

STREET'S EVOLUTIONARY DEBUNKING ARGUMENT: NUANCING A MORAL REALIST RESPONSE

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That there exist moral obligations which we, as moral agents, are ethically bound to uphold is a tenet of central importance to the moral realist. The term “moral realist” implies that there are moral obligations full stop. We might think of these obligations as duties in a Kantian sense, or as pain-pleasure calculations, but however we construe them, they are out there, says the realist. Of course, not all are of the same mind, and some have put out arguments against moral realism. Street in particular has constructed a potent evolutionary debunking argument. She relies on natural selection to argue that we have no way of coming to know these moral obligations which the moral realist asserts are out there. The challenge, as she puts it, is “to explain the relation between these evolutionary influences on our evaluative attitudes, on the one hand, and the independent evaluative truths that realism posits, on the other.”¹ To begin, I will reconstruct Street’s argument and examine exactly why she thinks the moral realist cannot meet this challenge. Then I will look at two replies to Street’s argument given by Copp and FitzPatrick.² I will then put forth my own argument— nuancing the intuitions of Copp and FitzPatrick to an extent— attempting to show that even if we grant evolution some influence on our moral judgments, evolution has only changed which moral tenets apply to our species, rather than distorting our knowledge of moral truths as Street claims. In other words, the kinds of beings we are, as a species, determine exactly which moral facts obtain for us: but more on this later. Finally, I will consider several consequences of this paradigm.

Street’s essay is quite lengthy, but here we will give a more concise presentation of her argument and then go from there. Here is Street’s argument³:

1. Human systems of moral, evaluative judgments are “thoroughly saturated with evolutionary influence” because natural selection has shaped human psychological dispositions.
2. Natural selection selected for those moral, evaluative judgments according to biological fitness (rather than tracking moral truths of the realist kind).
3. If human moral beliefs, shaped by evolution, align with moral truths, then this would be sheer coincidence.
4. We are not justified in thinking such a coincidence has occurred.
5. So, we cannot justifiably believe that our moral beliefs accurately represent independent moral truths.

¹ Street, S., 2006, “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value,” *Philosophical Studies*, 127: 109–66.

² Copp, D., 2008, “Darwinian Skepticism about Moral Realism,” *Philosophical Issues* 18: 186–206.; FitzPatrick, W.J. 2014a, “Debunking Evolutionary Debunking of Ethical Realism,” *Philosophical Studies*, doi: 10.1007/s11098-014-0295-y.; FitzPatrick, W.J. 2014b, “Why There is No Darwinian Dilemma for Ethical Realism,” in M. Bergmann and P. Kain (eds.), *Challenges to Moral and Religious Belief: Disagreement and Evolution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³ Street, S., 2006, “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value,” *Philosophical Studies*, 127: 114-118.

6. So, realism must invariably give way to moral skepticism.

Notice that Street does not try to argue against the *existence* of moral truths; instead, she takes a more epistemological tact, arguing instead that, because of the pervasive influence of evolution on our psychological dispositions which supposedly lead to moral beliefs, we should not have very much confidence that our moral beliefs have tracked moral truths. We can imagine, for instance, that moral truths are kites, and that the string which leads from the kite to our hand is our ability to, in this case, quite literally grasp the truth. Street's argument is that *even if* there are moral truths flying up there, we have no good reason to think that the string we now hold is actually attached to a moral kite—as opposed to an immoral vulture or whatever flying entity one prefers. So, Street grants that there might be moral truths up there, but who really knows? Barring some kind of special revelation, the moral realist seems to be flightless.

What then are the moral realist's options? According to Street, they are quite grim. While the above argument is the gist of Street's evolutionary debunking argument, the consequence of such an argument come in the "Darwinian dilemma" she presents for the moral realist. The dilemma is nicely summarized by Street:

"On the one hand, the realist may claim that there is no relation between evolutionary influences on our evaluative attitudes and independent evaluative truths. But this claim leads to the implausible skeptical result that most of our evaluative judgments are off track due to the distorting pressure of Darwinian forces. The realist's other option is to claim that there is a relation between evolutionary influences and independent evaluative truths, namely that natural selection favored ancestors who were able to grasp those truths. But this account, I argue, is unacceptable on scientific grounds. Either way, then, realist theories of value prove unable to accommodate the fact that Darwinian forces have deeply influenced the content of human values."⁴

The hinge of the dilemma is the claim in favor of or against a relation between the influence of evolution on our moral beliefs and the truths in themselves. If the moral realist claims there is no relation whatsoever between our moral beliefs and the truths themselves, then they essentially deny the existence of any kite string at all; hence we find ourselves engrossed in skepticism. If the moral realist claims there is a relation between our moral beliefs—influenced by evolution—and the truths themselves, then the moral realist must be able to give a satisfactory account of how our evolutionarily-influenced moral beliefs were able to track these independent moral truths; that is, how the string was able to remain attached to the kite. Street assumes that this account will, as mentioned above, include some reference of natural selection, that it somehow "favored ancestors who were able to grasp those truths", but because of current evolutionary science, she refutes this claim.

It seems then that the moral realist is in trouble, that there is a proverbial hole in her kite—or whatever catastrophe one prefers. But not all are convinced. David Copp replies to Street's argument with a kind of naturalistic realism; that is, he grounds moral truths—

⁴ Street, 2006, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," 109-110.

no flying kites for him. Moral truths are, according to Copp, normative: they are to a large extent non-relativistic and apply to the whole of the human race, but they are grounded insofar as they have been influenced largely by humanity's social context, and this, according to Copp, has allowed us to remain with a great degree of morally evaluative accuracy.⁵ Simply because these moral codes which have been shaped in the midst of human society promote harmony, peaceful interaction, politico-social stability, and the like. These are just the things which normative ethics attempts to accomplish. So Copp would accept premise (1) of Street's argument but deny (4): we *are* justified in thinking that our moral beliefs (forged within the context of human society) have sufficiently tracked independent moral truths.⁶

Street happens to have directly responded to Copp's argument.⁷ Her reply is simply that Copp has not by any means avoided her argument; after all, Copp, relying upon his moral intuitions about moral truths (that they have been forged in the refining fire of human society), is making use of his evolutionarily-shaped mind to inevitably come up with an evolutionarily-shaped moral belief, thereby falling into the Darwinian problem that Street proposes all over again.⁸ So we cannot accept Copp's account to be a good one because the moral truths he posits are simply those which we can expect from a mind shaped by evolutionary influences. Copp's account therefore does not have the power to escape Street's trap.⁹

But that is not the only reply the moral realist has. Part of the issue with Copp's account is that he allows for the pervasive influence of evolution on our moral beliefs which Street posits; that is, he grants premise (1), which is why he could not, according to Street, escape the force of her argument. But it is not evident, as FitzPatrick rightly claims, why we should have to accept premise (1) at all.¹⁰ What reason is there to believe that our moral judgments are pervasively saturated with evolutionary influence? Street's argument is simply that our basic powers of reasoning are likewise influenced by evolution, and so, since these powers and faculties are the basis of our moral beliefs, then the evolutionary contamination is present in our moral beliefs too.¹¹ Needless to say, Street does not avoid

⁵ Copp, D., 2008, "Darwinian Skepticism about Moral Realism," *Philosophical Issues* 18: 186–190

⁶ Similar arguments have been made by Wielenberg and Enoch. See Wielenberg, E., 2010, "On the Evolutionary Debunking of Morality," *Ethics*, 120: 441–64., and Enoch, D., 2011, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁷ Street, Sharon., 2008, "Reply to Copp: Naturalism, Normativity, and the Varieties of Realism Worth Worrying About," *Philosophical Issues*, 18: 207–28.

⁸ *Ibid.* 214–218

⁹ There have, naturally, been replies to Street's critique of Copp's argument. See FitzPatrick, W.J., 2014b, "Why There is No Darwinian Dilemma for Ethical Realism," in M. Bergmann and P. Kain (eds.), *Challenges to Moral and Religious Belief: Disagreement and Evolution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.,; Locke, D., 2014, "Darwinian Normative Skepticism," in M. Bergmann and P. Kain (eds.), *Challenges to Moral and Religious Belief: Disagreement and Evolution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ FitzPatrick, W.J. 2014b, "Why There is No Darwinian Dilemma for Ethical Realism," in M. Bergmann and P. Kain (eds.), *Challenges to Moral and Religious Belief: Disagreement and Evolution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹¹ Street, S., 2006, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies*, 127: 120–130

the issue with this reply; after all, the problem merely shifts one remove away: why should we doubt our capacities for reason? These are deep waters which I do not intend to dive into, for they drift too far afield of this paper's focus.¹² Simply put, it is not clear that the moral realist must accept premise (1).

The upshot of such a move is that the moral realist escapes Street's proposed dilemma and Street's argument without having to deal with certain devastating consequences. Recall Street's dilemma for a moment: "Either way, then, realist theories of value prove unable to accommodate the fact that Darwinian forces have deeply influenced the content of human values."¹³ The whole dilemma is contingent on the application of this supposed fact: the Darwinian influence on the content of human values. But if the moral realist claims that there has been no such influence on the content of human values, then Street's dilemma and her argument lose all power. But what plausible account can the moral realist give which overrides the claim of pervasive evolutionary influence? For starters, autonomous moral reflection is perhaps the most intuitive of all. The moral realist can claim, *contra* Street, that we have the ability for rational, autonomous moral evaluations that are not merely the brute consequences of evolutionary impulses.¹⁴

I would like to take the gist of this response to Street and develop my own argument alongside it. I will play into Street's trap; that is, I will take her challenge head on, responding directly to her second horn of the dilemma and, like Copp, denying premise (4) and, like FitzPatrick, denying premise (1) as Street puts it. Here is the second horn:

"The realist's other option is to claim that there is a relation between evolutionary influences and independent evaluative truths, namely that natural selection favored ancestors who were able to grasp those truths."¹⁵

Before I launch my argument, I should post a couple caveats. For one, I will not grant Street's assumption here; that is, I will claim that evolutionary influences and independent evaluative truths are related, but I will not argue that natural selection has somehow selected ancestors who held those truths. Also, I will not deny premise (1) outright but rather amend it. Evolution has impacted our dispositions: prizing the clan above all others, seeking the survival of the self (though we seem to fight against this too), but not in the way that Street assumes. So, while I will take FitzPatrick's point that we have autonomous moral reflection for granted, I will not deny all evolutionary influence full stop. Here is the argument:

¹² For further discussion see Nagel, T., 1979, "Ethics Without Biology", in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 142–46.

¹³ Street, S., 2006, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies*, 127: 109–110.

¹⁴ Again, a fuller account of this discussion can be found, for starters, here: Nagel, T., 1979, "Ethics Without Biology", in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 142–46., and FitzPatrick, W.J. 2014b, "Why There is No Darwinian Dilemma for Ethical Realism," in M. Bergmann and P. Kain (eds.), *Challenges to Moral and Religious Belief: Disagreement and Evolution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁵ Street, S., 2006, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies*, 127: 109–110

1. If there are moral truths (obligations, duties, etc.), then they are the kinds of things that have to do with ends; that is, the moral perfection of an individual.
2. If they are the kinds of things that have to do with the ends of individuals, then there is no one limited set of moral propositions (simply because there are, or possibly are, different species—kinds of individuals—to which moral truths can apply).
3. If there is no limited set of moral propositions, then it is possible that a different set of moral truths could have applied to humans (and other moral beings).

I begin without the assumption that there are moral truths simply because this is not an argument, like Street's, for the existence or non-existence of independent moral truths. And what is more, I can safely assume that moral truths have to do with the ends of moral individuals simply because this is a common definition, and given my caveat about our having autonomous reasoning, there is no apparent reason to doubt this; after all, when we think of moral obligations, we imagine that the individual who fulfills them all is somehow an exemplary individual: perfect in some way.

The language of (2) might be confusing, but the basic point is simply this: the number of moral propositions that exist is greater than the number which apply to the human species alone. We can call this idea "species relativism". Perhaps we have good reason to think that incest is immoral amongst human beings. But if there is an alien species which, for whatever reason, must propagate through means of incest, then it does not seem reasonable to assume that such an alien species is somehow acting immorally by having incestual relations. However, it may be the case that while incest is morally impermissible for humans and morally permissible for Martians, murder is nevertheless morally impermissible for Martians and humans alike, for whatever normative reasons we might apply. The gist of it is simply this: morality is species-relative. Moral truths direct moral beings to their respective *teloi*; that is, their ends, but not all ends are the same simply because not all species are alike. And finally, premise (3) is a natural consequence of (2) and the notion of the evolution of species. Maybe in some possible state of affairs human beings evolved to be a radically different species than we are today. According to (2), if such were the case, then there would be differing sets of moral truths which human species A and human species B are obligated to follow. Our moral obligations would simply be different because we are different kinds of beings with different kinds of ends.

What is the upshot of this argument? First of all, it meets the challenge of Street's second horn; namely, it gives an account which explains how evaluative truths and evolutionary influences are related. It is not so much that evolution has influenced the content of our moral beliefs in my account; instead, evolution has influenced which moral beliefs can reasonably be held by human autonomous, rational, moral reflection because evolution, amongst other factors, has shaped the kinds of beings—the species of creatures—we are. It is because we are able to engage in reflection on our own nature that we can know which moral truths apply to us; for in examining our species, we find exactly what leads to human flourishing—what leads to the fullness of *eudaimonia*, to call upon Aristotle.

Secondly, it resists the hyper-rational, individualistic implications of FitzPatrick's critique of Street's argument. If moral truths are faithfully tracked because humans have the capability for autonomous, rational, moral reflection, then it seems as though individuals of the human species, like severally mentally handicapped individuals, have

no ethical standing, and it seems as though, based on this criterion, that they count for something less than human. But if moral truths are broadly construed as applying to the human species broadly construed, then individuals like those who are severally mentally handicapped now have moral status and are a part of our collective moral life. Also, it encourages us to think in terms of the whole human species; thus, ethics is still objective and normative insofar as it applies to human beings and their experiences. Third, by taking on this species-relative view, we are able to resist making claims like Copp's which fall prey to Street's critique. And even though my caveat about premise (1) allows me to escape her objection, I think that even without this it is still possible. For in the end, I do not claim exactly what the moral truths actually are, unlike Copp; rather, there is room for such normative argument amongst the members of our species even while giving an account of how evolution relates to moral truths and our moral beliefs about them. Such normative arguments must take into consideration the kind of beings we are, our relation to other species, and our relation to the world at large.

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