

MIGHT GOD HELP EXPLAIN MORAL KNOWLEDGE?

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ABSTRACT: Although owing to proper basicity, phenomenal conservatism, and deliberative indispensability our axiomatic moral judgments seem to be *prima facie* justified, the question of potential undercutting defeaters can pose a challenge to moral knowledge. Evolutionary debunking arguments of various stripes are one of the more recent widely discussed contenders for such a defeater. Because of the likes of Michael Ruse, Richard Joyce, and Sharon Street, such arguments have attracted much attention. Their general structure features an empirical premise according to which the process of evolution has had a significant impact on the stock of even our axiomatic moral judgments. The epistemic premise has it that if the empirical premise holds, then our moral knowledge is severely challenged if not debunked altogether, and perhaps even moral realism itself, since if our epistemic faculties can't reliably put us in touch with objective moral truths, those truths are out of a job in our ontology. Since the most outspoken evolutionary debunkers are secularists, they somewhat understandably tend to smuggle something of a naturalistic origins thesis into their conception of evolution, thus precluding a divine guidance of the evolutionary process, which renders it a formidable challenge for them to evade the force of the debunking challenge. Unsurprisingly Ruse, Joyce, and Street all end up abandoning moral realism and any moral knowledge predicated on it. Theism, however, potentially provides a defeater-defeater against the evolutionary debunking argument(s) (if not a defeater-deflector), by rejecting the naturalistic origins thesis as a gratuitous theological add-on to which evolution need not be attached, carving out room for evolution to be a divinely guided process that may well ensure a correspondence between moral truth and at least our most nonnegotiable moral convictions.

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The topic of this paper pertains to a particular version of the moral argument

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for God. There are various distinctively moral arguments for God's existence—along with one major argument against God's existence (or at least goodness), namely, the problem of evil. Two that find their roots in the writings of Immanuel Kant are what John Hare has called an argument from grace and an argument from providence. They will not be our focus here.

Other arguments might focus on matters of objective value, on the one hand, or authoritative moral duties, on the other; those arguments are primarily metaphysical or ontological in nature. The metaphysics of morals will not be our main focus. Instead, we will direct our attention first and foremost to matters of moral knowledge, something in the arena of epistemology, the branch of philosophy that deals with issues like belief, justification, warrant, and knowledge.

The general structure of various moral arguments is somewhat similar, at least in broad outline. Most all of them start with some important moral phenomenon—be it moral regrets or moral freedom, moral obligations or moral rights or moral goodness, the resplendent value of human persons, our need for moral transformation or forgiveness or ultimate perfection, or the reality of moral knowledge. Then one can inquire into whether the resources of theism provide a robust explanation of the phenomenon in question—and perhaps even a better explanation than what can be provided by secular accounts.

If the case can be made, then the argument is thought to provide distinctively moral reasons to take theism seriously. Those reasons may not be enough to make theism more likely true than false (a P-inductive argument), but still may at least provide reasons for theism to be more likely than it would otherwise be (a C-inductive argument).

So to get the discussion underway, let's first talk about what knowledge is, then extend the discussion to moral knowledge. Then we can ask if we have good reason to think that we have such knowledge, and next consider an important objection to this idea of moral knowledge. Finally, we will consider whether and how theism and its resources might inform the discussion, perhaps addressing those objections effectively, thus bolstering our confidence that we possess moral knowledge after all.

Moral Knowledge

Knowledge comes in different forms. There is *competence knowledge*, like how to ride a bike; we also speak of *acquaintance knowledge*, like I know Sally, or I know Chicago. But the form of knowledge that is of most interest to us for present purposes is *propositional knowledge*, which is to say, knowledge of propositions, or *knowledge-that*. You know that twice two is four. You know that Joe Biden is president. The truth value of a particular proposition may not be known, but every proposition is either true or false.

So to say we know a proposition is to say three things: first, we believe the proposition, and though there is much to say about what belief consists in, let's put that to the side for now. Second, the proposition is in fact true, presumably by corresponding with the way reality actually is. We cannot know something false. Of course we can know *that* something is false, like twice two is five, but we cannot know that twice two is five. And third, we need to add something to true beliefs that renders them items of knowledge for us. Some call this justification; others call it warrant. For now, let us call it justification, by which we mean something like evidence.

Suppose you believe that there are extraterrestrial intelligences, and suppose you are right. You have a true belief, in that case. But do you have knowledge? Presumably only if you have the right sort of evidence, and enough evidence, for the true belief. It must not be, for example, just a lucky guess. There is no shortage of discussion over this matter of justification—how much of it is needed, whether something else or in addition is needed, and so on. But for present purposes we can think of knowledge as something like an appropriately justified true belief, and now we can turn our attention specifically to moral knowledge.

To qualify knowledge as moral is to delimit the scope of its content. Since morality involves questions of values and principles of conduct—good and bad, right and wrong, vice and virtue—moral knowledge claims might look like this: “Lying for purposes of self-aggrandizement is wrong,” “Torturing children for the sheer fun of it is morally evil,” “Integrity is a laudable virtue.” Judging that we know such propositions, then, and to be correct in our claim, (1) we have to believe them, (2) they have to be true, and (3) we have to be adequately justified in believing them.

Again let's agree to set aside discussion of the belief requirement, except to say, very briefly, that our actions more than our words alone are probably the best measure of our beliefs. Regarding the second requirement (that the propositions be true), we will largely assume this to be so for present purposes. Moral realism is the view that there are robust, objective moral truths, and we are less arguing for such realism as presupposing it. If, though, someone were inclined to deny moral realism, perhaps by adopting error theory, expressivism, constructivism, or certain sensibility theories, that would be a way to deny moral knowledge, at least moral knowledge of a robust sort. Whether such nonrealist accounts can do justice to our pre-theoretical intuitions about morality is a fascinating question, but not the focus of our current inquiry, though the matter is not altogether avoidable, as we will see.

Where we *do* want to focus our attention is the third requirement of moral knowledge, namely, the matter of justification. Legitimate moral knowledge claims must feature propositions adequately justified to believe. To this matter we now turn.

Justification

Are we adequately justified to believe in at least some of our moral judgments? Obviously not every knee-jerk and spontaneous moral assessment we make is well-evidenced and sufficiently thoughtful, perhaps particularly on deeply vexed and complex moral questions involving a conflict of moral intuitions. But what about what seem to be eminently clear and central moral beliefs that are practically non-negotiable? It is wrong to torture children for fun, for example. Are we adequately justified to believe such a proposition as that?

Again, to avoid biting off more than we can chew, let's assume that some moral propositions are true. If they are all false, we clearly cannot have knowledge of them, so game over. But even if some moral claims are true, recall that this is only one of the three conditions that moral knowledge calls for. We have to believe the proposition, the proposition has to be true, and we need to be justified to believe it. What case, then, can be made for such justification?

David Enoch makes a case for the justification of moral beliefs in terms of what he dubs their "deliberative indispensability." The basic idea is this: just as something like various inferential patterns—like abductive inferences to the best explanation—are necessary for our theoretical reasoning, likewise objectivity about the norms of practical reasoning seems ineliminable from our practical deliberation. When engaged in ethical deliberation, for example, we are aiming to get things right, to decide what makes best sense.

The basic idea is that the shared phenomenology of theoretical and practical reasoning reveals that they share a great deal in common. They are both trying to get to a fact of the matter. Even if, as is at least sometimes the case, this effort unavoidably makes appeal to one's own desires, in allowing oneself to settle a deliberation by reference to a desire commits one to the normative judgment that the relevant desire made the corresponding action the one that makes sense. This bespeaks commitment to normative truth of sorts.

This, though, as Ritchie notes, is not yet enough to show a need for objective moral facts. Why think these are at least sometimes necessary? Well, arguably it is this question of justification that shows itself to be an especially obstinate consideration when it comes to deliberating on our desires. 'It is pretty implausible to claim,' Angus Ritchie writes, 'that the only thing I ever do when reflecting on my desires is to discern my own all-things-considered desire. My deliberation also involves considering whether my desires are excessively self-centred (sic) or shallow, and how they ought to be weighed against the desires and needs of others. It looks as if I am trying to get something right, and trying to revise my desires in the light of the fact of the matter about what is or is not right' (Ritchie 2012: 25).

Still, as Ritchie recognizes, there could be objective norms of practical reasoning without such norms being distinctively moral, but at the least, for now, we can say that if we were to reduce all of our moral judgments to sentiments, preferences, and conventions, and never robustly objective moral claims, it could not help but affect our first-order moral attitudes. Ronald Dworkin captures this insight when he writes, “The claim that abortion is objectively wrong seems equivalent ... to ordinary discourse, to ... [the claim] that abortion would still be wrong even if no one thought it was ... I mean that abortion is just plain wrong, not wrong only because people think it is’ (Dworkin 1996: 98).

This point broaches a quite important matter to which we will return. Not all sentimentalists or sensibility theorists (who assign primacy to our passions and sentiments in their ethical theory) say the same thing. And it is often the case that what makes for the largest differences pertains to their metaphysical commitments. Hume was a sentimentalist for whom God is irrelevant, and his ethical theory, not coincidentally, has usually been interpreted, for understandable reasons, as subjectivist at best.

Other sentimentalists, from Shaftesbury to Hutcheson to Reid, were theists for whom our emotions are plausibly thought to put us in touch with objective moral truths. This is one of those unavoidable junctures at which the importance of the larger metaphysical stories various ethicists tell can be neither altogether nor responsibly ignored. At any rate, our first go at arguing for the justification of at least some of our moral claims has to do with the demands of practical deliberation, which seem to have deep resonances with deliberation in theoretical matters.

A second tactic or strategy to account for moral justification is this: Many epistemologists, following a modified foundationalist model of knowledge, suggest that there are certain beliefs of ours that rightly function as the foundation of the rest of our knowledge. These foundational beliefs can be called basic beliefs, which are noninferential, which is to say that we do not infer them on the basis of other beliefs. Beliefs we do thus infer from other beliefs are in our superstructure of beliefs, but the foundational or basic beliefs are known more directly, without the need for discursive inference. They are self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible; they don’t lack justification, but their justification does not come from other beliefs—they are “non-doxastic.” Suppose I see a cloud in the sky; I am justified to believe it and may well know it, not because I am making an inference, but simply because the belief was formed within me in the right sort of way. A properly basic belief, then, is a basic belief that is formed in some such way. So it is both noninferential and properly justified or warranted.

So what does this have to do with our axiomatic moral beliefs? When epistemol-

ogists found reasons to alter foundationalism from a classical model to a modified one—largely to avoid a self-referential incoherence problem—they opened the door for more propositions to qualify as properly basic. And among such properly basic beliefs may well be something like certain of our moral convictions. After all, they seem to be about as sure as any of our other beliefs, and in fact we are hard pressed to identify yet more basic beliefs by which to ground our central-most and most obvious moral convictions. So arguably we have good reasons to accept, say, the wrongness of torturing children for the fun of it; such a proposition may well qualify as a properly basic belief.

And third, consider what some recent epistemologists have called “phenomenal conservatism,” the view that if it seems to someone *S* that *p* is true, then *S* is *prima facie* justified in believing that *p*. Phenomenal conservatives nominalize how it seems to *S* as *S*’s “seemings,” which refers to experienced mental states with propositional content and a distinct phenomenal character (Tolhurst 1998: 293–302). Seemings, like beliefs, have propositional content in that, just as *S* may believe that *p*, so it may seem to *S* that *p*. But whereas beliefs are true or false and typically corrigible, seemings are veridical or non-veridical and uniformly incorrigible. Moreover, seemings have a forceful phenomenal character: they have a sort of felt veridicality that inclines us to believe their propositional content (Tolhurst 1998: 298–99). Seemings are thus causally and epistemically prior to beliefs, providing support for beliefs.

Given phenomenal conservatism, evidence comes cheap, so that evidentialism’s demand for evidence as a necessary condition of epistemic justification is easy to satisfy. For as long as it seems to *S* that *p* and *S* has no defeater of how things seem, *S* has adequate supporting evidence to believe that *p*. The application to our moral beliefs is obvious. In moral experience we experience seemings with moral propositional content, e.g., “It is wrong to torture a child for fun.” In the absence of some defeater we are justified in holding such moral beliefs.

So, in sum, considerations concerning deliberative indispensability, proper basicity, and phenomenal conservatism can, both individually and severally, plausibly be thought to help supply justification for at least some of our moral judgments. Combined with objective truth and belief, this would be enough to make moral knowledge possible. But this all depends on the absence of defeaters, especially defeaters for our justification.

It might be useful to bear in mind a distinction between defeaters. *Rebutting Defeaters* show the belief in question to be false. For example, looking through the window and seeing that the sky is clear is evidence for the belief that it is not raining outside. Therefore, this perception is a rebutting defeater of the belief that it is raining. *Undercutting Defeaters* in contrast show the belief in question to lack justifica-

tion, though it still may turn out to be true. For example, suppose I see a horse in the room, but then find out that you slipped me a pill that makes me see horses. I have an undercutting defeater for my belief there's a horse in the room—even though it may turn out that there is a horse in the room. Still, I lack justification to believe it. So in the next section let's lay out one of the more important potential defeaters of moral justification and, thus, of moral knowledge.

Evolution

One important potential defeater is a relatively recent challenge, and it is an objection arising from considering implications of evolutionary theory. To start out, what is it we are getting at when we refer to evolution? In a more recent book, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, philosopher Alvin Plantinga helpfully illuminates this matter by drawing a few distinctions. He identifies a cluster of ideas often associated with evolution: (1) the ancient earth thesis; (2) the progress thesis (life has progressed from relatively simple to relatively complex forms); (3) the thesis of descent with modification; (4) the common ancestry thesis; (5) the claim that there is a naturalistic mechanism driving this process of descent with modification (the most popular candidate is natural selection operating on random genetic mutation); and (6) the naturalistic origins thesis (that life itself developed from nonliving matter without any special creative activity of God but just by virtue of processes described by the ordinary laws of physics and chemistry).

Plantinga employs the locution *evolution* to denote the first four of these theses, and *Darwinism* to include a commitment to natural selection as the underlying mechanism of evolution. The final thesis, the naturalistic origins thesis, he notes, is not really part of the theory of the theory of evolution. The notion of evolution as an unguided process, in other words, is but what he dubs a 'theological add-on' (Plantinga 2011: 8-10).

And this ambitious claim, the naturalistic origins thesis, is, truth be told, probably at the foundation of much resistance to evolution by certain theists. They think evolution commits them to saying God had nothing to do with the process of human development, a notion to which they are understandably averse. Plantinga rightly rejects this notion that evolution entails an unguided process, opting instead for the choice of leaving whether the evolutionary process was guided or not an open question. In fact, this matter of whether the process was guided or not will prove quite relevant to our assessment of the debunking challenge to moral realism.

So let's proceed on the assumption that evolution involves old earth, the progress thesis, descent with modification, the common ancestry thesis, and a naturalistic mechanism operating on random mutation. We recognize the naturalistic origins

thesis, though, as less a function of evolution than a naturalistic supplement to evolution. If, in our analysis of the discussion, we find imported any such assumption that the process of evolution is unguided, it is vital to bear in mind that the discussion has shifted from evolution alone to something like the conjunction of evolution and naturalism.

On the assumption of something like Darwinian evolution, then, the question becomes, does such a picture provide reasons to cast moral realism and/or moral knowledge in doubt? Some have argued that the answer is yes, advancing evolutionary debunking arguments (or EDAs) to make their case. Expressed in discursive format, EDAs generally look something like this (thanks to John Fraser for help here):

Darwinian forces have had a pervasive influence on our moral beliefs [empirical premise].

If (1), then our moral beliefs have greatly diminished epistemic status or are completely debunked [epistemic premise].

So, our moral beliefs have greatly diminished epistemic status or are completely debunked.

Before looking at a few salient examples of EDAs, allow me to say a word about the target of such arguments.

The conclusion just adduced delimits the potential scope merely to the epistemic status of our moral beliefs. Truth be told, some EDAs target moral realism, a metaphysical thesis, whereas others merely target moral knowledge, a matter of epistemology. So how, one might wonder, is what starts as an epistemic argument extended into the realm of moral ontology?

One way to effect the transition from an undercutting defeater against moral knowledge to a rebutting claim against substantive moral metaphysics is via a redundancy claim, which has analogies outside of ethics. In the philosophy of mathematics, for example, anti-Platonists try to defeat indispensability arguments for numbers by arguing that we can explain our use of number words and concepts without commitment to numbers, so, through Occam's razor, we can trim our ontology and numbers are excluded. Or in philosophy of mind, physicalists like Ted Honderich and Jaegwon Kim try to show that an analysis of behavior shows there is no need or room to postulate distinctively mental states with their own causal power: they are redundant riders, because physical events do all the work that needs doing. Occam then gets us physicalism—or something in its close vicinity.

So, what an evolutionary naturalist debunker opposed to moral realism might say is that if our moral feelings and judgments can be fully explained without appeal to moral values, then those values are redundant, and Occam's razor can remove them from our ontology. Nietzsche's view was along these lines: looking out on the world

described by Darwinian materialism, he could discern no moral facts, and he offered an account of our moral judgments that does not require there to be any moral facts. If his account is plausible—we are offering interpretations or imposing moral constructs on the world, and we can explain the origin of moral sentiments in terms of instincts oriented to our survival—then it might be claimed that this shows moral facts are dispensable from our ontology.

If we can fully explain why we make moral judgments without appeal to moral values, then they are out of a job in our ontology. This seems to be the way hard-nosed materialists see things. They might agree it is still useful to view people from a “moral stance,” that it is instrumentally useful to treat people as if they are moral beings, while maintaining that this is a useful fiction. (Thanks to Angus Menuge in personal correspondence for invaluable help thinking these issues through.) But here we begin to get into specific formulations of EDA’s, so let’s do a brief review of the major debunkers. For present purposes it will suffice to focus on three of them: Michael Ruse, Richard Joyce, and Sharon Street.

The Empirical Premise

Ruse’s 1986 *Taking Darwin Seriously* presents an account of how Darwinian evolution bears on epistemology and ethics, and its last chapter offers his debunking account. In terms of the empirical premise, Ruse, while rejecting group selection, cites kin selection and reciprocity as the two main ways in which to account for helping and cooperative behavior (Ruse 1986: 201,218). He lauds kin selection in particular as one of the great triumphs of twentieth-century biology. Ruse points in particular to primatologist Frans de Waal’s study of primates to demonstrate their resemblance to human morality.

De Waal understands morality as bottom up, using a variety of examples to show that animal tendencies to prosociality, altruistic behaviors, community concern, and aversions to inequity suggest that the operation of such moral building blocks in higher primates reveals that morality is not as much of a human innovation as some might think. Certain animals seem to show empathy (or at least empathic behavior), give and want affection, and respond to our emotions much the way we do to theirs. Bonobos, for example, do not merely exhibit male dominance and xenophobia, but an affinity for harmony and sensitivity to others. For such reasons he strongly resists the depiction of animals as primarily vicious and self-centered as wrongheaded. Our own psychological makeup remains, he insists, that of a social primate. He doesn’t call apes, or even bonobos, moral creatures, but he definitely thinks that morality among human beings, consonant with the empirical premise, finds its etiology in evolutionary history (De Waal 2013).

This is just the sort of evidence that one like Ruse adduces to bolster the causal (or empirical) premise. Ruse is not insistent that all of our behavior is controlled by reciprocity or kin selection, but is instead inquiring ‘whether we have innate tendencies or dispositions inclining us to social thoughts and actions, which later would improve our reproductive chances’ (Ruse 1986: 230). Darwinian forces, he is convinced, are responsible for our basic moral inclinations, even though culture still plays a role in developing them (Ruse 1986: 234-235). He likens this to a skeleton (our biology) and flesh (culture), while he leaves ‘relatively unexplored the ways in which cultures, under the influence of biology, actually develop’ (Ruse 1986: 245n5).

Like Ruse, Richard Joyce offers a book-length treatment of the evolutionary genealogy of our moral faculties and beliefs. His *Evolution of Morality* begins with a discussion of the problem of altruism; the important point is that natural selection has favored certain kinds of helpful behavior in humans. He writes, ‘In order to make an organism successfully helpful, natural selection may favor the trait of making moral judgments’ (Joyce 2007: 16-17). Joyce includes kin selection, direct reciprocity, indirect reciprocity, and even group selection in his explanation of the evolution of altruism, including a separate category of what he calls *mutualism*, helping behavior which does not sacrifice fitness for the helper (Joyce 2007: 23).

He acknowledges that it is beyond the capability of researchers to say just how natural selection worked to bring about our moral sense (Joyce 2007: 133). Nevertheless, he argues that the universality of the moral sense is evidence that it is innate, rather than something learned or acquired. Sounding on ethics more than a little like Noam Chomsky on language acquisition, Joyce writes, ‘No one would deny that cultural learning plays a central role in determining *the content* of the moral judgments that an individual ends up making; the claim is that there is a specialized innate mechanism (or series of mechanisms) designed to enable this type of learning’ (Joyce 2007: 137).

Even more than Ruse and Joyce, Sharon Street has garnered the most attention of all as a debunker. She begins with our evaluative judgments and works backwards. Specifically, she posits that certain kinds of evaluative judgments, such as endangering one’s own survival and causing harm to one’s own kin, for example, would have a very negative impact on one’s success at survival and reproduction. Meanwhile, other kinds of evaluative judgments, such as promoting one’s own survival and caring for one’s own offspring, would have a correspondingly positive impact on survival and reproductive success (Street 2006: 114). She argues that the fact that so many of our evaluative judgments correspond to what promotes reproductive success, and the absence of judgments which have the opposite tendency, is evidence ‘in favor of the view that natural selection has had a tremendous influence on that content’ (Street 2006: 117).

Like others, Street considers the observable behavior of many nonhuman species, particularly the higher primates, to be additional evidence of the influence of evolutionary forces on our evaluative tendencies. She concludes, 'We may view many of our evaluative judgments as conscious, reflective endorsements of more basic evaluative tendencies that we share with other animals' (Street 2006: 117). However, she argues that the influence of evolutionary forces on our evaluative judgments is indirect in shaping our basic evaluative tendencies (Street 2006: 120). Other factors can and do influence the judgments that we actually make, including the crucial and *sui generis* influence of rational reflection that must also be taken into account (Street 2006: 113-114).

Still, in setting the stage for her debunking argument, Street maintains that the influence of evolutionary forces on our evaluative judgments is pervasive through the basic underlying tendencies that we have inherited from our evolutionary past. She also argues that 'The truth of some account very roughly along these lines is all that is required for the Darwinian Dilemma to get off the ground' (Street 2006: 121).

The Only Etiology in Town

Ruse, Joyce, and Street all seem to gesture toward the nonnegotiable fact that it is inevitable that morality, whatever it exactly amounts to, must invariably find its origin in our evolutionary story. Of that they seem sure, although they admit that the specific and precise mechanisms for how this played out remains a matter of some conjecture, so a strong dose of provisionality is appropriate on that score. Their tentativeness on the specifics, however, does not discourage or dissuade them from using the empirical premise with confidence in their debunking arguments. The reason for the presumption seems to an assumption that *merely possible* fine-grained accounts of evolutionary genealogies of morality are enough.

The specific details of how evolution produces, say, the human moral sense largely do not matter to the debunkers because they are interested less in showing how evolution accomplished such a feat than simply that it *could* have. Joyce, for example, writes, 'remember that the objective is to show how helping behavior *could* develop through the forces of biological natural selection' (Joyce 2007: 37). Ruse also is explicit about the standard for the debunker as far as the empirical premise is concerned, stating that, 'At the empirical level, the biologist has got to make good the claim that he can show, through natural selection, how the moral capacity or sense *could* [emphasis added] have evolved' (Ruse 1986: 100). Street likewise approaches the empirical premise with initial caution when she writes that 'it must suffice to emphasize the hypothetical nature of my arguments, and to say that while I am skeptical of the *details* of the evolutionary picture I offer, I think its *outlines* are certain enough to

make it well worth exploring the philosophical implications' (Street 2006: 113).

Philip Kitcher likely speaks for all of them in his characterization of the possibility of an evolutionary genealogy of morality: 'The principal reason for taking the possibility seriously lies in the difficulty of thinking of serious rivals' (Kitcher 2006: 172). In the introduction to *The Ethical Project*, Kitcher writes that his position on the evolution of ethics allows only such novel entities that can be justified through accepted methods of rigorous inquiry. 'Appeals to divine will, to a realm of values, to faculties of ethical perception and 'pure practical reason,' have to go' (Kitcher 2011: 3-4).

The main point to emphasize for now is that the reason the debunkers seem sanguinely content with the mere possibility of naturalistic explanations and origins of morality, however short on details they may be, is that they, it would seem, see such etiologies as the only real option. They seem to see something at least in the close vicinity of naturalism as part and parcel of the evolutionary hypothesis. A scientific commitment to the latter goes hand in glove with a philosophical commitment to the former. As such, there is simply no other operative game in town. Hence, possibilities, even remote ones, that comport with the only legitimate contender—naturalism and Darwinism—are enough to endorse the empirical premise. Getting the specific details of the causal premise right is simply not necessary.

In a particularly telling passage, Ruse writes that, 'We know that evolution occurred, that it was Darwinian in nature, and that humans are part of the natural order. Therefore, in something as important to us as our morality, there is a strong presumption that natural selection will have had a causal influence. Such a presumption may ultimately prove wrong. I doubt anyone expects a definitive case. Nevertheless, we go into our enquiry with a great deal of positive background knowledge' (Ruse 1986: 224).

Stepping back from the discussion for a moment, then, recognize that Ruse, Joyce, and Street are all assuming not just evolution, but evolution and naturalism. As such they import the naturalistic origins thesis into their analysis, and by their own admission they think that naturalists like themselves are hard-pressed to hold onto moral realism and at least any moral knowledge predicated on such realism. Part of what Ruse considers our positive background knowledge is that nothing like theism is relevant to this discussion, and nothing like divine guidance of the process of evolution is a realistic possibility. At least *prima facie* this attitude makes it difficult indeed for naturalists to evade the force of the empirical premise.

The Epistemic Premise

Let's turn our attention to the epistemic premise, which says that if Darwinian

forces have indeed had a pervasive influence on our moral beliefs, then our moral beliefs have greatly diminished epistemic status or are completely debunked. Ruse thinks that the import of the challenge is that we should reject moral objectivism in favor of moral subjectivism. Vice and virtue are relevantly like secondary properties, as David Hume thought. The mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects, so that the subjective feelings that, given our constitution, result from the contemplation of some act, are mistaken for perceptions of objective properties of the act itself.

C. S. Lewis said as much: that if naturalism is true and human moral beliefs are ultimately the product of our evolution, then the transcendental pretensions of morality are exposed for a sham. Experiences of moral obligation or guilt are nonveridical, their seeming objects illusory; dictates of conscience on evolutionary naturalism are no more capable of being true or false than a vomit or a yawn.

Ruse, however, recognizes that the traditional concern with subjectivism is that it lacks authority to be prescriptively binding. Morality is thought to be more objective than that. Ruse's answer is that the Darwinian explanation handles this issue not by explaining how morality actually does have binding authority, but rather why there is this misleading appearance that there is. Ruse writes, "The point about morality (says the Darwinian) is that it is an adaptation to get us to go beyond regular wishes, desires and fears, and to interact socially with people. How does it get us to do this? By filling us full of thoughts about obligations and duties, and so forth. And the key to what is going on is that we are then moved to action, precisely because we think morality is something laid upon us" (Ruse 1986: 253). His argument is that Darwinism accounts for the true nature of our moral experience by revealing to us that we are mistaken about the true nature of morality.

Joyce reasons similarly to Ruse, referring to a complete non-moral genealogy of moral judgment, thus vitiating prospects of moral realism. Joyce's conviction seems to be that a complete non-moral genealogy of moral judgment is something that, if not yet achieved, is a realistic goal, something potentially within our reach, a practical inevitability. This despite the challenges associated with filling in the details of such an account. Once more, though, if naturalism is the only game in town, then those challenges don't and presumably shouldn't, on Joyce's view, detract from our confidence that some such story is true. No sort of guiding teleology would be allowed on naturalism, without which a cosmic convergence of our moral judgments and objective moral facts (if such there be) is a pipe dream. And, as Joyce puts it, 'Broadly speaking, no sensible person can object to evolutionary psychology.'

Street (2006) distinguishes between basic evaluative tendencies and full-fledged evaluative judgments, arguing that relentless selective pressure has had a direct and

tremendous influence on our basic evaluative tendencies and these, in turn, have had a major—though not necessarily overriding—indirect effect on our actual moral beliefs or full-fledged evaluative judgments. All of our basic moral judgments are formed within an evolutionary framework, which leaves room for reason, but only as a slave of the passions.

In Street's formulation, there is a dilemma for the value realist based on whether or not there is a relation between evolutionary forces on the one hand, and the independent evaluative truths affirmed by the realist, on the other (Street 2006: 121). Starting with the assumption that there are attitude-independent, evaluative truths, the first horn in Street's dilemma says there is no relation between these truths and evolutionary forces, while the second horn says there is. Either way, argues Street, the realist is stuck in the unfortunate position of having no reliable knowledge of the independent evaluative truths. Given this predicament, Street argues that we are forced to give up realism altogether and adopt antirealism with respect to evaluative truths (Street 2006: 141).

It is telling that the three best-known proponents of EDA's, naturalists all, take their import to be a rejection of moral realism. Ruse becomes a moral subjectivist; Joyce adopts an error theory and fictionalist account of morality; and Street adopts what's called a version of constructivism. They all abandon the notion that morality is objectively true, and thus knowledge of such truths impossible. There are, of course, plenty of naturalist-leaning thinkers who want to argue that the evolutionary debunking case against moral realism is not decisive, but we are not going to discuss those defenses of secular moral realism here. We are rather going to spend the rest of this paper on the matter of whether theism—supernaturalism, a theistic hypothesis—might help defuse debunking concerns.

Might Theism Help?

Eric Wielenberg has noted that more work by theists addressing debunking objections should be done, and this is my intent here. By theism is meant belief in a self-subsistent, omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent, and personal deity. Note that the arguments so far considered have been predicated on the conviction that Darwinism gives an "entire analysis" of our moral sentiments, such that nothing more is needed. But the insight of Plantinga's earlier point is that this is to import into Darwinism an absence of teleology, which is underdetermined by Darwinism. Ruse, Street, and Joyce are smuggling in their naturalistic convictions that a theist would have grounds for resisting.

If we have principled grounds for resisting aspects of EDA's, it may go to show

that theism provides an effective answer to debunking. This is not enough, by itself, to add to the moral argument for God, but if, ultimately, the theistic answer is more persuasive than the naturalistic one, then that would strengthen the moral case for God's existence to at least some degree. For now, let's simply ask what are some of the resources from theism that might help answer the debunking challenge.

To help structure our discussion let's quickly review four variants of debunking, all of which have already been touched on, but let's quickly enumerate and articulate them using Paul Rezkalla's succinct and perspicacious categorization (Rezkalla 2021). First, there is the cosmic coincidence issue; evolutionary pressures are thought to distort our moral beliefs, not enable them to discriminate between what is true and what is not. Second, the truth and inclusive fitness problem: truth-tracking is thought to be incidental to fitness-tracking; perhaps sometimes they overlap, but such cases are rare. To illustrate such challenges, Street uses the analogy of someone trying to get to Bermuda by boat, but simply allows the wind and waves to guide the vessel. Very rarely the boat will end up in Bermuda, but most of the time that won't happen. Likewise with our moral judgments shaped by the evolutionary process privileging fitness.

Third, a justification problem: if our beliefs are formed by an unreliable process, they lack justification or warrant, and if our moral beliefs are formed in this way, we lack moral knowledge. And fourth, a contingency problem: had evolution played out differently, morality for us could look quite different from how it does. Sometimes this is called the problem of Darwinian counterfactuals, because this very question was raised by Darwin himself when he wrote the following: 'If ... men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brother, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters; and no one would think of interfering' (Darwin 1998: 102).

To tackle such objections from a supernatural perspective, it bears emphasis that the central-most relevant feature of a theistic picture that gets added to the mix is a rejection of the natural origins thesis—and a corresponding affirmation that the process of evolution could have been directed by God after all and, as a result, be more goal- or telos-driven than would otherwise be plausible to believe. This directedness of the process of evolution may well prove to be just what is needed to avoid the problems of debunking.

Regarding the cosmic coincidence of moral truth and our moral judgments, evolution need not have been a purposeless process in which such coincidence or correspondence was a matter of infinitesimal likelihood. God's purposeful control over evolutionary processes could ensure the destination intended be achieved. Regarding

truth and inclusive fitness, theistic evolution allows for a teleological underpinning of the evolutionary story that permits and is even conducive to the tracking hypothesis.

As for the contingency problem, here is where teleology can continue to help a great deal. A purposive account of the universe can both do justice to our pre-philosophical moral commitments, unlike the departures from moral realism we see in Ruse, Joyce, and Street, and explain the human acquisition of belief-generating and belief-evaluating capacities that track moral truth. It avoids the explanatory gap that comes from asking how human beings, developing in a physical universe that is not itself shaped by any purposive force, come to have the capacity to apprehend objective moral norms. John Hare famously speaks of a moral gap of a different kind—the gap between what morality requires of us and the best we can do on our own. He argues that God’s grace provides the best way to close this gap. Here the gap in question is different from Hare’s moral gap; it is rather an explanatory gap. To close this gap, an account is needed of the coincidence between our moral judgments and moral truth.

So how does theism accomplish this feat? Maybe something like this: God knew that our possession of moral knowledge would be objectively valuable, which gives him good reason to make this happen. Desiring this state of affairs, and knowing how to bring it about, God had the power to make it happen and took actions to do so, and this intrinsically valuable state of affairs of our possession of moral knowledge came about (Ritchie 2012: 163-164).

As Ritchie puts it, ‘A theistic explanation of the emergence of moral knowledge need not conflict with a version of the theory of natural selection. The theist need not deny that the processes described by evolutionary biology explain the generation of human convictions about ethics, and their capacity to reason about these convictions and refine them. All that the theist needs to add to the account given by evolutionary biology is the claim that the world is providentially ordered so that the interaction of the quasi-teleological process of natural selection and of the spandrel-like features it generates yield an outcome which enables human beings to apprehend that which is of objective value’ (Ritchie 2012: 174).

There’s parity of reasoning when a supernaturalistic explanation is invoked by design theorists to explain the extremely restricted range of value of the fundamental physical constants of the universe permitting the existence of living conscious beings. Their account is not in competition with that of physics; rather, ‘they are claiming that the physical system has surprising properties, which are better accounted for if the scientific account is complemented by a higher-order account in which a benevolent creator orders the world so as to achieve certain objectively valuable outcomes.’ Likewise with respect to the development of belief-generating and belief-evaluating capacities in human beings. Whereas the scientific story will

not explain why our moral capacities track the truth, the theistic story is, as Ritchie puts it, ‘a higher-level account which explains why our capacities have this additional property’ (Ritchie 2012: 174-175).

On theism, as George Santayana once put it, the Good is also nature’s Creator. The theist is in a position to say why there is a necessary connection between certain natural properties and their supervenient moral properties, and an account of the developing of human moral faculties—a theistic genealogy of morals. This account allows for something akin to Street’s “tracking relation”: we have the basic moral beliefs we do because they are true, and this is because the mechanisms responsible for those moral beliefs are aimed at truth. The theist is in a position to offer a narrative that can explain the general reliability of at least those most axiomatic of our moral judgments.

The great 18th century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid appealed to a set of first or self-evident principles of morality able to be discerned through reliable epistemic faculties. There are moral beliefs to which we should pay homage—utilizing them as data for the construction of moral theories or as a kind of court of appeal in assessing them. As Mark Linville and others have insightfully pointed out, our confidence in these beliefs is wisely invested only in the event that we have reason to believe the faculties responsible for them to be truth-aimed. Reid’s theism provided him with such a response; the moral faculties were forged in the same shop as our other cognitive faculties, designed by God for the purpose of discovering moral truth. ‘That conscience which is in every man’s breast,’ he wrote, ‘is the law of God written in his heart, which he cannot disobey without acting unnaturally, and being self-condemned’ (Reid 1983: 355).

On this sort of story, one does not encounter the defeater of the evolutionary debunking objection, because God’s providential ordering of the process amounts to a defeater defeater, or perhaps, in the words of Alvin Plantinga, a defeater deflector. A defeater-defeater is used to restore the epistemic credentials of a belief which is facing a defeater, but a defeater-deflector prevents a would-be defeater from becoming a defeater in the first place (Moon 2017).

This, then, could be the start of a broader moral apologetic case for theism—one based on moral knowledge predicated on robust moral realism. We have only gestured in the direction of the challenge debunking poses to naturalists, but if the case can be sustained that theism provides better resources for avoiding the force of such objections than those of naturalism, the prospects for an epistemic moral argument for God seem rife with potential.

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