Worldviews, moral seemings, and moral epistemology

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I shall try to address a rather big topic in this paper by looking at some of the connections

between moral epistemology and what I shall call worldviews, as well as the role moral

intuitions of a type I shall call "seemings" play in mediating between the two. I want to examine

both the impact of worldviews on moral epistemology as well as some of the ways in which what

we say about moral knowledge might impact our worldviews. I shall argue that worldviews

often play a significant role, even if they are present only in the background, in moral

epistemology. I shall also argue that our moral convictions sometimes can reasonably shape

metaethical claims, and thereby indirectly have an impact on worldviews. The commerce

between worldviews and metaethical and normative ethical convictions thus runs in both

directions.

I begin with a striking observation about disagreements in moral philosophy from Gilbert

Harman:

> It turns out, to my surprise, that the question whether there is a single true
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> morality is an unresolved issue in moral philosophy. On one side are relativists,
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> sceptics, nihilists, and noncognitivists. On the other side are those who believe in
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> absolute values and a moral law that applies to everyone. Strangely, only a few
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> people seem to be undecided. Almost everyone seems to be firmly on one side or
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> the other, and almost everyone seems to think his or her side is obviously right,
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> the other side representing a kind of ridiculous folly. This is strange, since

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everyone knows, or ought to know, that many intelligent people are on each side

of this issue.[1]

I think something like what Harman says is true, although I do not think his characterization of

the people who are *not* "relativists, sceptics, nihilists, or noncognitivists" is quite right. It seems

to me that one might well defend a "robust moral realism" to use David Enoch's phrase, without

necessarily defending anything that could usefully be described as "absolute values." I shall in

this paper refer to all those people on the other side of Harman's divide as moral realists, taking

the term to refer to those who believe there is such a thing as objective moral knowledge, where

objective moral knowledge is understood as knowledge of moral propositions whose truth is

"stance-independent" (to use Russ Shafer-Landau's useful characterization) of human beliefs,

actions, attitudes, and emotions. I shall refer to the people who are on Harman's side (relativists,

skeptics, nihilists, or noncognitivists) as moral skeptics, using the term here not in its usual sense

but more broadly to describe anyone who denies that we have objective moral knowledge.

Suppose we grant, at least for the sake of discussion, that there is a divide among moral

philosophers (and perhaps among non-philosophers also) that is somewhere in the neighborhood

of the one Harman describes. Let us grant further, again at least for the sake of discussion, that

Harman is right in claiming that people on each side of this divide tend to be quite confident that

their view is correct and that the other side is seriously wrong. If this is so, how might we

explain this phenomenon?

Harman himself suggests that the reason for the divide is that there are two radically

different approaches to doing moral philosophy. His own explanation of the difference sees it as

centering on "a difference in attitude toward science." Here is the alleged difference: "One side

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[1] Gilbert Harman, "Is There a Single True Morality?" in *Explaining Value: and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 78.

says we must concentrate on finding the place of value and obligation in the world of facts as revealed by science. The other side says we must ignore that problem and concentrate on ethics proper."[2] Once again, I think Harman is picking out a real difference, but I do not think his description of the difference is perspicuous. If one looks at an expressivist such as Simon Blackburn and a moral realist such as David Enoch, I doubt very much that there is a significant difference between them in their attitudes towards *science*. Enoch, for example, seems just as firmly committed to evolutionary theory as Blackburn.

The difference between them may *involve* science, but it is not a difference in their views of science or their views of the value of science. Rather, Harman seems to have a kind of philosophical conviction (we might call it philosophical faith) that the truths of science are all the factual truths there are, while Enoch seems open to the possibility that there are some truths that are not discoverable by science. I call Harman's view philosophical and not scientific, because I take it that it is obvious that the claim that all truths about reality are scientific truths is not itself a theory or conclusion of any science. It is rather a claim *about* science. I shall call Harman's view about science the completeness of science thesis.

The difference in views about the completeness of scientific thesis is rooted in a deeper difference. I would describe that difference as a difference in worldviews. One can see this if one notes that among the people who would deny Harman's claim about the completeness of scientific knowledge one would find Platonists, Idealists, Theists, Panentheists, and perhaps Pantheists. All of these people have recognizable worldviews that at least fit poorly with the completeness of science thesis.

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[2] Harman, 79.

What about Harman's own view? I would describe it as a worldview as well, one that is usually described as some form of metaphysical naturalism, understood roughly as the view that that there is nothing real over and above the natural world. (I want to distinguish metaphysical naturalism from naturalism as a metaethical view, since there might well be some who are advocates of metaethical naturalism who reject metaphysical naturalism.) Some may want to deny that metaphysical naturalism is a worldview, claiming that it is simply a common-sense view of things. However, the claim that metaphysical naturalism is not a worldview is surely mistaken. When a worldview is widely shared, as metaphysical naturalism is among contemporary intellectuals, and its truth more or less taken for granted by many, its character as a worldview may be easy to forget. However, if views such as Platonism, Idealism, Theism, and Pantheism are worldviews, and metaphysical naturalism is a logical alternative to those views, then metaphysical naturalism must be a worldview as well. So, if Harman is right in claiming there is a particular divide in approaches to moral philosophy, and I am right in how I characterize that divide, there are clearly ways in which worldviews impact moral philosophy, and perhaps ways that moral philosophy may impact worldviews as well. I shall return to the importance of this in my conclusion.

Methodists and Particularists in Epistemology

I now wish to connect the divide Harman notes within moral philosophy to another divide that is present in epistemology more generally, as well as in moral epistemology, the divide Roderick Chisholm describes as the disagreement between "methodists" and "particularists."[3] The term "particularist" here is not used as it normally is in moral philosophy.   On Chisholm's view, methodists and particularists are committed to two rival ways to resolve what has been

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[3] See Roderick M. Chisholm, *The Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), particularly pp. 61-70, for an account of this distinction.

called, since the days of the ancient Greek skeptics, "the problem of the criterion." The problem is easy to state. All of us presumably have some beliefs that are true and some that are false. We also know some things, or at least think we do, but it seems highly likely that some of the things we think we know we do not actually know. How can we distinguish the false beliefs from the true ones, and the genuine cases of knowledge from the spurious ones? The people Chisholm calls "methodists" think that to do this sorting, one needs a "criterion," some tool that will provide a reliable method for dividing the epistemic sheep from the goats. Once we have our method in place, we can then decide what particular beliefs are true, and which beliefs count as genuine knowledge. John Locke would perhaps be a paradigm of methodism.

Particularists deny that we must have a method or criterion to enable us to do this. On the contrary, particularists say, if we are to gain any useful knowledge about what methods for obtaining knowledge or true beliefs are reliable, we must already know some things. Particularists say, for example, that if I believe that human memory, sense perception, and mathematical reasoning are all reliable ways of arriving at true beliefs or knowledge, that is because we have learned that they mostly give us true beliefs. However, that surely presupposes that we can recognize genuine particular cases of knowledge and true beliefs independently of knowing what methods are reliable. To develop good theories about how knowledge or true beliefs are obtained, we must already have some knowledge and true beliefs. Thomas Reid and G. E. Moore could serve as paradigms of particularism.

My own hunch is that a proclivity towards methodism or particularism is closely linked to how seriously a philosopher takes the problem of skepticism, whether the skepticism be global or regional in nature. If one thinks that skepticism is a real problem, and that the skeptic needs to be answered, one will naturally seek a criterion or method that will give us a way to certify

claims to knowledge or true belief. On the other hand, if one thinks that skepticism is an impossible stance, one that does not have to be taken seriously, one will likely think that the best way to make progress in epistemology is to begin with the assumption that we have particular cases of knowledge or at least justified true beliefs which can serve as a basis for doing epistemology. My own sense is that since Chisholm wrote, the tide in epistemology generally has moved in the direction of particularism. Skepticism is unpopular, and most epistemologists assume that we can rely on intuitions and make judgments about cases of knowledge. If that is so in epistemology generally, it perhaps provides some support for particularism in moral epistemology as well.

Particularism (or Priorism) in Moral Epistemology and Intuitive Moral Judgments

If we turn from general epistemology to moral epistemology, something like the difference between methodism and particularism reappears, although the terminology in this case is, as I noted, confusing, since "particularism" in moral philosophy is often used to describe the normative claim that there are no general, indefeasible, moral truths. I shall therefore from this point on refer to what Chisholm called "particularism" as "priorism" to avoid confusion. Perhaps methodism is more plausible than priorism in moral epistemology (at least to many philosophers) than it is in epistemology generally, simply because skepticism in moral epistemology seems more plausible to many than global skepticism. Furthermore, I think that the divide between methodists and priorists in moral epistemology aligns pretty closely with the one Harman noticed. Moral skeptics in my sense (those who deny we have objective moral knowledge) will naturally think that those who believe there is objective moral knowledge incur a burden of proof. It appears to them that moral realists need to give an account of how we have this alleged knowledge. Moral skeptics are drawn to methodism, and they think that weaknesses

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in moral epistemology cast doubt about, or perhaps add further justification for doubt about,

whether there is any genuine moral knowledge at all.

On the other hand, those who are confident that we have objective moral knowledge

seem more likely to be priorists. They may be just as interested in moral epistemology as the

skeptics are but for different reasons. They may want to understand how we gain moral

knowledge, but they do not think that this understanding is necessary to provide any kind of

basis or foundation for moral knowledge. Rather, their attitude is more like the dominant

attitude found today among philosophers of science. Most philosophers of science today do not

see themselves as offering a kind of certification of the soundness of science, as if science stood

in need of philosophical foundations, even though such an attitude was common among

philosophers in the past, as can be seen in thinkers from Kant to Husserl. Rather, they assume

that science gives us genuine knowledge, but want to understand how science works. They think

this understanding is likely to be gained from paying attention to actual scientific inquiry, both

today and in the past.

Similarly, defenders of moral knowledge may certainly want to understand how we get

moral knowledge, but they do not necessarily see moral agents as dependent on *philosophy* to

provide a kind of foundation for morality, a foundation that would be something like a

certification of the genuineness of moral knowledge. Rather, the presumption is that if there are

no actual examples of moral knowledge that can be recognized, moral epistemology would be a

hopeless undertaking.

If we assume that some (perhaps most) human persons have some genuine moral

knowledge, then it seems evident that humans must have cognitive capacities of some kind that

make that knowledge possible. The task of moral epistemology will consist in part in describing

those capacities and understanding how they work, a task that is likely to be at least partly dependent on empirical psychology. It seems plausible that at least some of the moral knowledge we have on such a view will be basic in the sense of being non-inferential, which is why forms of moral intuitionism have had enduring appeal for those who favor priorism in moral epistemology.

If we claim that all moral knowledge is inferential in character, based on propositional evidence, then familiar problems will arise about the premises for the arguments for moral conclusions. If we require arguments for those premises, and so on for the premises of those arguments, and there is no non-inferential knowledge, then it looks like the only options are an infinite regress, or (more plausibly) some form of coherentism. However, in my view, even a plausible form of coherentism will have to make some use of moral intuitions.

It seems possible to construct a moral system that would be a kind of anti-morality, affirming the reverse of all our normal moral judgements, or at least affirming moral judgments that would differ dramatically from ordinary morality. Imagine for example someone who is demonic in character, and like Milton's Satan, affirms "Evil be thou my good." Such a person might believe we have moral obligations to lie, cheat, and generally mistreat others as much as possible. If that seems impossible, we can at least coherently imagine someone, perhaps after a quick reading of Nietzsche, affirming a kind of morality that is "beyond good and evil," in which the strong and creative individuals do not have obligations towards the weak or the sick. Such a system might be perfectly coherent internally, perhaps as coherent as contemporary common-sense morality, but enormously less plausible to most people than common-sense morality. If so, the greater plausibility of the common-sense moral "web of beliefs" would surely be due to the greater plausibility of many of the individual judgments that make up that web. Even if there is

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no body of moral truths that is foundational, the superiority of a moral web of beliefs over an anti-moral web of beliefs seems to be grounded at least partly in the plausibility of the particular components of the moral web. It is hard to imagine a case for ordinary morality that does not lean in some ways on intuitions.

Robert Audi's Moral Intuitionism

Robert Audi, in *The Good in the Right,* has argued forcefully that many of the objections that are often raised against forms of moral intuitionism of the type defended by David Ross can be met. Rossian intuitionism is often alleged to be very implausible because it posits a special cognitive moral faculty, or because it alleges that fundamental moral principles cannot be argued for, or that they are indefeasible, or that they are "self-evident" in the sense that their truth is immediately obvious to anyone who understands them. In some cases, Audi shows that Ross himself does not make such claims for moral intuitions. For example, Ross does not claim that moral intuitions require a special cognitive faculty or that they can never be doubted by anyone who understands them. In other cases, Audi argues that claims Ross may have made can be dropped from moral intuitionism, preserving what is important in the view while making it far more plausible.

Audi argues for viewing moral intuitions as "prima facie justified inputs to ethical theorizing," and shows that those committed to moral intuitions in this sense can employ what is usually termed "reflective equilibrium" to extend and systematize those inputs.[4] Although Audi himself favors what he calls a "moderate rationalism" in moral epistemology, he claims that moral intuitionism is also a live option for those who favor a more empiricist account of moral knowledge.[5] In his 2015 article, "Intuition and Its Place in Ethics," Audi goes even further by

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[4] Audi, *The Good in the Right,* p. 78.
[5] Audi, *The Good in the Right,* pp. 55-57.

arguing that there can be rational disagreements about moral intuitions that are self-evident: "The self-evident need not be unprovable, need not be obvious, and need not be rationally beyond dispute."[6]

In the article just referred to, Audi carefully distinguishes between six different forms of intuitions. For example, he distinguishes perception-like "objectual intuitions" from intuitive judgments that are propositional in nature, but for my purposes I will ignore most of these distinctions. Since the phrase "moral intuitions" is so often used to refer to moral principles that can be known in a strong way, to avoid confusion I shall, in the remainder of this paper, mostly reserve talk of moral intuitions to those kinds of cases. However, as Audi notes, there are also perceptions about particular cases (and judgments based on such perceptions) that have a kind of immediate, non-inferential appeal. I shall in this paper call these cases of "moral seemings." For my purposes moral seemings can be actual perceptions of particular actions or states of affairs as having moral properties, as well as non-inferential moral judgments about such particulars that seem correct. (Of course the seemings about propositional judgments could be grounded in actual perceptions.) I realize that the term "seemings" could be applied to Rossian principles as well, and what I am calling seemings could also be called intuitions and indeed are sometimes described in this way. However, I think intuitive judgments about particular actions and situations are different enough from intuitions about principles that a different name for them would be useful. The paradigm of a moral seeming will be something like this: It *seems* to me that the man that I see down my street who is beating his dog is doing something morally wrong.

What status do moral seemings have? In the spirit of Audi's project of weakening intuitionism and thereby making it more plausible, I suggest the following: Instead of saying, as

Audi does, that moral intuitions about particular cases, which I am calling seemings, give us "prima facie justified inputs to ethical theorizing," let us suppose that moral seemings merely offer some *degree* of prima facie support to *candidates* to be inputs to ethical theorizing, where the "possible inputs" are moral judgments. This allows for the plausible view that some moral seemings seem much stronger than others. All of our moral seemings on the view I am describing are fallible, but all offer some *degree* of prima facie justification for moral judgments. However, in some cases the degree of justification may be low enough that the seeming by itself does not offer even prima facie justification for a moral judgment.

This might be the case for a number of different reasons. One is that the intuition itself might be very weak, one that I have a natural tendency to doubt. The seeming might also conflict with other seemings that are present at the same time. Another type of case might be one where I have learned that moral seemings of a particular type are unreliable, even if those intuitions seem strong. As an example of this consider the case of a person raised in a racist society who has been socialized to see people of another race as untrustworthy and immoral, but who has come to realize the wrongness of those experiences and the judgments they give rise to. To such a person someone of another race might still *appear* to have bad moral qualities, but the person has learned to discount these seemings as the product of cultural bias and immediately knows they are not a reliable source of moral insight. In other cases, the seemings might be powerful, almost impossible to doubt, and the person may have no reason to doubt them, even though they are in principle fallible.

I want to claim that if someone is a moral priorist and believes that there is such a thing as genuine moral knowledge, this weak endorsement I have offered to moral seemings, when combined with other normal human cognitive capacities such as reflection, is strong enough to

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provide an explanation of how moral knowledge is possible. I am not claiming that our moral cognitive capacities are *limited* to moral seemings. If we humans are capable of such things as grasping abstract moral principles that are necessarily true and self-evident through rational intuition, that would be a good thing, a huge bonus for the project of showing how moral knowledge is possible. However, if we merely have more humble cases of experiences that provide moral seemings about particulars, perhaps by way of emotions, that might be enough to get the ball rolling. Thoughtful humans could then reflect on these moral seemings, attempt to systematize them and theorize about them, testing those theories against experiences, which may be refined and shaped through the process of reflecting on them, seeking reflective equilibrium.

Why should we trust moral seemings if they are as fallible as I am prepared to admit? It is important to form this question carefully. We should not necessarily "trust" all our moral seemings in the sense of believing that they provide justification, even of a prima facie sort, for moral judgments. Rather, we trust them only in the sense that the fact that some proposition or state of affairs or action seems to have a certain moral quality provides some degree of prima facie support for the corresponding judgment. We might say that what a seeming provides is some reason to believe a particular moral judgment is true, even though the reasons provided may vary greatly in strength. Obviously, once particular judgments of this sort are accepted, inductive generalizations could be accepted as well. Reflection may also give us the ability to recognize common features present in various moral judgments, which may make it possible to recognize abstract principles underlying the judgments. Conflicts between moral seemings will have to be resolved, and, just as is the case with other empirical judgments, a reasonable person will consider the seemings of other people, especially those regarded as having particular moral expertise.

This stance could be defended, I think, simply as a particular application of what some philosophers call "the principle of phenomenal conservatism," which at least some internalist epistemologists argue is a necessary epistemological principle if one is to avoid global skepticism. Here is Michael Huemer's version of this principle: "If it seems to S as if P, then S thereby has at least *prima facie* justification for believing that P."[7] The principle I am defending is even weaker than Huemer's, since all I am supposing is that a moral seeming provides some degree of prima facie justification for a belief. Thus, a moral seeming, though it always provides some support for a moral belief, does not always or automatically provide prima facie justification for a moral judgement or belief.

In the remainder of this paper I shall try to do two things. First, I want to look at the status of moral seemings in light of contemporary psychology, to see what light this might shed on their epistemic status. Then, after a brief look at debunking arguments that purport to show that we should not trust our moral judgments, I shall return to the subject of worldviews and ask how particular worldviews might affect the credibility of moral seemings, as well as the credibility of moral knowledge in general.

Scientific Accounts of Moral Seemings

Anyone who is aware of the incredible diversity of moral practices and beliefs found in human societies through the centuries may be tempted to the view that our moral seemings are purely culturally based. This is not a new issue. Herodotus, in his *Histories,* tells a story about the Persian king Darius, who first summoned some Greeks to his court, and then some natives from a tribe in Callatia in India, and asked them both about how they treated the dead bodies of

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[7] Michael Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Studies in Epistemology and Cognitive Theory: Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), p. 98. Other philosophers, such as Richard Swinburne, defend a similar principle but call it "the principle of credulity." See Swinburne, *The Existence of God,* pp. 303-15.

their fathers. Darius asked the Greeks what they would take to eat these bodies, and was told

that they would not do it for any amount of money. The Callatians, who in fact (according to the

story at least) actually did eat their fathers' bodies, were asked what they would take to burn

them, and responded with horror that such a thing should not even be mentioned.[8]

 Even if the story by Herodotus is true, it does not show that Greeks and Callatians

necessarily disagreed completely. Neither Greeks not Callatians were said to think that one

should be indifferent towards the bodies of fathers. The differences in behavior might have

stemmed from differences in non-moral beliefs or differences in the conventional symbolic

meanings of the different actions. However, if moral seemings were completely a product of

culture, and if there were no areas of agreement among humans about moral matters, then we

would have little or no reason to believe that moral seemings provide evidence of moral truth.

Fortunately, this is not the case. We now have substantial scientific evidence that

humans are hard-wired to see the world in moral ways. Our basic moral impulses, while

certainly shaped by culture to some degree, seem to be fundamentally similar over different

cultures. The evidence for this comes from studies of small children and infants as young as

three months old, studies that have been replicated across many cultures. Yale developmental

psychologist Paul Bloom summarizes these findings as showing that "some aspects of morality

come naturally to us." The natural endowments, according to Bloom, include the following:

1. A kind of moral sense: "some capacity to distinguish between kind and cruel actions,"

along with a natural tendency to favor the former and dislike the latter.

2. Some natural empathy and compassion: "suffering at the pain of those around us and

the wish to make this pain go away."

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[8] The story, whose historical authenticity is doubtful, can be found in Book 3, Chapter 38, of Herodutus's *Histories.*

3. A basic sense of fairness: "a tendency to favor equal divisions of resources."

4. A basic sense of retributive justice, in the sense of "a desire to see good actions rewarded and bad actions punished."[9]

There is also empirical evidence that the moral seemings we are hard-wired to make are not infallible. For example, it is not hard to find cases in which the natural emotion of disgust is morally unreliable, giving rise to prejudiced judgments most of us would reject. Even without knowing this, it seems obvious that the fact that we are hard-wired to respond to the world in certain ways does not prove that our natural endowment enables us to track objective moral facts. It does not follow from the fact that we have a natural tendency to make a type of judgment that the judgment is true. (I shall shortly discuss Sharon Street's well-known argument that an evolutionary explanation of our basic moral impulses presents a problem for moral realists.)

It is also important to note, as Nietzsche constantly emphasized, that we also have natural tendencies to engage in immoral behavior: acts of violence and cruelty towards others. However, despite the fact that these base urges seem to be equally as "natural" as our moral impulses, the two do not have the same status. Sane human beings who are not psychopaths do not normally *approve* of bad behavior, especially when others are engaging in it at their expense. Furthermore, when people engage in such bad behavior themselves, they typically rationalize it, redescribing it as good in some way or at least providing some justification that would excuse themselves from being judged immoral.

It looks as if even human infants experience moral seemings. In studies virtually all six month old infants, when showed two geometrical figures, one of whom was a "helper," and one

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[9] This summary of findings can be found in Paul Bloom, *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil* (New York: Broadway Books, 2013), p. 5. Bloom's book is a popular presentation, but it describes a large amount of experimental scientific research.

of whom was a "hinderer," responded positively to the helper and negatively to the hinderer.[10] Bloom himself describes the work as "finding in babies what philosophers in the Scottish Enlightenment described as a moral sense." As Bloom notes, this is not an impulse to act in a particular way, but a cognitive faculty: "the capacity to make certain types of judgments—to distinguish between good and bad, kindness and cruelty."[11]

To be sure, the research findings show that the basic cognitive powers that come naturally to humans are far removed from the sophisticated moral systems of Mill or Kant. Young children of course do not naturally perceive all human beings as "ends in themselves," and they have little inclination towards the universal beneficence enjoined by utilitarian ethics. Bloom notes some of the limitations of the moral sense the experiments found: "We are by nature indifferent, even hostile, to strangers; we are prone toward parochialism and bigotry."[12] The morality that is embedded in our natural moral seemings seems to be one that is restricted in scope. We recognize goodness and badness quickly and easily in our dealings with family, friends, and neighbors, but less easily, if at all, in relation to strangers and those who are different from us.

Still, we do have a kind of rudimentary moral sense which enables even small children to make some moral judgments that are correct. At least this is so if we assume that humans do have some genuine moral knowledge. And it does not seem too hard to imagine how rational reflection on those moral responses that come naturally to us could lead someone to expand the scope of moral concern beyond family and friends. A Socrates, or a Buddha, or a Confucius, not to mention a Moses or a Jesus, might think something like this:

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[10] See Bloom, pp. 28-31
[11] Bloom, p. 31
[12] Bloom, p. 6

It seems that I and the human persons around me (my family and friends) have a kind of value. I can see why it is wrong for me to treat them badly. However, I can see that other human persons, not my family and friends, are also human persons. similar in all kinds of ways to my family and friends. If I perceive those close to me as having value, then why shouldn't I think that those others have value as well?

Thus, even if we put aside the possibility of a divine revelation, Moses (or whoever wrote the Pentateuch) might have been thinking something like this when the ancient Israelites were enjoined to treat the foreigner and stranger with kindness and justice. Perhaps initially only a few exemplary people thought along those lines. However, I find it impressive that once those thoughts are formulated by these moral pioneers, they seem convincing to many more thoughtful, reflective people.

Interestingly, recently Eric Wielenberg has offered a similar story to explain how people might rationally come to believe in human rights. In his version, humans naturally come to believe that there is a kind of "moral boundary" around themselves, which implies that it is wrong to violate the boundary by treating them in particular ways. On Wielenberg's story, once a person has formed such a belief, and also noticed that other people are similar to oneself, then one can follow the "likeness principle" to attribute something like human rights to others.[13]

Perhaps without the guidance of these exemplars, our natural tendency would be to think as Polemarchus does in Book I of the *Republic*: Do good to your friends but harm your enemies. However, when I read Socrates' admonition that I should never do evil to anyone, even if others have done me evil, or Jesus's story about the good Samaritan, who showed compassion on a

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[13] Eric Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 135-142.

member of a tribe that looked down on him, I may recognize that Jesus and Socrates are right and my natural impulses to put limits on the scope of my moral responsibilities are wrong.

This suggests that to get a fully developed, plausible normative moral theory one needs more than hard-wired moral seemings. One needs to exercise rational reflection, taking into account the views of those who seem most wise. The process will require paying attention to the moral seemings of others, and well as the reflections of others, and this will certainly require rejecting or modifying some of our moral seemings. Seemings are not enough. However, it also seems plausible that without our hard-wired moral seemings, moral knowledge would not get off the ground. Reflection needs something with which to work.

Darwinian Debunking Arguments

One might still wonder whether our moral seemings have even the low degree of epistemic merit I am ascribing to them. After all, Sharon Street and others have famously offered what are now called "Darwinian debunking arguments" against the view that moral judgments track some kind of objective truth.[14] The intuition that lies behind such arguments is that it seems likely that evolution would not select for cognitive faculties aimed at moral truth, but at cognitive faculties aimed only at survival and reproduction of organisms. It would be a highly implausible coincidence if objective moral truth coincided with what the evolutionary process selected for.

Street's version of the argument admits that morality is partly a product of many factors, including rational reflection but also social, cultural, and historical factors.[15] However, she claims that it is still very plausible to think that evolution played a key role in developing our

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[14] Street, Sharon, "A Darwinian dilemma for realist theories of value," *Philosophical Studies* (27,1; 2006) 109-166.

[15] Street, p. 114

moral beliefs and practices by selecting for what she terms "basic evaluative tendencies." She describes these in the following way: "an unreflective, non-linguistic motivational tendency to experience something as 'called for' or 'demanded' in itself, or to experience one thing as 'calling for' or 'counting in favor of' something else."[16] These "proto-evaluations," as Street terms them, seem quite similar to what I have been calling moral seemings. Street also argues, as I have, that these basic evaluative tendencies are in some ways a necessary part of the story if there is such a thing as genuine moral knowledge. She admits the importance of rational reflection, but she claims that "rational reflection must always proceed from some evaluative standpoint."[17] Rational reflection cannot stand completely apart from "one's starting fund of evaluative judgments." Thus, Street thinks that if the "fund of evaluative judgments with which human reflection began was thoroughly contaminated with illegitimate influence," then the "tools of rational reflection were equally contaminated."[18]

The overall argument Street presents is a dilemma. Either there is no tracking relation between the basic evaluative judgments evolution has given us and alleged objective moral truths or there is. If there is no such relation, then we have little reason to trust those judgments. If there is a "tracking relation," the judgments would be trustworthy, but Street argues that the claim that there is such a tracking relation is scientifically implausible.

There are now a large number of replies to Street (and other similar arguments) present in the literature. One type of response is to argue that there is a relation between our basic evaluative judgments and normative truths that is not accidental, even though evolution did not select for those judgments because they were normatively true. Rather, there is some third

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[16] Street, p. 119.
[17] Street, p. 124.
[18] Street, p. 124

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factor, selected for by evolution, which is positively correlated with true normative judgments. For example, David Enoch argues that there is a kind of "pre-established harmony" between our moral intuitions and what is good and bad. The harmony is explained by the fact that survival, one of the factors driving natural selection, is itself objectively valuable.[19] Erik Wielenberg argues that the third factor is simply the presence of rational faculties themselves.[20] On his view it is a necessary truth that beings with such faculties have moral rights, but he believes that the possession of such faculties also *causes* those who have such rights to believe they have them. Thus, it is not an accident that at least some of our moral beliefs are accurate.

There is a dispute about the acceptability of this type of response. Some of the evolutionary debunkers have argued that these responses are question-begging. The defenders of moral knowledge assume that some of our moral judgments are true and try to show that those judgments can be explained as products or by-products of something that evolution does select for, thus showing that it is no accident that our moral faculties are at least partially reliable. The debunkers claim that this amounts to assuming what is in question because the defenders, in order to show that our moral cognitive faculties are reliable, must assume we have some moral knowledge, but this is really to assume that our moral cognitive faculties are reliable. However, the debunking arguments call into question the reliability of those moral faculties and thus imply we are not entitled to believe that some of our correct moral judgments are positively correlated with something evolution selects for.

I am sympathetic with the *type* of strategies Enoch and Wielenberg offer, though I have worries about the specific "third factors" they appeal to. The goodness of survival seems too

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[19] See David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 163-77
[20] Wielenberg, pp. 146-166.

limited and thin to do the work required here, and I do not think the possession of our cognitive

faculties is an adequate ground for the possession of human rights, since such a view would not

explain why infants or those with dementia or brain injuries have such human rights. However,

in principle I think their type of response is legitimate, and some similar strategy may succeed.

It seems to me that appealing to moral knowledge in responding to debunking objections would

only be illegitimate if those debunking arguments had given *conclusive* reasons to think that our

moral faculties were unreliable, and thus that our claims to moral knowledge had been defeated.

Russ Shafer-Landau, in his "Evolutionary Debunking, Moral Realism, and Moral

Knowledge," has argued convincingly that all of the versions of the debunking arguments that

have been offered at least have premises that can reasonably be doubted.[21] If Shafer-Landau is

right, then moral epistemologists who are not methodists but priorists, and who are convinced we

have some well-justified moral beliefs, seem well within their epistemic rights in relying on

some of those moral beliefs in constructing a reply to what is best construed as a challenge to

those beliefs, not a defeater. One way of thinking of the challenge is this: Evolution gives us

some reason to worry about whether our moral knowledge is reliable. It seems perfectly

legitimate to respond to such a worry by constructing a plausible evolutionary scenario as to how

beings such as ourselves might have gained true moral beliefs.

Indeed, I think it might be perfect reasonable for someone to continue to believe we have

moral knowledge even if that person does not know how to respond to these debunking

arguments. Imagine someone has given an evolutionary debunking argument against the

reliability of our mathematical intuitions, and that the defender of mathematical knowledge does

not know how to respond to the argument. The defender might reasonably reply, "I am not sure

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[21] *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, 7, 1; 2012), pp. 1-37.

why we have the mathematical faculties we do, or how evolution led to our having those capacities. However, I am very confident that we have mathematical knowledge, and thus there must be a story to tell here, even if I do not know what the story is." If someone thinks, as I do, that some of our moral knowledge is as certain as mathematical knowledge, then a similar response could surely be given for morality.

Worldviews as Shapers of Background Factors

However, many philosophers would disagree with me about this. Many think that moral knowledge is somehow problematic in a way that other kinds of knowledge are not. Why is this the case? To return to the issue posed at the beginning, I suspect that in many cases the answer has to do with the presence of background beliefs that are tied to broader worldviews, though perhaps in some cases this influence may not rise to the level of conscious reflection. Here is one way to put the point: evolutionary debunking arguments gain some of whatever force they appear to possess from those metaphysical background beliefs. It is not evolution as a scientific theory that creates problems for belief that we have reliable moral faculties; it is the conjunction of evolutionary theory and metaphysical naturalism.

The influence of such worldview-type background beliefs is perfectly explicit and conscious in the work of J. L. Mackie. One of Mackie's primary motivations for embracing an error theory of objective morality lay in what he called "the argument from queerness." This queerness for Mackie had two related parts: one metaphysical and one epistemological. The metaphysical oddness is that if there are objective values, "they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe."[22] The

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[22] Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, p. 38

epistemological problem is, according to Mackie, that moral knowledge would require a "special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing."[23]

It is obvious, I think, that morality's alleged metaphysical queerness is only present if one assumes metaphysical naturalism. Metaphysically, for example, if God and angels exist, it would simply be false that moral values would be utterly different from anything else in the universe. With respect to the epistemological queerness, I have argued, along with Audi and many others, that there is no need for any special "moral faculty" to have moral knowledge, at least no faculty other than the kind contemporary cognitive psychologists study. All we need are the kinds of seemings that contemporary psychology affirms we are hard-wired to have. Or, perhaps better, all we need is to accept that the outputs of these seemings can be truth-tracking. On some metaphysical worldviews this seems highly plausible, even if it does not on others.

I can imaginatively enter the world of a metaphysical naturalist and get a sense of both of the kinds of queerness Mackie discusses. It does seem to be the case that in that world it would seem odd, or at the very least surprising, that the fundamental entities of the universe would include things as diverse as physical particles and objective values. It also would seem odd that humans, as purely physical creatures that are the product of an evolutionary process that has no telos, should have the ability to recognize those objective values. However, as soon as I return from Mackie's world to the world I believe I actually inhabit, the oddness vanishes. I believe that the universe is the creation of a personal God who is himself essentially good, and that God created humans (through an evolutionary process) so they could enjoy a relationship of friendship with God. To enjoy friendship with God those humans must be morally good. If that friendship is to involve some degree of reciprocity, then those humans must somehow play a role

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[23] P. 38

in their own development, and thus their goodness must be something that is acquired. If this is true, then it seems entirely to be expected and not in the least odd that humans have the capacity to recognize moral value and to attempt to actualize such value.

I am not here attempting to give a moral argument for theism. There are other non-theistic worldviews which would also reduce or eliminate the oddness Mackie saw. For example, one might defend, as Ronald Dworkin did in his last book, *Religion Without God,* a metaphysical view in which there are simply basic moral facts that hold whether there is a God or not.[24]

I realize that someone who is a convinced metaphysical naturalist may be completely unmoved by such considerations. Certainly, if we knew for certain that the universe was what philosopher George Mavrodes called (in honor of Bertrand Russell) a "Russellian universe," then Mackie's intuitions would have force.[25] However, it is legitimate to ask whether we do know that the universe is a Russellian universe. If we do not know this for certain, it is possible that our recognition of moral truth is itself a strong clue that the universe is not Russellian and that we ought to be open to other metaphysical alternatives. Might morality itself be something that should unsettle a view that often appears to be accepted uncritically as part of the intellectual spirit of the age?

Immanuel Kant might well be taken as a model for such critical questioning. I realize that many contemporary Kantians do not read Kant as a moral realist, but as a constructivist. However, I think this reading of the historical Kant is dubious. Kant thought that his critique of metaphysics, which famously limited reason to make room for faith, was essential for his defense

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[24] Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013).
[25] George I. Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality," in Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (eds.), *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 213-26.

of morality to succeed. He did not believe that moral commitments could float free from metaphysical truth, even if those metaphysical claims cannot be established by theoretical reason. It is only if we recognize that mechanistic science describes reality as it appears to us and not as it really is, that we are entitled to have what Kant called "moral faith," in which we believe in our own reality as free moral agents with intrinsic value. Although Kant connected this kind of moral faith with religious faith, and although both are forms of faith, they are still distinct. For Kant moral faith is a form of faith because it is not grounded in theoretical reason, but it is crucial for him that the contents of this faith are consistent with the findings of theoretical reason. Moral faith requires us to see ourselves in a certain way, and to reject the temptation to think that morality itself is only what Kant called "a figment of the brain."

Suppose we agree with Wielenberg that humans have a kind of intrinsic value or dignity that grounds human rights, even if we disagree with his view that this quality is grounded in our ability to reason, and even if we can give no coherent account of why we have such a quality. Of course one can easily imagine that this view is false, and that human rights, as well as the intrinsic value presupposed by such rights, are, as Bentham famously said, "nonsense on stilts." Why should we think Bentham is wrong? One answer to Bentham might to be to claim that I am *morally obligated* to believe that humans have the kind of value or dignity presupposed by belief in human rights. To fail to believe that my fellow humans have the quality of dignity is in some way to devalue them; it is an unwarranted loss of faith in them. Such a stance would certainly be in the spirit of Kant in holding that our deepest view about ourselves and our universe should itself be shaped by morality.

William James is well-known for saying that his first action as a being with free will was to believe in free will.[26] In a similar spirit, perhaps a moral being should say that his or her first act as a moral being is to believe in morality, and to believe that we live in a moral universe. Moral faith is not a substitute for moral epistemology, but it may provide motivation for the belief that there is such a thing as moral knowledge. Moral epistemology may be another form of faith seeking understanding.

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[26] Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Boston: Little Brown, 1935), Vol. 1, p. 323.