

THEISM & EVOLUTIONARY DEBUNKING ARGUMENTS AGAINST MORAL REALISM

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Abstract. Evolutionary debunking arguments against morality come in a variety of forms that differ both in how they take evolution to be problematic for morality and in their specific target of morality i.e. objectivity, realism, justification for moral beliefs, etc. For the purpose of this paper, I will first articulate several recent debunking approaches and highlight what they take to be problematic features of evolutionary history for morality. In doing so I will be forced to abstract from some of the specific arguments offered, although I will provide replies to particular aspects of the arguments offered by Michael Ruse, Sharon Street and Richard Joyce. Then, I will show that theists have independent reasons for rejecting certain, core assumptions of these debunking approaches, thus deflating the major thrust of debunking worries for morality. While there may be good responses available to the non-theist realist with respect to several of the worries raised below, this paper will simply show why the theist need not be troubled by contemporary debunking approaches against morality.

I. EVOLUTIONARY DEBUNKING ARGUMENTS AGAINST MORALITY

Evolutionary debunking arguments, in general, attempt to use what we know of evolutionary history in order to undermine certain beliefs or sets of beliefs, typically by highlighting potentially epistemically dubious etiologies of those beliefs. Evolutionary debunking arguments have been offered against the reliability of and/or justification for our beliefs about morality, religion, metaphysics, and even the general reliability of our cognitive faculties. However, debunkers tend to see morality as uniquely or unusually susceptible to these skeptical worries and as such, morality has received the most attention as a target of evolutionary debunking approaches, with skeptical worries going all the way back to Darwin, himself.

Evolutionary debunking arguments against morality come in a variety of forms that differ both in how they take evolution to be problematic for morality and in their specific target of morality i.e. objectivity, realism, justification for moral beliefs, etc. For the purpose of this paper, I will first articulate several recent debunking approaches and highlight what they take to be problematic features of evolutionary history for morality. In doing so I will be forced to abstract from some of the specific arguments offered, although I will provide replies to particular aspects of the arguments offered by Michael Ruse, Sharon Street and Richard Joyce. Then, I will show that theists have independent reasons for rejecting certain, core assumptions of these debunking approaches, thus deflating the major thrust of debunking worries for morality. While there may be good responses available to the non-theist realist with respect to several of the worries raised below, this paper will simply show why the theist need not be troubled by contemporary debunking approaches against morality.

II. THE COINCIDENCE PROBLEM

There are several ways that evolution can be problematic for morality. One of the strongest challenges comes from the massive coincidence that allegedly plagues realists who also affirm evolution's role in shaping human behavior, tendencies, and cognition. The problem of coincidence is most clearly articulated by Sharon Street in her famous *Darwinian Dilemma*.¹ Realists who deny that there is a causal connection between moral facts and the evolutionary pressures that pushed us towards the moral tendencies we have today are faced with the problem that most of our moral judgments may be off the mark. In other words, realists have to make sense of the relationship between the moral facts and the ways that evolution has shaped our intuitions and moral attitudes in a "doxastically discriminating" fashion.² If realists deny a relationship or a causal connection, then they land in the unwelcome conclusion that it would be a massive coincidence if our moral attitudes and intuitions, that were shaped by evolutionary pressures, made us believe the moral facts. In other words, if the moral facts play no causal role in the etiology of our moral beliefs and evo-

1 Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value", *Philosophical Studies* 127, no. 1 (2006).

2 I'm borrowing this phrase from Russ Shafer-Landau, "Evolutionary Debunking, Moral Realism and Moral Knowledge", *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2012).

lution has played a substantive role in shaping our moral beliefs, then it would be a massive coincidence if the content of our moral beliefs matched the moral facts. Street nicely illustrates the worry with her Bermuda example:

Allowing our evaluative judgements to be shaped by evolutionary influences is analogous to setting out for Bermuda and letting the course of your boat be determined by the wind and tides: just as the push of the wind and tides on your boat has nothing to do with where you want to go, so the historical push of natural selection on the content of our evaluative judgements has nothing to do with evaluative truth. Of course, every now and then, the wind and tides might happen to deposit someone's boat on the shores of Bermuda. Similarly, every now and then, Darwinian pressures might have happened to push us toward accepting an evaluative judgement that accords with one of the realist's independent evaluative truths. But this would be purely a matter of chance, since by hypothesis there is no relation between the forces at work and the 'destination' in question, namely evaluative truth."

By denying a causal relation between moral facts and the "push of natural selection" on our moral tendencies, the realist must accept that evolutionary pressures act in a purely distortionary capacity similarly to how the winds and tides are not conducive to our arrival at the island of Bermuda. This coincidence worry hinges on the assumption that evolutionary pressures did, in fact, act as distortionary pressures on our moral tendencies—they are distortionary because they are not truth-seeking any more than the winds and tides are Bermuda-seeking. Does the theist need to accept this assumption? It does not seem so (at least not obviously so).

The theistic picture of human evolution and indeed all of evolutionary history and the entire unfolding of creation includes a commitment to teleology, even in the barest of senses, namely that God purposed a creation that unfolded itself over time. Since Darwin, we now know that the unfolding of species history can be explained by evolution via natural selection and other mechanisms.³ However, this explanation provides only the mechanistic account of the story. God's purposeful, though non-interventionary, control over evolutionary processes precludes evolution's acting in a capacity counter-productively to God's intentions for creation. If God's intentions for creation included the presence of

3 Drift and other mechanisms like niche construction, developmental biases, and gene-culture co-evolution, whose evolutionary significance is defended by those in the "extended evolutionary synthesis" camp (See Kevin N. Laland et al., "The Extended Evolutionary Synthesis: Its Structure, Assumptions and Predictions", *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 282, no. 1813 (2015)).

rational beings who could both grasp and act in accordance with the dictates of morality, then surely this would not be impossible to achieve despite evolution. The theist simply need not grant Street's assumption that evolution's influence on our judgment-making capacity and evaluative tendencies is like the erratic influence of the wind and tides on my attempt to arrive at Bermuda. On theism, why can't the winds of evolutionary pressures be, at least somewhat, Bermuda-bound?

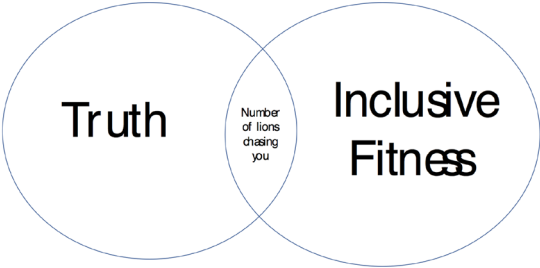
However, even if evolutionary pressures are distortionary, the theist at least has some reason to think that God's purposes could ameliorate or temper the extent of the distortionary influences on our judgment-making capacities such that not all, nor even a significant subset, of our judgments would be off the mark. In other words, even if God knew that evolutionary pressures would have distorted the ability of human beings to grasp moral truths, God could have "set things up," so to speak, in such a way as to account for evolution's potential distortionary impact. Again, this could but need not be understood as a result of divine intervention into natural processes. The theist can understand divine amelioration of evolution's distortionary effects in a non-interventionary manner as there is no need to appeal to miraculous intervention, here, over and above the general, purposive control that classical theists have maintained that God exerts over creation.

The specific details of the theistic evolutionary account can be spelled out any number of ways and the particulars are not as important as the wider implications of the view, namely that God could mitigate distortionary pressures that threatened to undermine core elements of the divine desiderata for creation, and specifically for rational creatures.

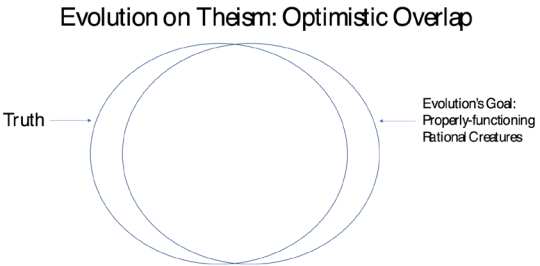
III. TRUTH AND INCLUSIVE FITNESS

Here is another way of putting the problem and its corresponding solution on theism. Street grants that evolutionary processes can push us towards truth if the truth is fitness-conducive. That is, evolutionary processes may inadvertently have caused us to grasp truths that were integral for survival. While evolutionary processes are not truth-tracking for truth's sake, they can be truth-tracking for fitness's sake. For example, it was fitness-conducive for our Pleistocene ancestors to grasp that if two lions are in pursuit, and only one of them gets tired and stops, that there is still one remaining lion in pursuit. Thus, being able to conclude that two minus one is not zero is a matter of life and death.

So, the evolutionary story favored by Street and the debunkers puts evolution's *desiderata* as correlating truth-conduciveness with survival-fitness only in cases where the inability of grasping the truth would have served tremendously maladaptive purposes. Truth-tracking is incidental to fitness-tracking and, additionally, these cases of overlap are rare and, importantly, moral truths do not fall into the overlap of the two domains.



However, it seems clear that the theist need not buy this version of the evolutionary story. Evolution on theism is not committed to so pessimistic of a relation between evolutionary *desiderata* and truth-tracking. As mentioned above, if God has purposed evolutionary processes in such a way as to ensure the proper functioning of any rational creatures produced by said processes, then it is possible and indeed even reasonable to suspect that the overlap of the two domains will be larger. If God desires proper-functioning rational creatures then part of their ability to properly function rests in their capacity to detect facts about reality, including some moral facts. Thus, the theist has strong reasons to reject the pessimistic overlap in favor of the optimistic overlap.



This worry is often captured as the “implausibility of tracking” the moral facts where the objection to the realist is simply that there is no plausible tracking story to be given once we grant that evolution has significantly shaped not only our body plans, organs, etc. but also our psychology and cognitive machinery (this is the second horn of Street’s dilemma). As illustrated above, the theist does have a response to the tracking implausibility objection in that theistic evolution allows for a teleological underpinning of the evolutionary story that permits and is even conducive to the tracking hypothesis. The implausibility of tracking is only really a serious worry on Street’s pessimistic overlap assumption—an assumption that the theist need not grant.

None of this is to say that theism is true, that moral realism is true, or that theism, if true, can answer all of the problems that moral realism faces. This argument simply shows at least that moral realism on theism is less susceptible to evolutionary debunking worries than moral realism on its own.

IV. BELIEF PILLS AND JUSTIFICATION

The coincidence problem also leads to a related but conceptually distinct problem regarding whether we are justified in our moral beliefs if evolutionary processes played a doxastically discriminating role in their formation. To motivate this worry, consider Richard Joyce’s Napoleon-Pill analogy⁴. Suppose that a scientist gives a you pill that both causes you to believe that Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo and removes from your memory the fact that you were ever given such a pill. Would your belief that Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo be justified? Certainly not. Regardless of what theory of justification turns out to be true, no beliefs acquired in this way can be justified. Similarly, beliefs about what is morally right and wrong, the debunkers argue, have been caused in us via evolutionary processes that did not have truth as their primary aim. So then even if it turns out that we have “arrived” at the correct moral beliefs, we are unjustified in thinking that they are the correct moral beliefs. Evolutionary processes work in a similar fashion to the nefarious scientist in the Napoleon-Pill example; they cause beliefs in such a way that does not appropriately connect their acquisition to the relevant features of the world, namely the moral facts (if they exist).

4 Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (MIT Press, 2006), 181.

Let us consider a stronger variation of Joyce's argument where rather than the pill's merely causing you to believe that Napoleon lost at Waterloo, rather the pill forms in you a mechanism that inclines you to indiscriminately form beliefs about Napoleon—call this mechanism the Nap-Generator. The Nap-Generator forms beliefs about Napoleon without sensitivity to any facts about Napoleon. It is obvious that any beliefs formed by the Nap-Generator would be unjustified. And there is a plausible empirical story on which evolution works similarly to this example: humans may have evolved a moral capacity rather than merely specific moral beliefs.⁵ Michael Ruse argues that evolution's role in morality is at least partially that of giving humans a capacity (or tendency) for moralizing the world and seeing the norms and codes of our moralizing process as objective, otherwise we would not be motivated to follow the dictates of morality.⁶

If evolution has shaped for us a moral capacity that merely functions to saturate our evaluative judgments with the feeling of objectivity, then this should undermine our confidence in the deliverances of that capacity. Or if the capacity merely functions to generate judgments about the world that maximize inclusive fitness, then this knowledge should similarly undermine our confidence in the deliverances of that capacity—we should not think that those beliefs match the moral facts.⁷ In the same way that justification is undermined given the Nap-Generator's indiscriminate forming of Napoleon-related beliefs, so too is the justification for the beliefs formed by the moral capacity.

The theist, here, has recourse to a similar move to the previous rebuttals developed above. That is, the theist need not accept that the moral capacity fires indiscriminately and forms moral beliefs without sensitivity to the relevant features of the world, namely the moral facts. If theism is true, then there is good reason to think that the moral capacity *does*, in fact, form beliefs, or at least is capable of forming beliefs that are sensitive to the moral facts. The

5 William J. FitzPatrick, "Debunking Evolutionary Debunking of Ethical Realism", *Philosophical Studies* 172, no. 4 (2015) groups debunking approaches into those that try to undermine either the moral 'capacity' for or the moral 'content' of our beliefs. Chandra S. Sripada and Stephen Stich, "A Framework for the Psychology of Norms", in *The Innate Mind: Culture and Cognition*, ed. Peter Carruthers, Stephen Laurence and Stephen Stich (Oxford Univ. Press, 2006) argue for a dual-mechanism approach to norm-related cognition where acquisition and implementation are the two fundamental cognitive processes underlying human morality.

6 Michael Ruse, "Evolutionary Ethics: A Phoenix Arisen", *Zygon* 21, no. 1 (1986).

7 We should also not believe that the moral beliefs do not match the moral facts, as this would be unwarranted by the evidence. Rather, the warranted position is that of agnosticism.

moral capacity, on theism, is plausibly both sensitive to the moral facts and reliable in the judgments that it forms on the basis of the moral facts.⁸

V. CONTINGENCY

An additional problematic feature of evolution for morality is the contingency worry, initially gestured at by Darwin himself and defended more recently by Michael Ruse. The worry goes roughly along the following line: our moral tendencies are calibrated (by evolutionary pressures) to the kind of creatures that we are; however, we could have been very different, thus, our moral tendencies could have been very different. The argument hinges both on an empirical premise that morality is radically contingent in this way and a philosophical premise that realism entails that the moral facts concerning what is good for us are immutable. The empirical premise is captured by Stephen J. Gould's infamous worry that if you "rewind the tape of life, erasing what actually happened and let it run again, you'd get a different set of ten each time."⁹ Charles Darwin articulates the contingency worry in *The Descent of Man* as follows:

If, for instance, to take an extreme case, men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker-bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters; and no one would think of interfering.¹⁰

And Michael Ruse also puts it starkly:

We are what we are because of contingent circumstances, not because we necessarily had to be as we are. Suppose, instead of evolving from savannah-living primates...we had come from cave-dwellers. Our nature and morality

8 Shafer-Landau draws a useful distinction between the sensitivity and reliability of belief-forming mechanisms and tendencies. A belief-forming mechanism is sensitive when it results in "non-accidentally believing propositions when they are true" whereas reliable mechanisms produce mostly true beliefs. A book of predictions about the weather that based its information on astrology columns might be reliable without being even remotely sensitive (Shafer-Landau, "Evolutionary Debunking, Moral Realism and Moral Knowledge", 16–17). Sensitivity, or the lack thereof, is what generates the brunt of the debunking worry.

9 Stephen J. Gould, "Interview: Stephen Jay Gould, Evolutionary Biologist and Paleontologist", *Academy of Achievement*, 1991.

10 Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (John Murray, 1888), 99.

might have been very different. Or take the termites...they have to eat each other's feces...had humans come along a similar trail, our highest ethical imperatives would have been strange indeed.¹¹

Even Sharon Street formulates a version of the contingency worry:

Imagine, for instance, that we had evolved more along the lines of lions, so that males in relatively frequent circumstances had a strong unreflective evaluative tendency to experience the killing of offspring that were not his own as 'demanded by the circumstances,' and so that females, in turn, experienced no strong unreflective tendency to 'hold it against' a male when he killed her offspring in such circumstances, on the contrary becoming receptive to his advances soon afterwards. Or imagine that we had evolved more along the lines of our close primate relatives the bonobos, so that we experienced sexual relations with all kinds of different partners as 'called for' in all kinds of different circumstances. Finally, imagine that we had evolved more on the model of the social insects, perhaps possessing overwhelmingly strong unreflective evaluative tendencies in the direction of devoting ourselves to the welfare of the entire community, and only the weakest tendency to look out for our own individual survival, being unreflectively inclined to view that survival as 'good' only insofar as it was of some use to the larger community.¹²

Prima facie, the contingency worry seems like a serious challenge for any realist conception of morality. If it's true that human morality is susceptible to this radical contingency such that both what is moral for us and what we believe is moral are so dependent on the topography of our evolutionary history, then surely this undermines moral objectivity. However, I think this line of concern is misplaced, along with the contingency challenge, itself. Let us grant the empirical premise to the debunker—that there does exist such a radical dimension of contingency in evolutionary history—need the theist be worried by this?¹³ I don't think so—and not even for reasons uniquely available to the theist. Even if we could have "turned out" very differently than we did, this, by itself, is not problematic for morality. And here it will be

11 Ruse, "Evolutionary Ethics", 108.

12 Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value", 120–21.

13 For recent work on the extent of contingency warranted by the empirical evidence, see Zachary D. Blount, Richard E. Lenski, and Jonathan B. Losos, "Contingency and Determinism in Evolution: Replaying Life's Tape", *Science (New York, N.Y.)* 362, no. 6415 (2018) and for a philosophical treatment, see T. Y. W. Wong, "The Evolutionary Contingency Thesis and Evolutionary Idiosyncrasies", *Biology and Philosophy* 34, no. 2 (2019).

helpful to introduce and make use of the distinction between attributive and predicative goodness.¹⁴

When we speak of good books or good butterflies or good undergraduate students (if they do exist somewhere as of yet undiscovered in the created order), do we mean to say that goodness is some, one-and-the-same quality that we can appropriately predicate of each of these subjects? Or is goodness only appropriately understood in the attributive sense as “goodness for X”, where what goodness is in a good book is different from the goodness of a good butterfly and a good undergraduate student. In the same way that “big” and “small” are adjectives only properly understood when attached to nouns i.e. a big snail is still smaller than a small hippopotamus, so too can “good” only be understood when attributed. The contingency worry relies on a predicative reading of goodness. In other words, the debunker seems to be assuming that there is such a thing as goodness, *per se*, such that had we evolved along some different track then we could have missed the goodness mark and arrived at strange ethical imperatives. If goodness is attributive, however, then the contingency worry loses its teeth for it is not problematic that our ethical imperatives are contingent on the kinds of creatures we are since goodness is only sensical when indexed to particulars—whether they be humans, walruses, or feces-loving termites!

Is it possible, then, that cannibalism and murder could have ever been good for humans? Could we have evolved along a different evolutionary trajectory such that the dictates of ethics would have looked radically different than what we now think? I do not think so—and the reason is that our rational natures are what our goodness is indexed to. By rational nature here I simply mean the ability to consent and communicate that consent, or something along those lines¹⁵. For example, if termites became endowed with rational natures, then it might be the case that possessing a rational nature is so radical a change that it comes with its own set of ethical imperatives. If so, then behaviors that would have previously been good for a species would no longer be good because the rational nature necessitates certain ethical prescriptions. For example, some species of spiders engage in post-copulatory

14 For an in-depth treatment of the distinction, see P. T. Geach, “Good and Evil”, *Analysis* 17, no. 2 (1956) and Judith J. Thomson, “The Right and the Good”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 94, no. 6 (1997); Judith J. Thomson, “Turning the Trolley”, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36, no. 4 (2008).

15 Thanks to John Schwenkler for this suggestion.

cannibalism (mostly the females, although sometimes the males, cannibalize their mates after copulation). If these spider species acquired rational natures, it may be the case that it would no longer be good for them to cannibalize one another since doing so would violate what is prescribed by the rational nature—it is not good for creatures with rational natures to kill each other by cannibalism or otherwise. For creatures who both jointly can consent and do not consent to post-copulatory cannibalism it would be wrong for said spider to cannibalize them. This is compatible with the attributive theory of goodness since goodness is still indexed to particular kinds of creatures—and those with rational natures are prescribed different goods in virtue of the rational nature.¹⁶ If what is good for us is contingent on the kinds of creatures we are, then contingency is not a concern for the realist.¹⁷

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16 I would like to thank Marshall Thompson for this example.

17 This response is obviously not uniquely available to the theist however, the theist has resources to deflect the contingency worry even on a predicative understanding of goodness. The theist can appeal to a similar line along that of the earlier responses discussed in this paper, namely that she has independent reasons for thinking that a good God would not have let our evolutionary trajectory so miss the goodness mark such that we would have arrived at some inverted morality where humility is reprehensible and cannibalizing each other is permissible.

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