
Biological causes and the epistemic status of moral beliefs

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Abstract

What, if anything, do the biological causes of moral beliefs tell us about the epistemic status of those moral beliefs? Numerous people have argued that evolutionary influence on morality would give us reason to be skeptical about moral claims, or at least about realist interpretations of moral claims. The potential epistemic significance of more proximate biological influences on moral beliefs, however, has received less attention. This is particularly surprising because recent empirical work on the biology and psychology of morality has provided us with a wealth of evidence about the variety of proximate factors that may influence the production of moral judgments. These factors include emotions such as disgust and contempt, the unconscious application of heuristics and rules, and various features of the environment (such as messiness and time of day), as well as conscious reasoning. Focusing on emotions and the unconscious application of rules, I analyze the relevant empirical literature and argue that these two factors do play an important causal role in the production of moral beliefs. Then I evaluate the extent to which the influence of these two factors on the production of moral beliefs undermines (or strengthens) the epistemic status of those moral beliefs. Lastly, I consider the objection that evolution, in contrast to other types of causes, has unique potential to affect the epistemic status of moral beliefs. In response, I discuss how causal proximity affects the potential of a cause to have implications for the epistemic status of a belief.

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