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[15] Evolution and Epistemology

0. Outline

1. **Problems for Plantinga (ctd)**
2. **The 'Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism'**

1. Problems for Plantinga (ctd.)

- *[2] Intelligent design 'proper functionalism'.*
- Plantinga's position on 'design':
  - Initially: allows for literal interpretation of design in terms of the intentions of a designing agent or looser interpretation in terms of history of selection.
  - Towards the end of his [1993]: the latter interpretation is rejected in favour of the former
- The reasons given for this change of mind are fairly dubious and apparently unconnected with his theory of knowledge/warrant (see Plantinga [1993:201-204]). I won't discuss them here.
- However, I'd like to quickly comment on where this rejection of the natural-selectionist option might leave his epistemology.

1. Problems for Plantinga (ctd.)

- Ok: Plantinga wants to impose requirements on the etiology of cognitive faculties that produce warranted beliefs so as to ensure that it isn't the case that were they to deliver true beliefs, these beliefs would be merely accidentally true.
- It is plausible that somehow involving an act of creation by an intelligent agent in the etiology could be a way of ensuring that:
  - It is at least *partly* due to the fact that a sentient agent intended them to produce these results that, say, watches non-accidentally track the time.
  - So presumably origination in an act of creation by an agent could be at least *part* of a sufficient reason to claim that certain cognitive faculties deliver beliefs that, if true, wouldn't be true by accident.

1. Problems for Plantinga (ctd.)

- So far so good (let's say).
- However: origination in an act of creation by an agent clearly isn't *sufficient* for non-accidentality - further requirements are in order.
- Already mentioned: Plantinga's requirement of a high probability of the relevant results being produced conditional on the object operating as designed, in the intended environment.
- But there may be more.
- Now note: these further requirements had better not be *epistemic* requirements of any sort or Plantinga's proposed analysis would be circular.
- Problem: this might precisely be the case.

1. Problems for Plantinga (ctd.)

- In his [1995], Plantinga suggests that:

  > 'perhaps it is also necessary that if the design plan is the result of conscious and intelligent design, then the bit of the design plan in question must not be due to an erroneous belief on the part of the designer'. (Plantinga [1995:437])

- Example: I design a particular herbal treatment for depression on the basis of the false assumption that, since yellow is a happy colour, eating yellow flower extracts makes one happy. Presumably, if my concoction does manage to alleviate depression (because, say, I used St John's Wort), it will only be a fortuitous accident that it does so.
- This paves the way for potential trouble…

1. Problems for Plantinga (ctd.)

- But if certain of the designer's beliefs are required to be *true*, shouldn't it *also* be the case that the relevant beliefs aren't *accidentally* true?
- For it not to be any accident that the artifact does X in environment *E*, shouldn't the designer *know*, or at least have warrant for the belief, that the artefact does *X* in environment *E*?
- Example: Say that I am told by a generally trustworthy medical source that St John's Wort is effective in treating depression. It turns out that my generally trustworthy medical source has the odd delusion or two, including the belief that since yellow is a happy colour, eating yellow flower extracts makes you happy…
- Circularity threatens.

1. Problems for Plantinga (ctd.)

- Finally, *on top* of conceptual circularity, Plantinga then seems threatened with a choice between the strongest kind of skepticism possible (both *justificatory* and *global*) and an infinite regress of knowledgeable designers:

  [1] Intelligent design is false and we have no warranted beliefs whatsoever.

  [2] Intelligent design is true but our designer's beliefs have no warrant and hence neither do ours.

  [3] Intelligent design is true, our designer has knowledge, skepticism is avoided but… our designer must himself have been designed by a knowledgeable designer who was himself designed by… ('Creationistic Infinitism'?)

1. Problems for Plantinga (ctd.)

- Not a nice trio of options… Where does that leave Plantinga?
- My guess: Plantinga would suggest that we can claim that skepticism would be averted if ID were true and our creator had knowledge in an 'analogically extended' sense.
- Indeed, he tells us (Plantinga [1993:236]):

> 'God has not been designed; still, there is a way in which… his cognitive or epistemic faculties work. This way is given by his being essentially omniscient and necessarily existent… so that it is a necessary truth that God believes a proposition *A* if and only if *A* is true. Call that way of working '*W*'. *W* is something like an *ideal* for cognitive beings… and it is (partly) in virtue of that relation that the term knowledge is analogically extended to apply to God'

- I'll leave you to puzzle over this one…

2. The 'Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism'

- Quite some lectures ago, we discussed a probability-based argument purporting to show that:

> An atheistic evolutionary view of our origins is *false*, because of its low, or comparatively low, likelihood (alternative argument: the data *favours* ID over Darwinism).

- Here is a somewhat different anti-evolutionist probability-based argument.
- In a number of publications, Plantinga has defended an extremely controversial line of thought purporting to demonstrate the following (Plantinga [1993, 2002, unpublished]):

> An atheistic evolutionary view of our origins *cannot rationally be endorsed* by us (whether or not it is true).

2. The 'Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism'

- The argument caused quite a stir (Plantinga: 'oddly enough, not everyone who has heard this argument has lept to embrace it'), with an entire edited volume dedicated to the issue (Beilby [2002]) + a string of papers.
- Note: this argument doesn't presuppose an endorsement of Plantinga's possibly controversial views on the nature of warranted belief (i.e. his 'proper functionalism').
- Let:
  - *R* = Our cognitive faculties are reliable.
  - *E* = We evolved via natural selection.
  - *N* = 'Naturalism' is true - i.e., inter alia, theism (*T*) is false (in particular, evolution proceeded without divine intervention).

2. The 'Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism'

- The argument:

  [1] We should either believe that Pr(*R*|*E*&*N*) is low or suspend judgment as to its value.

  [2] If we believe that Pr(*R*|*E*&*N*) is low or suspend judgment as to its value, *E*&*N* becomes an undefeatable defeater for *R*.

  [3] An undefeatable defeater for *R* is an undefeatable defeater for *all* our beliefs, including *E*&*N*.

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  [4] If we were to follow [1] and do the rational thing, evolutionary naturalism would be rationally self-defeating.

  (Note: he also offers a *second* argument, from a low value for Pr(*R*|*N*&*E*) to its probable falsity - see Sober & Fitelson's piece)

2. The 'Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism'

- Definition: *D* is a '*defeater*' for *S*'s belief that *P* iff, were *S* to come to believe that *D*, it would be epistemically irrational for *S* to continue believing that *P* (Plantinga's definition; there are variants in the literature).

  Example #1 ('undercutting' defeater: rationality requires that I suspend judgment as to whether or not *P*) :

  'I enter a factory and observe an assembly line on which there are widgets spaced at 15 inch intervals; they look red, and I form the belief that they are red. But then the shop superintendent happens along and tells me that the widgets are irradiated with infrared light, making it possible to detect otherwise undetectable hairline cracks.'

2. The 'Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism'

Example #2 ('rebutting' defeater: rationality requires that I believe $\neg P$) :

'I visit Aberdeen, read the guidebook, and come to acquire the mistaken belief tha the university was established in 1595. But then I attend a local reading of the poetry of William McGonagall …; in the course of the proceedings someone mentions the mistake and the mortified author of the guidebook stands up and acknowledges his grievous error.'

Note: Plantinga takes it that given our belief that the conjunction of $\Pr(R \mid E\&N) = \text{low}$ ($\Pr(R \mid E\&N) =$ inscrutable), *E*&*N* is a rebutting (undercutting) defeater for our belief that *R* and an undercutting defeater for the rest of our beliefs, including (if we hold it) *E*&*N*.

2. The 'Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism'

- Of course, defeaters can themselves be defeated (and these defeater-defeaters subsequently defeated, etc.), e.g.:

  '[Back in the widget factory,] the president of the firm comes along and tells you that the shop superintendent, while reliable on most topics, has a thing about widgets and infrared light: he tells everyone this same story, although as a matter of fact the widgets In this factory are never irradiated by red light.

- Plantinga holds that the undercutting defeat that the conjunction of $\Pr(R \mid E\&N) = \text{low}$ ($\Pr(R \mid E\&N) = \text{inscrutable}$) imposes on the rest of our beliefs is *itself* undefeatable (because once we suspend judgment regarding *R* we cannot then rationally form any further beliefs to help us out or the situation).
- Arguments in the style of Plantinga's aren't new…

2. The 'Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism'

- Here is another famous Christian apologist seemingly pushing a very line:

  'It is only through trusting our own minds that we have come to know Nature herself. If Nature, when fully known, seems to teach us (that is, if the sciences teach us) that our own minds are chance arrangements of atoms, then the sciences themselves would be chance arrangements of atoms and we should have no reason for believing them.' (C.S. Lewis [1960])

- Of course, living in a post-Darwin age, we have the resources to challenge the thought that our minds might supervene on 'chance' arrangements of atoms.
- Plantinga's argument: attempt to argue that even taking evolution into consideration, Lewis' doubts remain unscathed.

2. The 'Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism'

- Plantinga's premise [1] is possibly the most controversial, accordingly, he spends some time defending it...
- He begins by suggesting that there is no prima facie reason why evolution should have equipped us with reliable cognitive faculties, as 'natural selection is interested not in truth, but in appropriate behaviour'.
- Presumably he really means: 'natural selection is interested in truth *only insofar as it generates* appropriate behaviour'.
- So: pending an investigation into the link between true belief and adaptive behaviour, evolutionary theory doesn't immediately yields predictions regarding *R*.
- As Plantinga notes: $\Pr(R|E\&N)$ will crucially depend on the relation between belief and behaviour.

2. The 'Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism'

- Next move: relevantly divide the space of outcomes into *n* jointly exhaustive possibilities $P_1 \ldots P_n$ so as to evaluate $\Pr(R|E\&N\&P_i)$, as well as $\Pr(P_i|E\&N)$, for each *i*. (as $\Pr(R|E\&N) = \sum \Pr(R|E \,\&\, N \,\&\, P_i)\Pr(P_i|E \,\&\, N)$)
- His division:
  - Semantic epiphenomenalism (P_1): beliefs fail to cause behaviour by virtue of their intentional properties
  - Maladaptive semantic non-epiphenomenalism (P_2): beliefs cause behaviour by virtue of their intentional properties and the behaviour that they cause is maladaptive.
  - Adaptive semantic non-epiphenomenalism (P_3): beliefs cause behaviour by virtue of their intentional properties and the behaviour that they cause is adaptive.

2. The 'Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism'

- He quickly discounts P_2, on the basis of its low probability conditional on *E&N* and focuses on P_1 and P_3, whose probabilities conditional on *E&N* he takes to be non-negligeable.
- Regarding P_1, he argues that $\Pr(P_1 \mid E\&N)$ = fairly high.
- His rationale for this (aside from claiming it is the 'received view' in contemporary philosophy of mind):

> 'If [(as materialists presume)] a belief just is a neural structure of some kind - a structure that somehow possesses content – it is exceedingly hard to see how content can get involved in the causal chain leading to behaviour. For if a given such structure had had a different content but the same neurophysiological properties, its causal contribution, one thinks, would be the same' (Plantinga [2002:10])

Reference

- Beilby, J. (ed.) [2002]: *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism.* Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.
- Lewis, C.S. [1960]: 'On living in an atomic age' in his *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.
- Plantinga, A. [1993]: *Warrant and Proper Function*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Plantinga, A. [2002]: 'Introduction' in Beilby [2002].
- Plantinga, A. [unpublished]: 'Naturalism Defeated'.

Next lecture: Evolution & Epistemnology (ctd.)

- Reading: try to read the Ramsey or Sober & Fitelson pieces from the 'optional' reading for today. I have also added the following article to the Moodle:
  - Fales, E. [1996]: 'Plantinga's Case Against Naturalistic Epistemology', *Philosophy of Science* 63(3).