemic benefits of epistemic paternalism, and propositions that are epistemically self-promoting.

Much in the same vein, Matthew Braddock criticizes a CSR-inspired debunking argument against theism put forth by Jason Marsh (2013). It rests on the empirical premise that early humans lacked a concept of a 'high god' and the epistemological premise that this finding is much better predicted by naturalism than theism. Braddock rejects both premises. In a volume that is heavy on the theoretical aspects of debunking arguments and somewhat light on their empirical side, Braddock deserves credit for closely studying the empirical findings on whether prehistoric humans really were natural nonbelievers. According to Braddock's account, the CSR, the ethnographic record, the literature on the cultural evolution of religion, and the archaeological record do not support this view. Furthermore, he argues that natural nonbelief is not even at odds with theism, as theism need not impose a belief requirement for salvation and as believers can have an implicit relationship with God without possessing the concept of a 'high god'.

Lari Launonen and Aku Visala present a counter-argument against an evolutionary debunking argument against religion that relies on recent work on the cultural evolution of religious belief. In their chapter, they engage with Taylor Davis's attempt at debunking religious belief (2020), which adapts a similar argument due to Paul Wilkins and John Griffiths (2013). Davis suggests that

religion evolved through a cultural-evolutionary process because of the benefit it bestows on groups whose members hold religious beliefs. Belief in a punishing 'big god' fosters pro-social behavior within groups and thus plausibly evolved as a solution to free-riding problems. What turns this cultural-evolutionary explanation into a debunking explanation is the fact that the benefits of religious beliefs, unlike, e.g., those of scientific beliefs, do not depend on them being true. To this, Launonen and Visala respond by defending academic theology as a truth-sensitive project, very much on the same level as philosophy, citing, e.g., cross-cultural convergence among theologians.

The two contributors from philosophy of mathematics are both at least cautiously optimistic about the prospects of defusing debunking arguments against mathematical realism. Mary Leng explores the possibility of repurposing David Enoch's third-factor-based defense of metanormative realism to defend mathematical Platonism against the Benacerraf-Field problem (Enoch 2010). In light of the well-known problem that Enoch's solution presupposes the truth of certain controversial assumptions—a problem that carries over to the mathematical domain—Leng advises only cautious optimism. Sharon Berry reaches a similarly semi-optimistic conclusion. Observing a structuralist consensus in mathematics and philosophy, Berry thinks it possible to reduce debunking arguments about mathematical knowledge to debunking arguments about logical coherence knowledge, which provides at least some ground for optimism.

The volume is thus characterized by a pronounced debunking-critical orientation. To be sure, not all contributions are wholly pessimistic about debunking arguments. The opening chapter by Hallvard Lillehammer, exploring how we should respond to the discovery that our ethical beliefs lack justification, seems premised on the assumption that debunking arguments at least sometimes succeed. Max Baker-Hytech's thesis is a comparative one, namely that theistic beliefs are less vulnerable to debunking than moral beliefs. Daniel Z. Korman and Dustin Locke observe rather cautiously that the prospects of debunking color realism depend on "controversial issues," which they do not settle in their chapter. Christos Kyriacou argues only that the debunking project is constrained by the fact that *some* norms of epistemic rationality are immune to debunking. Andrew Moon offers a subtle account of different kinds of global debunking arguments without ruling out their success. And Diego Machuca notes how global debunking arguments and global vindicating arguments are self-defeating and viciously circular, respectively. But rather than to flatly dismiss them on these grounds, he notes that this finding might reveal the possibly aporetic nature of reason.

Thus, while not all contributions are straightforwardly dismissive of evolutionary debunking arguments, it is, I think, accurate to say that the overall tenor of the volume is debunking-critical. It is also noteworthy that the volume does not feature any novel evolutionary debunking arguments, which might strike new fear into the hearts of practical or theoretical philosophers. Most chapters contain discussions of existing debunking attempts, with many of these chapters explaining why the cogency of these debunking attempts has been overstated.

Against this background, a potentially interesting question for skeptics about debunking is why debunking arguments are initially believed to be conclusive. One reason why evolutionary and other debunking arguments have received considerable attention is probably because they possess significant intuitive plausibility. At least at first glance, the suggestion that we should be skeptical of ethical beliefs that we only hold because they provided an evolutionary advantage to our ancestors is extremely convincing and powerful. Debunking arguments in other disciplines also possess significant *prima facie* plausibility. A task for debunking skeptics may be to explain *why* such arguments appear sound at first glance but turn out to be confused upon closer inspection. If the skeptics about debunking are correct (I believe the jury is still out), there is, in a sense, an epistemic illusion here that could be worth trying to understand and explain. Mogensen briefly touches on this question, noting that it is a well-known psychological fact that our intuitions about coincidences are often confused (p. 56). But this question deserves further attention from anti-debunkers.

The contributions from Max Baker-Hyatt and Mary Leng deserve special recognition for spanning across different disciplines. The volume engages with the debunking debates in various philosophical disciplines. However, many of the contributions are still tied to a particular discipline. This is relatively typical of the overall debate, which largely takes place within the respective disciplines (notable exceptions aside). Baker-Hyatt and Leng, however, succeed in elegantly establishing connections between debunking debates in different disciplines. I find Baker-Hyatt's discussion of whether debunking arguments apply equally to inferentially and non-inferentially justified beliefs particularly enlightening. In my view, this question is important but still somewhat overlooked in the extensive literature on debunking. Baker-Hyatt's discussion shows that the answer to this question may affect debunking arguments differently across different disciplines.

A discipline that is not covered by the volume and that is overall somewhat neglected by commentators on debunking is political philosophy. It can be said

that political philosophy is traditionally something of a home turf for would-be debunkers. Think, for example, of “ideology critique,” which has always been a core element of Marxist methodology and that can certainly be understood as a form of debunking. Libertarianism, too, has a tradition of attempting to ‘explain away’ opposition to capitalism and other libertarian ideas (recently, Huemer 2013: chap. 6). One aim for future research might be the integration of the debate surrounding debunking with related issues in political philosophy.

The quality of the contributions to this volume is invariably high. This, along with its disciplinary breadth, makes this edited volume a valuable resource for scholars of debunking arguments and for anyone interested in the topics discussed in the chapters.

Peter Königs | ORCID: 0000-0002-7267-4675

Ethics Institute, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

*p.j.konigs@uu.nl*

## References

- Davis, T. 2020. “Dual Inheritance, Common Sense, and the Justification of Religious Belief.” In R. Peels et al. (eds.), *Scientific Challenges to Common Sense Philosophy*, 191–214. New York: Routledge.
- Enoch, D. 2010. “The Epistemological Challenge to Metanormative Realism: How Best to Understand It, and How to Cope with It,” *Philosophical Studies* 148: 413–438.
- Golub, C. 2017. “Expressivism and The Reliability Challenge,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 20: 797–811.
- Huemer, M. 2013. *The Problem of Political Authority*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Klenk, M. 2022. “Debunking, Epistemic Achievement, and Undermining Defeat,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 59: 43–60.
- Leben, D. 2014. “When Psychology Undermines Beliefs,” *Philosophical Psychology* 27: 328–350.
- Marsh, J. 2013. “Darwin and the Problem of Natural Nonbelief,” *The Monist* 96: 349–376.
- Street, S. 2006. “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value,” *Philosophical Studies* 127: 109–166.
- White, R. 2010. “You Just Believe That Because ...,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 24: 573–615.
- Wilkins, J. S. and P. E. Griffiths 2013. “Evolutionary Debunking Arguments in Three Domains.” In G. W. Dawes and J. Maclaurin (eds.), *A New Science of Religion*, 133–146. New York: Routledge.