Sharon Street and Debunking of Morality

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Abstract

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Sharon Street's evolutionary debunking argument is an epistemological challenge against moral realism. It is built upon the empirical assumption that evolutionary forces have played a significant role in processes of moral belief formation. The goal of her subsequent dilemma argument is not to deny the existence of moral facts or morality as a whole, but to show that the starting assumption leads to the conclusion that we should think our moral beliefs are probably not objectively true. In this paper, I will firstly clarify the epistemic aspects of moral realism. Then I will illustrate Street's empirical assumption and the investigated relations between evolutionary influences and moral beliefs. After then explicating the dilemma that Street builds upon her empirical assumption, I shall elaborate prominent realist objections to her argument, and problems that afflict these realist objections. This leads us to the conclusion that none of the realist objections has successfully defended moral realism against Street's debunking argument; however, Street needs to take some of their insights seriously, in order to improve her debunking dilemma.

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By Mehdi Najafi

INTRODUCTION

Meta-ethics concerns the nature of morality, the objectivity of moral facts, the justifiability of moral knowledge, and the essence of rightness and wrongness. It involves epistemological and metaphysical investigations of morality. From this view, moral realism, in its bold version, claims that there are stance-independent (objective) moral facts and, at least in some cases, our moral beliefs can be directly and epistemically justified. In those cases, our beliefs make accurate representations of moral realities and we are justified in holding them. Another version, however, takes a more moderate position and holds that even if moral facts are not directly accessible, we have enough evidence or reason to justifiably believe there are such realities (Boyd, 1988).

After elaborating these two forms of realism in more detail, I will investigate one of the most impressive meta-ethical critiques against such views, which has been recently proposed by Sharon Street. I will uncover the problems of her evolutionary argument and then I will try to repair some of its deficiencies. On the whole, however, I conclude that Street's argument falls short of its ambitious goal, and its epistemic challenge remains open for further development and debate.

MORAL REALISM

Defined narrowly, one tenet of moral realism is that there are objective moral facts and true moral propositions. On such a view, objectivity is defined in a stance-independent sense: moral facts are said to exist independently of any real or hypothetical subject's *second*-order mental stances towards them (e.g., our thoughts about them, feelings about them, etc.) (Street, 2006).

This realism allows that some moral facts do depend on *first*-order mental states. For example, if it really is morally bad that I cause you agony, the realist can allow that this may depend on your experience of that agony, which is a first-order mental state, while saying it does not depend further on how any of us feel or think about that suffered agony. This realism also allows that any *perceived* fact is processed by our mind and so perception of it is mind-dependent. So the realist's stance-independence claim means a kind of conceptual or metaphysical objectivity not a necessary casual independence.

According to Horn (2014), realists hold that moral judgments attribute moral properties to states of affairs, actions, events, and so on. Moral properties could be represented through moral propositions, just like all other non-moral judgments that attribute non-moral properties to some state of affairs or facts. So, in principle, moral statements are truth-apt so that they, accurately or inaccurately, represent the reality of moral facts. Similar to other beliefs, they are true if they give us an accurate report of moral realities, and otherwise they are false (Boyd 1988, Sayre-McCord 2005). All realists agree in this, but they do not unanimously agree on what exactly the nature of moral facts might be or what would be the criterion according to which a moral judgment counts as justified.

Bolder and more modest types of realism diverge regarding the spelling out of the epistemic commitments. While bolder realists (e.g. Brink 1989) maintain that some moral beliefs are justified because moral facts are directly accessible, more modest realists, such as Shafer-Landau (2012), allow that we don't have direct epistemic access to those realities, but claim nonetheless that we have enough evidence or reason to form justified moral beliefs corresponding to them.

Beliefs should be originated by reliable sources to be justified. When one sees an apple on the table via reliable perceptual systems, this epistemic access to the apple is relatively direct. In contrast, relatively indirect epistemic access of external objects involves inference from perception of other things to beliefs regarding the object in question. For instance, we cannot directly perceive the structure of DNAs in chromosomes, but we perceive outcomes of related methods or tests and infer DNA's structure from these. This is a very rough distinction between direct and indirect epistemic accesses, which for simplicity sets aside nuances and controversies. For my purposes the point is that the justifications for some beliefs involve more steps (more perceptions, inferences, etc.) than others, allowing that there are always at least some steps.

Street argues that neither type of realism is defensible. Even if the metaphysical commitments could be met, evolutionary considerations indicate that realists cannot meet the bolder or more modest epistemological commitments. Our moral beliefs do not enjoy even relatively indirect justification.[1]

My own view is in line with this epistemic skepticism. But like all positions in this debate, it is difficult to provide this skepticism with a satisfactory defense. My plan is to focus on Sharon Street's recent and influential evolutionary argument for epistemic skepticism. I will clarify supposed flaws in her argument, but also propose repairs of these flaws. Overall I defend her position but suggest it remains in need of further development and defense.

MORAL BELIEFS AND STREET'S EVOLUTIONARY ASSUMPTION

Street (2006) concentrates on the relation between evaluative attitudes (also called values) and evaluative facts. While engaging Street's text I will restrict the focus to evaluative attitudes or

values and putative evaluative facts of the moral sort – for short, I talk of *moral beliefs* and *moral facts*.

Street's main evolutionary and epistemic argument against realism about moral beliefs takes a dilemma form. But prior to formulating that argument, she clarifies a key evolutionary assumption underlying it: natural selection has significantly (certainly not exclusively) influenced which moral beliefs we come to hold. Street's dilemma will challenge realists to offer a satisfactory account of the *relation* between our moral beliefs influenced by natural selection, and moral facts, which realists claim are independent of stances. But it is important to first see that Street does not deny that numerous factors additional to natural selection have influenced our belief formation. She instead is supposing that selection has been "one enormous factor" in the process of forming moral beliefs (p.114). To give a flavor of this, she provides a comparison. A creature that tends to believe that 'the fact that someone is kin is a reason to harm that person' will have a tendency (under at least some circumstances) to assail one's offspring and other family members. Natural selection will relatively quickly extinguish this tendency from populations. But a creature that tends to instead believe that 'the fact that something would help one's offspring is a reason to do it' will aid the representation of that creature in the future gene pool (p.115-116.)

Street argues that it is our *basic* evaluative *tendencies* that have been tremendously influenced by evolutionary forces; these basic tendencies then help shape our more specific moral beliefs, and thereby indirectly transmit the influence of natural selection to moral beliefs they help form. She concludes that however other factors – such as moral reflection or social moral codes – help shape our full-fledged moral beliefs, those beliefs would have been very different if the contents of our basic evaluative tendencies were something else entirely (p.120). Put differently, she

believes that there is a corresponding relation between the basic evaluative tendencies which are directly influenced by evolutionary forces and full-fledged moral beliefs we finally affirm. For instance, if we had evolved a basic preference to sacrifice children to the welfare of the entire society, as some social insects have, then our full-fledged moral beliefs would presumably now be very different than they tend to be.

Later I discuss criticisms that have been leveled against Street's starting evolutionary assumption. For now the point to make is that, with the assumption, Street aims to make a partly empirical case for epistemic skepticism. In this connection, other authors have claimed that her starting assumption should be applied in a way that retains the distinctive empirical character of the argument and precludes it from collapsing into a more general and familiar skepticism, against which strong objections already exist (e.g., Shafer-Landau, 2012; Vavova, 2015). Accordingly, Street's Darwinian dilemma should meet the following three demands (Vavova, 2015):

First, her argument should depend upon its evolutionary assumption; otherwise, it would risk being a form of other sceptical arguments (p.105).

Second, her argument should be *targeted*, such that only the moral beliefs (and other beliefs involving evaluative attitudes) are undermined, while non-evaluative beliefs remain safe from her argument (p.105); otherwise, it would risk being self-defeating.

Finally, the argument must retain an epistemological character. Street explicitly says the challenge is epistemological, and does not depend on any ontological skepticism (p.105).

STREET'S DARWINIAN DILEMMA

Street argues that realists face a dilemma when articulating the relation between i) moral facts (the existence of which Street accepts for argument's sake), and ii) natural selection's significant influence on moral beliefs. Either natural selection has led us to form moral beliefs such that they sometimes track the supposed objective moral facts, or there is no relation of that sort – selection has not helped our moral beliefs to track the moral facts (even if some of those beliefs sometimes accurately represent those facts anyway). Assuming that these are the only two options the realist has, she investigates these and argues that both options lead to the conclusion that most of our moral beliefs are off track. Realizing this, she claims most of our moral beliefs would be unjustified, contrary to what realism holds.

I will elaborate and evaluate each horn of the dilemma in turn.

FIRST HORN OF STREE'S DILEMMA: NON-RELATION HORN

According to the first horn of the dilemma, the "no relation" horn, any correspondence between our moral beliefs and moral facts would be sheer coincidence. On this picture, selection would be "blind" to any truth and falsity of moral beliefs.

If this is the case, it is in principle possible that our moral beliefs sometimes accurately track moral facts far from any evolutionary affect. A boat which is pushed just by the wind and tides and has nothing to do with a sailor's intention most probably does not reach the desired shore, though it is possible in principle that it does. Similarly Street argues that without any relation between moral facts and natural selection, it is very improbable that Darwinian pressures push us toward evaluative judgments that accurately correspond to stance-independent moral facts, since they have nothing to do with such realities. So, our moral beliefs are – not necessarily, but very probably – mostly off track. They cannot align with moral facts unless via sheer luck.

On the first horn of the dilemma realists are left with a very skeptical result. It implies that most of our moral beliefs fail to correspond to moral facts, and Street infers from this that we should believe that most of our moral beliefs are not (directly or indirectly) justified. That would undermine the epistemic commitment of moral realism.

Some realist critics, such as Shafer-Landau (2012) And Vavova (2015), claim that this is not a serious and new challenge to realism. This first horn is articulated as though there are infinite moral propositions and infinite distinct moral beliefs we could hold, with the set of just true moral propositions being very likely an exceedingly small fraction of all these possible ones. It then implies that in absence of a relation between selection's influence and moral facts – in the absence of a guiding factor – we should be very skeptical that any of our moral beliefs have chanced to be among the exceedingly few true ones. But, the critics allege, this part of Street's argument then amounts to a non-empirical form of general skepticism, one that turns on mathematical claims involving compared sizes of sets that do not seem to depend on the moral nature of the propositions, beliefs, and facts being discussed. Street's arguments are then said to run afoul of the above-clarified demands on her evolutionary debunking argument (Shafer-Landau, 2012).

But Street could reply by accepting the demands and denying she has failed to meet them. The critics have mistaken a mere part of her argument (the first horn) for the whole (the entire dilemma). Even if the first horn of Street's argument is non-empirical and non-targeted, it does not follow that this is true of the whole argument. We already saw that she rests her conclusion partly on an empirical evolutionary assumption, and we will now see that the second horn is not only partly empirical but also is clearly targeted at moral (and other evaluative) beliefs.

THE SECOND HORN OF THE DILEMMA: CAUSAL RELATION HORN

On the second option entertained within Street's dilemma, a realist may claim that there *is* some kind of relation between independent moral facts and moral beliefs influenced by selection, since they also acknowledge that the content of our evaluative beliefs has been also influenced by Darwinian forces. The kind of relation that Street thinks realists need is one that involves natural selection tending to lead our moral beliefs to track moral facts. But, then they need to propose an explanatory account of this relation, which clarifies why we should think selection has been keyed into moral facts rather than – as is in other cases of evolution by selection – just keyed into adaptive facts.

According to Street, the realist's best candidate explanatory account would be what she calls the *tracking account.* On this view, the tracking of moral facts and adaptive facts are not mutually exclusive. Rather, tracking of moral facts tends to itself be adaptive, so that ascertaining moral truth tends to be also reproductively advantageous. Our far ancestors who hit upon moral truths more than others tended – because of this difference – to out-reproduce those others. This account could be elaborated by analogy with the reproductive advantage of accuracy in other kinds of belief and perception formation. For example, many animal populations have evolved increasingly accurate vision and keen senses of smell because these kinds of adaptation favoured reproduction. Likewise for our faculties of moral belief formation, according to the tracking account: the tendencies of these faculties in our distant ancestors to produce true rather than false moral beliefs was adaptive, tending to lend them reproductive advantage over others who were differently dispositioned. For example, we have a tendency to take care of our children, and to believe this is typically a morally good thing to do. Surely the tendency to form such a belief

would have helped our ancestors to out-reproduce any competitors who tended not to believe in the goodness of child care.

While the tracking account appeals to both the reproductive advantage of moral beliefs *and* to their supposed truth, anti-realists hold that appealing to the truth of moral beliefs is superfluous on an evolutionary account. They do not need to refer to anything more than biological fitness to offer a promising description about the evolutionarily-shaped moral beliefs. They simply argue that we have the tendency to make those beliefs that solve environmental problems more efficiently, and typically neither the stance-independent truth nor falsity of moral beliefs is relevant to the ability of these beliefs to help solve such problems. In the child care case, for instance, believing that it is good to care for children would have had the supposed reproductive advantage regardless of whether it is stance-independently true that it is morally good to care for children.

So, realists are requested to explain why natural selection, which aims at fitness, would also track stance-independent moral facts, when such facts seem to add nothing to the evolutionary explanation. Here, Street is appealing to a principle of parsimony. The realist's tracking account is not the most parsimonious one available. A simpler "adaptive link account" appeals to reproductive advantage without referring to the facthood of moral beliefs (p.127). She believes this implies that we should prefer the simpler account rather than the realist's tracking account – that the tracking account puts itself in a scientific competition that it does not win (p.129).

This part of her argument, the second horn of the broader dilemma, could be formulized as follow[2]:

1) If

a. there are stance-independent moral facts, and

b. evolutionary forces have significantly influenced the human moral faculties that shape our moral beliefs,

then we should believe that evolutionary forces have led us to have moral beliefs that are more effective than others for solving environmental problems and reproductive success, rather than also leading us to moral beliefs that accurately correspond to stance-independent moral facts.

2) If we should believe that evolutionary forces have led us to have moral beliefs that are more effective than others for solving environmental problems and reproductive success, rather than also leading us to moral beliefs that accurately correspond to stance-independent moral facts, then our moral beliefs are unjustified.
3) There are stance-independent moral facts. [A concession to realists for argument's sake.]
4) Evolutionary forces have significantly influenced the human moral faculties that shape our moral beliefs.

Therefore,

5) Our moral beliefs are unjustified.

By this argumentation Street tries to give us a reason that most of our morality is probably mistaken or unjustified, with premise 1 resting on her appeal to the more parsimonious evolutionary account of moral faculties.

Another problem, however, arises here. Suppose, given the parsimony principle, she is correct that we should prefer the adaptive link account over the tracking account. Her argument, and in particular premise 1, considers only *casual* roles in the evolutionary story. That is, she is comparing these two causal hypotheses:

- *Truth tracking* of some moral belief formation tendencies helped those tendencies to cause reproductive advantages.
- Truth tracking of some moral belief formation tendencies did not help those tendencies to cause reproductive advantage; only features of those tendencies *other than* any truth tracking helped them cause reproductive advantage.

Even if the second of these hypotheses is the more plausible one on grounds of parsimony, as she claims, this does not give us reason to believe that the truth tracking cannot be *correlationally* – rather than causally – related to adaptive moral beliefs. Put differently, even if evolutionary forces *causally* favoured only the beliefs which contributed to reproductive success, those adaptive beliefs might also, for some reason, have tended, by correlation, to track moral truths. Compare: the smoke of a campfire on a dark horizon does not help cause a visual advantage for people who are looking for their camping friends, because the smoke can't be seen in the dark. Nonetheless, the smoke is correlated with the fire, and the brightness of the fire does help cause visual advantage in the search for the campers. Advantage-bestowing fires will usually have produced smoke even though this smoke didn't help cause the advantages (Barker, Personal communication, December 14th 2017). Similarly, reproductively advantageous tendencies of moral belief formation may have usually produced true beliefs even if this correlated truth tracking didn't help cause the advantages. Street does not explicitly and directly address this possibility. Instead she argues that because parsimony favours the adaptive link account over the tracking account, we should think there is no relation between selectively favoured moral belief forming tendencies and the moral facts. In this way, she says, grappling with the second horn of her dilemma "is just to land oneself back in the first horn of the dilemma" (p.135). This underlying reasoning can be summarized as follows[3]:

I. If we should believe for reasons of parsimony that the truth of moral beliefs did not figure causally in the evolution of our moral faculties, then we should believe that it would again be a matter of sheer improbable luck that our evolved moral faculties tend towards truths, leaving our moral beliefs largely unjustified.

II. We should believe for reasons of parsimony that the truth of moral beliefs did not figure causally in the evolution of our moral faculties.

Therefore,

III. We should believe that it would again be a matter of sheer improbable luck that our evolved moral faculties tend towards truths, leaving our moral beliefs largely unjustified.

When clarified in this way, there is no question begging in Street's argument. But premise I, with its turn back to sheer improbable luck, does presuppose that there is no reliable correlation between reproductive advantage and truth. Without addressing the possibility of correlation, this premise is not yet justified. This is one way of expressing precisely what some realists have pointed out with their *indirect tracking accounts* (Copp 2008, Enoch 2009, Wielenberg 2010).

INDIRECT TRACKING ACCOUNTS

The indirect tracking accounts can be understood as arguing that Street's dilemma overlooks possible third options – ways of developing the appeal to correlation relations. They believe some alternative correlations could bridge moral fact and moral belief, correlations which have been ignored by Street. Put another way, the essence of Street's arguments against the tracking account is that the truths of moral beliefs played no causal role in the selection of moral belief forming tendencies. Realists' *indirect tracking accounts* accept this, but then argue that selected moral beliefs and moral facts are correlationally rather than causally related in particular ways. These realist alternatives accept Street's adaptive link account of why some particular moral

beliefs have been selected, but then also go beyond it to give an explanation of why those beliefs are also often true.

Enoch (2009) argues that an indirect relation between moral beliefs and moral facts could be created via a mediator. If two elements A and B are not directly correlated, they may be indirectly correlated via a mediator C. This would be a so-called third factor. He elaborates this in terms of a *pre-established-harmony explanation*. Survival, reproductive success, or whatever natural selection aims at could be a mediator in Enoch's view, helping to harmonize moral beliefs and moral facts. Though there is not a direct casual relation between selection of moral beliefs and moral facts, as there is supposed to be in a Street's "direct" tracking account, the content of our moral beliefs could have been selected for adaptive ends which are also in the same line with moral facts, e.g., about survival being morally good. So, evolutionary forces which shape the content of our normative beliefs to meet reproductive success also happen to tend to follow moral facts at the same time. According to this hypothesis, many moral beliefs are true as a consequence of this indirect process, not by sheer coincidence as Street's argument would suggest.

David Copp (2008), another realist thinker, argues that even if the evolutionary forces have strongly influenced the content of our moral beliefs, realists do not necessarily need to deny the adaptive link account. Realists who accept the influence of evolutionary forces may add the view that our remote ancestors favoured by natural selection tended to form moral beliefs that sufficiently enough correspond to moral facts. In fact, by a similar strategy he also tries to make a kind of compatibility between the adaptive link account and the tracking account, to escape the scientific problem. To do this, he first makes room for moral reflation and deliberation by offering what he calls the *quasi-track account* instead of the robust tracking account. On such a

view, moral reflection could refine our moral beliefs towards truth so long as they were not too far off track to begin with. The *quasi-tracking account* holds that the content of our far ancestors' moral beliefs were organized to roughly, though not perfectly, track moral facts..

Next comes the main part of his account, which closely resembles Enoch's strategy. Where Enoch appealed to survival as a Mediator, Copp appeals to societies' basic needs. This society-centered theory is a view "according to which the moral facts are identical to certain ordinary natural facts having to do with the needs of societies" (p. 203); this is supposed to explain why evolutionarily selected moral beliefs would tend also to turn out approximately true. In his view, if morality has the function of contributing to the stability of society, then beliefs implying the goodness of whatever promotes social stability and peacefulness and cooperation are by and large approximately true. Put another way, moral beliefs that correspond to the social moral code would sufficiently enough track moral facts, so that our *rational reflection* could in principle, and independently of evolutionary considerations, take us the rest of the way (p. 202).

As the truthfulness of moral beliefs does not, on this view, play any causal role in moral belief forming processes, Copp's theory is like Street's adaptive link account in that it does not appeal to anything more than adaptive properties to give a causal explanation of how moral beliefs and moral facts could be correlated. But the views differ in how Copp's suggests we evolved to form roughly true moral beliefs with the help of rational reflection. For Copp, this is part of a mechanism that helps make society possible, helps it meet its basic needs. This amounts to a kind of naturalistic moral realism that explains how our beliefs would tend to quasi-track moral facts even while acknowledging the influence of Darwinian forces as assumed by the adaptive link account.

Erik Wielenberg (2010) also invokes a mediator, another third factor. He proposes this factor is a cognitive capacity related to "moral barriers" which is supposed to be granted to all creatures like us. This evolved faculty leads us to track moral facts, or at least contributes in the process of shaping beliefs so that they track those facts. He argues that we have some rights and, for evolutionary reason and as a part of our advanced cognitive capacities, we reliably detect those rights. For instance, if we believe that we should not be tortured merely for fun, we truly recognize that fact and we actually have this right. Although we have not been directly selected for having true moral beliefs, natural selection favored creatures like us who have evolved with such advanced ability, which in turn helps make true beliefs. While the goodness of survival is supposed to be the mediator in Enoch's account, for Wielenberg a cognitive faculty is responsible for helping our moral beliefs track moral facts. So, he concludes that we do not track stance-independent moral facts accidentally, but indirectly, by an adaptive cognitive capacity which favors the truth of our moral beliefs.

In summary, realist indirect tracking accounts offer explanations of a putative correlation between evolutionarily-selected moral beliefs and objective moral facts of the sort posited by realists, while respecting Street's claim that the adaptive link account is superior to the direct tracking account. Thereby these third factor strategies escape the scientific challenge of the second horn in Street's argument. In their selection stories, they do not appeal to the truth of beliefs in an unparsimonious causal way. In fact, in the eyes of proponents, a third factor as a mediator (catalyst) appeals only to adaptive features, so it is compatible with the supposedly parsimonious adaptive link account. At the same time, on the indirect tracking accounts moral features play roles such that moral beliefs tend to be true.

Nonetheless, these accounts suffer from a defect in how they bridge moral facts to the non-moral (natural) facts. This problem will be explicated more precisely in the next section.

DEFENDING STREET AGAINST INDIRECT TRACKING ACCOUNTS

Because Street's argument did not address hypotheses of the realist indirect tracking type, its scope is too narrow. There are two options for remedying this. One is to change the form of the Darwinian dilemma into a trilemma. The other is to keep the dilemma form, but address the overlooked solutions by revising the formulation of the second horn of the dilemma. Either option will involve the same substance. To reveal what this substance is I will pursue the second option by expanding premise 1 (from our argument reconstruction above) into 1*:[4]

1*. If

a. there are stance-independent moral facts, and
b. evolutionary forces have significantly influenced the human mental faculties that shape our moral beliefs, and
c. *there is no mediator that connects the reproductive advantage of some moral beliefs with the moral facts* [thereby rejecting Enoch's proposal], *and*
d. *there is no rational reflection powerful and accurate enough to weed out false beliefs* [thereby rejecting one of Copp's proposals] and
e. *there is no evolutionarily influenced social moral code that helps direct us toward true moral beliefs* [thereby rejecting another of Copp's proposals] and
f. *there is not any cognitive capacity which correctly recognizes moral barriers and leads us to believe in moral truths* [thereby rejecting Wielenberg's proposal], and
g. …..
h. …..

then we should believe that evolutionary forces have led us to have moral beliefs that are more effective than some others for solving environmental problems and reproductive success, rather than also leading us to moral beliefs that accurately correspond to stance-independent moral facts.

This repairs the scope problem for Street's argument, but at a cost. The argument will always face the difficulty of foreseeing the new alternative solutions that realists may propose, and which premise 1* is attempting to address by adding to its list of antecedent negations beginning with (c). In other words, it is very hard for the anti-realist to assure us that premise 1* is complete. How serious a problem this is for our repair of Street's argument depends on what, more exactly, the realists are doing when generating new "indirect tracking" solutions that Street's argument does not yet address. Are there problems for these solutions?

There is at least one serious problem. These third factor strategies appeal to mediators that bridge non-moral facts, e.g., about the reproductive advantage of a moral belief, with moral facts. But the justifications for such linkages cannot be presupposed. Justification of this sort is, in essence, part of what has been under dispute from the beginning in this debate. It has not yet been provided in a non-question-begging way (Horn 2017).

Let me explain the error in more detail via an example inspired by Horn (2017). On a naturalistic utilitarian view, pain and pleasure are supposed to be avoided and are pursued by most rational creatures. Simultaneously, these two states are assumed to be intrinsically morally good and bad, respectively. But these assumptions of intrinsic goodness and badness are exactly what are at stake – anti-realists are saying at the outset that such assumptions require justification. Assumptions of these types are packed into any realist solution to the Darwinian dilemma that

posits indirect tracking by appeal to a specific third factor, a mediator, which connects non-moral facts with moral facts.

According to David Brink (1989), any such assumption is *a matter of substantive moral theory*. Following him, Horn (2017) argues that the indirect tracking solutions are invoking substantive normative ethical assumptions in a question begging manner. Survival, reproductive success, social moral codes, pleasure or any other factor of this sort might be biologically beneficial, but why should one accept that they are also morally good? Realists have not yet answered this question for any of the indirect tracking options. As such, they have begged the question against Street, and it is hard to see what sort of answer they could give that would not simply further beg the question.

Wielenberg (2010) tries to get rid the indirect tracking accounts of this obstacle. He argues that, since Street agrees (for the sake of argument) with the ontological component of realism that says stance-independent moral facts exist, the realists then can legitimately assume that there are such realities and build their theories upon this assumption.

But the problem is that realists are doing something more. In addition to assuming that there are moral facts, they attribute particular contents to those facts. This additional assumption or attribution is what is question-begging.

To elaborate, suppose that two persons are discussing the essential features of a fair political system. While both sides of the debate acknowledge that there could be such a system, one of them believes that even if there is a perfectly fair political system we have no way to know what the content of the involved policies would be. As both of them have accepted that there might be such a political system, both sides can legitimately apply this premise in their

arguments. But any substantive content cannot be legitimately added to that assumption. If, for instance, one of them supposes that the principles upon which a fair political system should be established are those of the Swiss constitution, then she can simply conclude that we know what the content of such a political system is. This additional substantial assumption, which is assuming the content of a fair political system, is exactly what should be justified by argument rather than assumption; otherwise it is unacceptable question begging.

At this point, advocates of indirect tracking may retreat from any particular indirect tracking views in order to avoid begging the question, then more modestly say that some views of this type may be available and Street must consider those alternatives before her argument is complete.

However, I think this more modest realist rejoinder would work no better than specified indirect tracking accounts, even though it would avoid begging the question. To show this I will draw upon how Vavova (2015) distinguishes two different kinds of challenge – one more general, the other more targeted – and their respective appropriate answers.

Suppose we doubt someone's perceptual beliefs on general skeptical grounds. For instance, we say that she cannot trust her color judgments in a particular case, because human sense perceptions are – independently of any empirical evidence – deceiving in all cases. This general skeptical challenge implies there is a burden on the person under examination to show that she is justified in holding her color judgments. But, this challenge could be easily met in a Moorean way: *look* – wriggles hands – *I'm not a handless brain in a vat* (Vavova 2015, p.3).

But remember, Street's dilemma is an evolutionary debunking argument – a more empirical and targeted challenge than general skepticism. Suppose again the person's color judgments are doubted, but this time on more targeted grounds: an optometrist's empirical test result. The appropriate answer to such a targeted and empirical skeptical challenge should be completely different from the Moorean one. It is not enough for the optometrist's patient to say, for example: *Colorblind? But look* – points to a color – *I'm not!* The optometrist's doubt is a more pointed challenge than a general skeptical challenge, so should be treated in a very different epistemic way. The person under question should present strong counter-evidence to show that she is justified to rely on her color judgments (Vavova, 2015).

Similarly, realists in answer to Street's challenge cannot simply say that some solutions might be available and that Street should consider all such probable realist answers. They need to provide specific, non-question begging, counter-evidence *against* Street. But they have not, and it seems could not because such specific views beg the question. Therefore Street's argument escapes the problem as follow[5]:

i. If realists cannot formulate a third factor or indirect tracking account without begging the question, then they cannot justify such an account.
ii. If they cannot justify such an account, then no such account (even a true one) can help save our moral beliefs from being unjustified as claimed by Street.
iii. Realists cannot formulate a third factor or indirect tracking account without begging the question.

Therefore,

iv. Third factor or indirect tracking accounts cannot help save our moral beliefs from Street's challenge.

Moreover, although Street did not originally and directly address indirect tracking strategies, her argument already implies that at least some of these realist solutions will suffer from another problem (p.124). As we saw, some realists hold that we have true or at least enough roughly true beliefs that could be refined by rational reflection. But if the content of our rational faculty, as with our moral and other faculties, has been strongly influenced by evolutionary forces, then we need some reason to believe that this faculty is also truth tracking when applied to moral content, rather than just adaptation tracking.

In a Cartesian analogy, if we do not have a perception-free way to tell whether our perceptions are reliable, then we cannot be sure that what we perceive is real. All possible tests would presuppose the reliability of the tested perceptual systems; our intuitive assessments of the test results would then illegitimately tend to favour the perceptual systems. Similarly, if our moral faculties have been strongly shaped by natural selection then our intuitive assessments of tests of our moral faculty will tend to illegitimately favour that faculty.

DIFFERENT PROBLEMS FOR STREET'S DILEMMA

So far, I have defended Street's position from objections, but this is not the end of things. According to FitzPatrick (2015), Street's appeal to parsimony, when preferring the adaptive link account over the direct tracking account, is problematic. On FitzPatrick's view, appeals to parsimony are effective only where "the world is obligingly austere", but FitzPatrick thinks that is partly what is at stake in the debate (p.893). If there are objective moral facts that are causally

or correlationally involved in processes of moral belief formation, as realists believe, then the greater parsimony of Street's adaptive link account is not a virtue at all. Parsimony would lead us astray of the world's complexities here. Given that the two sides will disagree in advance about whether parsimony is a virtue, it is illegitimate for Street to rely on parsimony as she does. This part of FitzPatrick's argument could be formulized as follow:

A) If moral facts exist, and

we have at least some reason to believe that some of our moral beliefs – for instance the belief that *torturing people just for fun is morally wrong* – may not be the result of a "morally blind" process but instead may be guided by respective moral facts, and

some moral beliefs could be verifiably explained in different ways (overdetermination) so that they overlap in some parts, and

it is not clear that greater parsimony – more especially where reality may not be so austere – is to be counted as a virtue that favours the adaptive link account over rival explanations,

then Street's initial evolutionary assumption is not clearly the best one to make.

B) All the antecedent statements listed in (A) are true.

C) Therefore, Street's initial evolutionary assumption is not clearly the best one to make.

By this, FitzPatrick does not intend to show us Street's account is untenable. Rather he questions its debunking ambition by arguing that Street's evolutionary assumption about the origins of our moral beliefs is not clearly the best among alternatives.

In response to FitzPatrick, a significant point should be noticed here. Remember that Street acknowledges the tentative nature of her initial evolutionary assumption by suggesting that her conclusion be read as a conditional statement, e.g., *if the evolutionary assumption is true, then [via her premises] moral realism fails*. To ensure that that conditional type of conclusion is of interest without yet firmly committing to its antecedent, she devoted an individual part of her article to arguing that the antecedent is at least plausible. FitzPartick's argument should be read as challenging that plausibility claim and thus the interest that Street sees in her conditional conclusion, rather than challenging that conditional conclusion itself. If FitzPatrick's challenge is convincing, this is a problem for the significance rather than soundness of Street's Darwinian dilemma.

But FitzPatrick's challenge is not as convincing as he hopes.[6] The problem is for premise B's assertion that we have at least some reason to believe that some of our moral beliefs may not be the result of a "morally blind" process but instead may be guided by respective moral facts. This assertion is ambiguous between a claim that is off target and a claim that begs the question.

To see this, first consider an alternate story of our moral belief formation that FitzPatrick sketches in order to support his assertion. He notes that even if Street is correct to claim that selection's influence early in our lineage's past would have lead us to moral beliefs that very probably were by and large not true, we might have refined these crude starting points via ongoing sophisticated moral reasoning. The refined descendent beliefs of this process may be quite different from their starting points that were influence by natural selection, and the refinements may have made our descendent beliefs more probably true or closer to the truth.

FitzPatrick sees analogous processes in physics and metaphysics, where many complex thoughts are neutral with respect to biological adaptation. For instance, the belief about motion that says 'an object that is in motion will not change velocity until a force acts upon it (Newton's Principia ,1687)' is not in any relevant sense a product of natural selection. But neither is it a lucky accident. Instead, our cognitive faculties have guided us to this belief despite it's not being a belief that confers significant reproductive advantage. The belief is the outcome of a trained and developed rational faculty which accurately follows scientific principles. If we have such ability to produce accurate representations of scientific facts, then our reflective moral faculties might also have helped us to accurately grasp moral facts.

Now this story of FitzPatrick's may merely be asserting a *possibility*. It is possible that we arrived at many of our current moral beliefs through the workings of the kind of moral reasoning or faculty envisioned. But this mere possibility is largely irrelevant to Street's Darwinian dilemma and the evolutionary assumption from which it starts. This is because her assumption is about what is in fact the case, not what is merely possible. She can happily concede that FitzPatrick's story is possible.

Instead, FitzPatrick may be implying that his story accurately reflects the *actual* state of affairs. However in this case he would be begging the question in much the way that I argued Enoch and Wielenberg did[7]. By implying that his story gives us some reason to believe that some of our moral beliefs are not in fact the result of a "morally blind" process that (directly or indirectly) tracks moral facts, he just flatly rejects Street's evolutionary assumption, without seriously engaging the reasons that Street provides for the plausibility of that assumption.

So I do not think that FitzPatrick's challenge succeeds. However, he does raise the important issue of parsimony. His remarks about parsimony are preliminary, when viewed against the backdrop of the large literature that exists on the virtues and vices of appeals to parsimony. But in future work, this may be a promising issue on which to mount a challenge against Street's Darwinian dilemma. This ensures that the present defense of Street's view is not complete. But I have defended it against several attacks, highlighting some of its strengths and limitations in the process.

Conclusion

In this paper Sharon Street's evolutionary epistemological challenge against moral realism, as well as realist objections, have been critically investigated. While I have argued that the realist objections are not yet convincing challenge, their objections are illuminating and provide grounds for further work. In particular, Street's evolutionary dilemma strongly relies on the empirical plausibility of the Darwinian Hypothesis and a principle of parsimony. Both of these have been questioned by opponents and this questioning could be developed into fuller objections.

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Endnotes

[1] Some thinkers, e.g. Michael Klenk (2017), believe that Street's challenge is the old Benacerraf-Field challenge in new dress; this issue falls outside the explicit scope of my paper, but implicitly my paper will expose aspects of Street's argument, and existing discussions about it, that make contributions beyond the Benacerraf-Field challenge. Other thinkers have tried to show that certain brands of moral realism lie outside Street's cross-hairs. Micah Lott (2018), for instance, argues that Aristotelian naturalism can escape Street's challenge. My own view is that this form of naturalism suffers the same problems that will be discussed below for Wielenberg's response to Street, with Lott's appeal to an ordered system of natural-historical judgments and human good being analogous to Wielenberg's appeal to a particular cognitive faculty and moral rights. However, I will not have space to address Lott's recent argument directly, and more generally I concede that some brands of realism may be unscathed by Street's challenge. The type of realism targeted is clarified in the text.

[2] This formulation was recommended by Dr. Barker.

[3] This formulation was recommended by Dr. Barker.

[4] This formulation was recommended by Dr. Barker.

[5] This formulation was recommended by Dr. Barker.

[6] Dr. Barker helped refine the following objection to FitzPatrick, and to improve my English expression of it.

[7] Yul Pui Lam (2017) argues that FitzPatrick's view is a variant of Wielenberg's reliabilist approach and thus suffers the same problems as those for Wielenberg's.