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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

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Introduction

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This special issue of *Ratio* focusses on a variety of issues in evolutionary ethics. As Paul Farber has argued in his masterful historical overview of the subject, the beginnings of evolutionary ethics can be traced to Charles Darwin (Farber, 1998, p. 7). In his *The Descent of Man*, Darwin aimed to explain the origins of morality with his theory of evolution by natural selection (Darwin, 1871). As such, Darwin did not use science to justify or challenge accepted moral beliefs. The first attempt to do this was made by his contemporary Herbert Spencer, who argued that we can derive moral lessons from nature (Spencer, 1893). But philosophers like G.E. Moore picked apart the arguments advanced by Spencer and his followers, convincing most academics to discredit Spencer's version of evolutionary ethics (Moore, 1903). Moreover, the modest arguments of Darwin and his followers also failed to convince the academic community. As a consequence, 'by the conclusion of the Great War, evolutionary ethics was approaching a dead end' (Farber, 1998, p. 118).

Farber argues that the history of evolutionary ethics can be divided into three episodes. The first starts with Darwin in the final quarter of the 19th century and ends as World War I draws to a close. The second episode takes place between 1918 and 1975. This was a period of severe stagnation in which attempts to resurrect the discipline were rare. As a result, evolutionary ethics 'was beginning to take the characteristics of an intellectual dodo bird' (Farber, 1998, p. 149).

According to Farber, we are now in the third episode of the history of evolutionary ethics. Enjoying a 'Phoenix-like' revival, the discipline reappeared in the 1970s (Farber, 1998, p. 147). The main reason for its resurgence was the development of sociobiology. Pioneered by E.O. Wilson, sociobiology is an approach in the study of behaviour that stresses the genetic components of behaviour and relates these to their evolutionary significance (Wilson, 1975). Sociobiology revived evolutionary ethics because it led 'numerous writers to believe that science had achieved a breakthrough that would illuminate the secrets of human nature and open the possibility (finally) of constructing a valid evolutionary ethics' (Farber, 1998, p. 147). As Farber explains, according to E.O. Wilson, 'biology can explain in evolutionary terms those moral intuitions that philosophers have so desperately tried to justify' (Farber, 1998, p. 151). Indeed, Wilson proposed that 'the time has come for ethics to be removed temporarily from the hands of the philosophers and biologized' (Wilson, 1975, p. 563).

These kinds of claims spurred fierce academic discussions, from which two distinct camps emerged (Farber, 1998, p. 159). In the first camp, we find people like Richard Dawkins who argue that sociobiology can help us to

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understand the evolution of morality, but that it provides little guidance for moral choice (Dawkins, 1976). People in the second camp, among whom we find the E.O. Wilson of his later book *On Human Nature*, argue that deeper knowledge of the evolution of morality will enable us to guide the evolutionary process rationally (Wilson, 1978). At long last, evolutionary ethics had become a respectable field of academic inquiry.

Nevertheless, argues Farber, not all is well with the discipline. The discussions in this third phase in the history of evolutionary ethics recall earlier discussions in the field and in fact do not significantly advance the debate. This means that 'the historian [has] a most difficult time in not throwing up his floppy disks and wondering whether anyone has been reading the literature on the subject from the last hundred years' (Farber, 1998, p. 159). So it seems that after all, 'sociobiology has not increased the plausibility of contemporary versions of evolutionary ethics over its earlier versions' (Farber, 1998, p. 166).

It seems to me that we are no longer in this third episode of evolutionary ethics. Instead, I think that we have entered a new, fourth episode. Farber, writing in the previous millennium, couldn't yet describe this fourth episode. For this episode started with the publication of Sharon Street's paper 'A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value' and Richard Joyce's book *The Evolution of Morality* (Joyce, 2006; Street, 2006). In the *third* episode of evolutionary ethics there were—and this is also true for the first and second episodes—just two main projects. These were to formulate an evolutionary ethics that allows us to draw moral lessons from nature, and to describe the origins of morality with scientific means. In contrast to this, our current, *fourth* episode is characterised by an explosion of different concerns about the relation between evolution and ethics. These include, but are not limited to, evolutionary debunking arguments, the formulation of various types of moral error theories, and the relation between evolution and moral progress.

The papers in this special issue reflect this diversity in approaches and issues in contemporary evolutionary ethics. Each paper published here has been presented at the 'Evolution and Moral Epistemology' conference held at Utrecht University in April 2018. Under the heading 'Evolution and Moral Epistemology,' we discussed five topics.

The first topic is the epistemology of evolutionary debunking arguments (EDAs). In his contribution to this special issue, *David Copp* asks whether responses to EDAs are question-begging. After arguing for a pragmatic understanding of question-beggingness, according to which whether an argument is question-begging depends on the argumentative context, he argues that some responses to the debunking argument, among which his own quasi-tracking account, are not question-begging in all argumentative contexts. *Michael Klenk* considers objective, subjective and hybrid accounts of undercutting defeat in epistemology and argues that we should be objectivists regarding undercutting defeat. He also argues that this is bad news for popular interpretations of evolutionary debunking arguments in metaethics. He closes with two suggestions for how we can nevertheless make progress in formulating evolutionary debunking arguments.

The second topic concerns the empirical presuppositions that underlie evolutionary debunking arguments. *Jeroen Hopster* considers Sharon Street's practical/theoretical puzzle. Many metaethicists assume that the set of normative judgments that causal forces have led us to make largely coincide with the set of true normative judgments. How do we explain this coincidence? Hopster argues that, if we frame the issue in terms of a general strategy for thinking about coincidence, and if we realize that the success of Street's challenge crucially depends on how we set the 'reference class' of normative judgments that we *could* have endorsed assuming realism, then some realist views can solve Street's puzzle. *Paul Davies* argues that we can conceive of 'Darwinized' debunking arguments, which are debunking arguments that are broadened and strengthened in ways inspired by Charles Darwin and his empirical work. He also argues that one such Darwinized argumentative strategy may be dialectically stronger than most evolutionary debunking arguments currently on offer.

The third topic is the moral error theory, according to which ordinary moral judgments are truth-apt but never true. Some moral error theorists have explicitly attempted to 'debunk' morality on the basis of evolutionary considerations (Joyce, 2006; Ruse, 1998). But not all moral error theorists do this (Kalf, 2018; Mackie, 1977). In his contribution to this special issue, *Jonas Olson* asks what debunking arguments can do for moral error theorists.

He starts with debunking arguments as a challenge for non-naturalist realists and argues that non-naturalists can offer a satisfactory response to this challenge. Nevertheless, debunking arguments are not metaethically uninteresting, for they have a limited and indirect role to play in the exchange between non-naturalist realists and moral error theorists.

Fourth, the penultimate topic concerns the relation between evolution and moral progress. Are evolutionary explanations of morality compatible with the occurrence of moral progress? Do they favour realist or anti-realist views of moral progress? In her contribution to this special issue, *Julia Hermann* assumes that moral progress exists and asks how it occurs. Specifically, is moral progress mainly driven by specific individuals who have gained new moral insights or is it driven by changes in the socio-economic and epistemic conditions in which agents morally judge the norms and practices of their society? She argues for the second answer and develops an account of moral progress that does not assume metaethical moral realism. She also describes the limits of moral progress and argues that these are partly grounded in our evolutionary history. *Michael Huemer* also believes that moral progress is possible, but contrary to Hermann, he does presuppose meta-ethical moral realism. For him, observed changes in moral values over human history are best explained as cognitive progress, where societies tend over the long term to move closer to objective moral truth. Does this mean that extensive government regulation and redistribution, to which societies currently converge, are therefore objectively good? Huemer answers this question in the negative. He argues that these trends are importantly different from true examples of moral progress so that they can be satisfactorily explained without adverting to objective moral correctness.

Fifth and finally, we have the question how we should conceive of the objectivity, truth, and justification of our moral beliefs in light of the kinds of evolutionary explanations of morality that Darwin gave in his *The Descent of Man*. For example, is a cognitivist version of Kantian constructivism compatible with evolutionary explanations of moral universals? Should we construe moral truth in terms of correspondence, as moral realists do, or differently? *Carla Bagnoli* argues that although evolutionary accounts of ethics discredit the absolutist construal of moral truths as timeless, they in fact support other conceptions of objectivity as tested by time. In particular, she argues that Kantian constructivists are not subject to debunking arguments based on evolutionary considerations. The final paper in this special issue is written by *Hanno Sauer*, who develops the flipside of the popular argument from disagreement against moral realism. According to his argument from agreement, we would expect to find a lot of moral disagreement if there were mind-independent moral facts, but we don't find much moral disagreement, so moral realism is false. Sauer explains the empirical evidence that supports this argument and shows what makes this argument novel and powerful.

This special issue marks the end of the research project *Evolutionary Ethics? The (Meta-)Ethical Implications of Evolutionary Explanations of Morality*. The members of this research project, Herman Philipse, Michael Klenk, Jeroen Hopster, Joeri Witteveen, Julia Hermann and Wouter Kalf, thank the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) for financial support.

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