



Evolutionary Debunking of Moral Realism

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Abstract

Evolutionary debunking arguments move from a premise about the influence of evolutionary forces on our moral beliefs to a skeptical conclusion about those beliefs. My primary aim is to clarify this empirically grounded epistemological challenge. I begin by distinguishing among importantly different sorts of epistemological attacks. I then demonstrate that instances of each appear in the literature under the ‘evolutionary debunking’ title. Distinguishing them clears up some confusions and helps us better understand the structure and potential of evolutionary debunking arguments.

1. Introduction

Evolutionary debunking arguments aim to undermine the epistemic status of our moral beliefs by appeal to their evolutionary origins.¹ The worry is that if evolution shaped our moral beliefs, but evolution aims for survival and fitness, not moral truth, then moral skepticism follows. Such arguments typically target moral realism, which holds that moral truths are independent of our moral beliefs – what is good is good whether or not we take it to be.² The thought is that just as evolutionary forces shaped our eyes and ears, so they shaped our moral beliefs – or, at least, early, proto-versions of those beliefs.³ But evolutionary forces select for survival, not moral truth. So, if realism is true, and the evolutionary story is roughly thus, then evolution has pushed our moral beliefs in directions having nothing to do with the attitude-independent moral truths. If this is right, then realism entails moral skepticism.⁴

My primary aim is to clarify the role of evolution in these arguments. I begin by distinguishing three related, easily conflated, but importantly distinct arguments, which are implicit in the literature. All reference an evolutionary claim, but only one uses it in a way that keeps the argument from collapsing into one or another more general skeptical challenge. I argue that this is the best version of the evolutionary debunker’s argument. It allows her to challenge realism in a new and interesting way. I consider several objections and find them all wanting. I end on a hopeful note for the realist.

2. The Science

The debunker claims that evolutionary forces have shaped our moral beliefs. The evolutionary psychology behind this empirical claim is controversial.⁵ Both sides should acknowledge this and move on. This challenge is distinctive in its suggestion that empirical facts about our beliefs’ origins could legitimately undermine those beliefs. So while it is important that this argument is empirical, the particular empirical claim is not important.⁶ It is replaceable⁷ and, anyway, not philosophically interesting. I won’t, therefore, engage with the evolutionary psychology here.⁸ My goal is to evaluate the conditional that if something like this evolutionary story is true, then its undermining potential is such and such. We should examine this conditional even if we think its antecedent false. Something very much like it – in form, if not content – may be true.

3. Three Very Important Features of the Argument

If the evolutionary debunker's argument succeeds, it provides either a *reductio* of realism or a scientifically backed argument for moral skepticism. Either way, the debunker's argument must be empirical, targeted, and epistemological. These Very Important Features distinguish the debunker from other skeptics and anti-realists. They are what make her a new and interesting opponent. Consider each in turn.

The debunker's argument rests on a claim about our beliefs' origins. The alleged threat arises because these origins are suspect. The debunker needs some such empirical claim. Her argument can't be evolutionary without it. If the debunker's argument isn't evolutionary, furthermore, it is simply a disguised version of some other skeptical argument, which is seriously misleading. The debunker's argument must, therefore, be *empirical*.

The debunker's argument must also be *targeted*. It should threaten only moral realists' moral beliefs. Realists' non-moral beliefs and non-realists' beliefs (moral or otherwise) should be safe. It is thus important that the argument not overgeneralize. This distinguishes debunkers from other, less modest, skeptics.

Finally, the argument must be *epistemological*. The conclusion isn't that there aren't moral truths, but that we cannot *know* them. This distinguishes debunkers from other anti-realists or skeptics aiming to debunk moral facts altogether.⁹

3.1. THE EPISTEMOLOGY

The evolutionary debunker aims to show that if realism is true, moral knowledge is, somehow, out of reach. There is more than one way to formulate an epistemological challenge, however, and distinct formulations require distinct treatments. This is important for both understanding the debunker's challenge and evaluating her opponents' responses.

To start, consider two familiar ways you might come to doubt your belief that the wall in front of you is green.

Optometrist. Your optometrist says that your color vision might be deceiving you: the tests suggest you are blue-green colorblind.

Skeptic. The skeptic says that all your senses might be deceiving you. She has done no tests.¹⁰

Both the optometrist and the skeptic aim to undermine your confidence in your color beliefs. In that sense, both challenges are epistemological. The skeptical challenge, however, isn't targeted: if it undermines color beliefs, it undermines all beliefs.¹¹ It rests on the fact of our fallibility, after all, and we are thoroughly fallible creatures. It also isn't empirical. The skeptic provides no evidence that your senses are deceiving you.

The possibility of error the skeptic raises is merely possible. With it she constructs a more abstract worry. This worry has, historically, pushed some to articulate epistemologies – ways of explaining how we could have knowledge.¹² It has pushed others to insist that we do know.¹³ The skeptical worry can seem devastating, and such insistence question-begging, yet most of us dismiss the skeptic. We are not so blasé toward optometrists, however. They do more than raise the possibility of error. They make that possibility probable. On any plausible view, such testimony from respected medical professionals should worry us. Whatever confidence you had, on the basis of your color seemings, that the wall is green is no longer justified. The optometrist thus raises a more common, everyday worry that remains even if we can, somehow, legitimately dismiss the skeptic. To emulate this challenge, the debunker must do more than make salient the possibility of error. She must make that possibility more probable, by providing evidence that it is actual.

This, and whatever else distinguishes optometrists from skeptics, has important dialectical repercussions for, first, what counts as a legitimate raising of the worry and, second, what counts as a legitimate response to the worry.

On the first point: all we must do to start worrying about skepticism is think of the many, perhaps distant but uneliminated possibilities of error. The skeptic points to those, noting that you might be deceived, and demands that you demonstrate that you are not. Rightly or not, we are not accustomed to demanding more from the skeptic. We don't let medical professionals off so easily, however. They must provide evidence – test results. The optometrist must demonstrate that you are probably deceived. If she cannot, you needn't worry.

On the second point: a legitimate response to the skeptic may not be legitimate against the optometrist, and vice versa. Even if we disagree about the significance of global skepticism, we should agree that optometrists can legitimately undermine our color judgments. Consider the Moorean dogmatist who dismisses the skeptic thus: *I might be a handless brain in a vat you say? But look – wriggles hands – I'm not!*¹⁴ We cannot respond to the optometrist similarly: *I might be colorblind you say? But look – points to a color – I'm not!*¹⁵

These challenges are thus dialectically different. The skeptical worry puts the burden on us to show that we are not mistaken; the more ordinary, everyday worry puts the burden on the one raising it to show that we are mistaken. The former requires us to do the hard work; the latter requires it of the doubter.

The evolutionary debunker could structure her worry either way. She could put the burden on realists to explain how moral knowledge is possible. Or she could take it upon herself to give realists reason to doubt. The debunker should take the latter strategy. The former merely makes salient a familiar skeptical challenge. While that challenge is formidable, it isn't in any sense evolutionary. It neither needs empirical premises nor targets moral realism. Worse yet, it doesn't show that moral knowledge is, in any special sense, worse off than any other. This way of taking the evolutionary debunking argument against moral realism is thus neither plausible nor new. The debunker's challenge should therefore resemble the optometrist's, which is targeted, empirical, and appropriately epistemological. Only the optometrist provides us with good reason to think that our beliefs are mistaken, and this is what the debunker must do.

3.2. THE PROBABILITY OF ERROR

The debunker must thus provide evidence of error. She must show that, if realism is true, it would be a massive coincidence that our moral beliefs and the moral truths coincide. One explanation for this is the empirical one: we evolved, but evolution selects for survival not truth. Yet another explanation, only superficially of the right form, is sometimes given. Consider:

...it's possible that as a matter of sheer chance, some large portion of our evaluative judgments ended up true, due to a happy coincidence [...], but this would require a fluke of luck that's not only extremely unlikely, in view of the huge universe of logically possible evaluative judgments and truths, but also astoundingly convenient to the realist.¹⁶

The claim that the coincidence is unlikely rests, in this passage, on the point that the “universe of logically possible evaluative judgments and truths” is “huge” – not on an evolutionary claim.¹⁷ We may have judged that infanticide is laudable or that plants are more valuable than human beings.¹⁸ Those judgments, Street argues, could have been true. There are infinitely many such judgments, and thus infinitely many possible coherent normative systems – infinitely many combinations of possible judgments and possible truths.¹⁹ The odds, then, that our judgments are the right ones – that they coincide with the true judgments – are phenomenally

low.²⁰ Elsewhere, Street argues that we have no “non-trivially-question-begging evidence that [our belief] system is the right one”.²¹ All we have is this massive, unexplained coincidence. Therefore, she argues, we cannot conclude that our belief system is the right one.

This is a persuasive argument.²² However, it won't do for the debunker. We can extract it thus, demonstrating that it isn't empirical:

1. There are many possible coherent normative belief systems.
2. Only one of these is right.
3. The odds are phenomenally low that mine is the right one. [1, 2]
4. I have no non-question-begging evidence that mine is the right one.
5. If the odds are low that I'm right and if I have no non-question-begging evidence that I'm right, I cannot conclude that I'm right.
6. I cannot conclude that my normative belief system is the right one. [3, 4, 5]

This is a third sort of challenge, unlike the optometrist's and skeptic's. It uses the premise that there are many possible coherent normative systems, rather than an empirical story about the origins of our beliefs.²³ Its conclusion follows without an evolutionary premise. An evolutionary story could justify P3. But it doesn't, here, and it needn't. P3 follows from P1 and P2 alone. The debunker cannot employ such reasoning if she aims for an *evolutionary* argument.

She cannot use this reasoning if she aims for a targeted argument either. Cutting 'normative' from the above reconstruction results in an equally good argument that we cannot conclude that our belief system – the whole thing – is the right one. The debunker must avoid this reasoning if she is to avoid global skepticism.²⁴

This is one way of developing a compelling epistemological challenge that doesn't need an empirical claim. We should, however, hesitate to endorse it, since it entails a much wider skepticism.²⁵ This isn't what any of moral realism's adversaries wanted.²⁶

3.3. THE EVOLUTIONARY ARGUMENT

The evolutionary premise has thus far been an unnecessary supplement to a more general skepticism. It is potentially significant in another way, however, as an undermining explanation of our moral beliefs. We can read Street's talk of distortion in this way:

...our system of evaluative judgements is revealed to be utterly saturated and contaminated with illegitimate influence. We should have been evolving towards affirming the independent evaluative truths posited by the realist, but instead it turns out that we have been evolving towards affirming whatever evaluative content tends to promote reproductive success. We have thus been guided by the wrong sort of influence from the very outset of our evaluative history, and so, more likely than not, most of our evaluative judgements have nothing to do with the truth.²⁷

With these claims about distortion and illegitimate influence, the debunker aims to give us reason to think that we are probably mistaken about morality. Evidence of evolutionary influence is allegedly problematic in the same way that evidence of being biased, drugged, or hypnotized is problematic.²⁸ Such evidence can be, like evidence of colorblindness, evidence of error.

What the debunker needs, then, is an argument that goes from

Realism. Moral truths are attitude-independent.

and

Influence. Evolutionary forces have influenced our moral beliefs.

to

Mistaken. We have good reason to think that our moral beliefs are probably mistaken.²⁹

But *Realism* and *Influence* don't, by themselves, entail *Mistaken*. To fill the gaps, we must know more about the way in which evolution's influence functions. Specifically, we need to know that whatever evolution aims at doesn't correlate with the moral truth. In other words, with *Gap* and *Off-track*, we can derive *Mistaken*:

1. *Realism*. Moral truths are attitude-independent.
2. *Influence*. Evolutionary forces have influenced our moral beliefs.
3. *Off-track*. Evolutionary forces aim at fitness, not attitude-independent moral truths.
4. *Gap*. The fitness enhancing beliefs and the moral truths come apart.³⁰
5. *Mistaken*. We have good reason to think that our moral beliefs are mistaken.

If this works, we have either a scientifically backed argument for moral skepticism or the beginning of a *reductio* of moral realism.

This version of the debunker's argument has all three Very Important Features. First, the empirical premise is indispensable for establishing the conclusion. It is a necessary part of what gives us reason to think that we are in error. Second, the argument is appropriately targeted. The evolutionary premise is key here too. Though accuracy isn't adaptive for our moral beliefs, it may be for some of our empirical beliefs – most obviously those about mid-sized objects like bears and cliffs. Total skepticism thus doesn't follow.³¹

Finally, this argument is epistemological in the right way. The evolutionary debunker doesn't request a moral epistemology – a story about how moral knowledge is possible. Nor does she demand a demonstration that you have any. Rather, she aims to show you that your confidence in your moral beliefs is unwarranted, given your epistemology. By your own lights, she argues, you are probably mistaken.³² The particular function of the empirical claim in this challenge thus distinguishes it from the skeptic's.

This is why we cannot dismiss the debunker as we might the skeptic. It may suffice as an answer to the latter to explain how moral knowledge is possible, and thus, how it is possible that we're not mistaken. It also may be legitimate to answer as Moore did, with fist thumping insistence that we aren't mistaken.³³ But we cannot answer the debunker or optometrist in these ways. Both grant that it's possible that we aren't mistaken. Nevertheless, they argue, mistake is *likely*. Even Moore wouldn't, I hope, be so dismissive of actual evidence of error.

A response to the evolutionary debunker's challenge must thus do more than give a moral epistemology – where that is to just show how moral knowledge is possible. Since the evolutionary debunker aims to give us reason to think that we are mistaken, a good response to her distinctly empirical challenge must thus either (a) establish that she is wrong and we have no reason for doubt or that (b) she's right and we do have such reason, but that also we have resources with which to dismiss it. Turn now to the literature.

4. Some Responses

If the debunker's argument is valid, and moral skepticism follows, then the obvious ways to avoid the conclusion are to reject realism or reject the science. To reject realism is to give up.³⁴ So set this option aside. To reject evolutionary theory is drastic. We could, however, following Nagel, reject just the evolutionary psychology bit of the theory:

Street holds that a Darwinian account is strongly supported by contemporary science, so she concludes that moral realism is false. I follow the same inference in the opposite direction: Since moral realism is

true, a Darwinian account of the motives underlying moral judgment must be false, in spite of the scientific consensus in its favor.³⁵

Nagel thus rejects *Influence*. Notice his reason: it isn't that he finds the science implausible. It is that he finds moral realism more plausible.

The best way to understand this move is like the Moorean Dogmatist's. Moore justifies his insistence that he isn't a handless brain-in-a-vat on the grounds that he is more sure that he has hands than he is of any premise of the skeptic's argument. Likewise, we might insist: we are more sure that kicking puppies is wrong than we are of any premise of the debunker's argument. We may, therefore, maintain our moral beliefs.

But it's one thing to be sure that kicking puppies is wrong, and quite another to be sure that the truth of 'kicking puppies is wrong' is attitude-independent. That is less obvious, and exactly what is in question. Nagel's Dogmatism thus looks both question-begging and less plausible than the Moorean version. Dogmatism, furthermore, is an anti-skeptical stance. But debunking challenges are dialectically different from skeptical challenges. Dogmatism might be legitimate against a skeptic, but it is not legitimate against a debunker. In fact, it is as implausible against a debunker as it is against an optometrist. Finally, there is an independent reason for setting this option aside. It enmeshes the realist in an empirical debate about evolutionary psychology. Even if the realist wins, she fails to address the philosophically interesting question and succeeds, at best, at shrugging off just one kind of debunker.³⁶

How then to manage the uncomfortable conclusion that our moral beliefs are probably mistaken? In another context, and for complicated reasons beyond our scope, Dworkin argues that this sad state shouldn't worry us. We should instead, "count it as a piece of luck – a special example of what Bernard Williams has called moral luck [that our moral judgments and the moral truths] here coincide".³⁷

We may, of course, have gotten lucky and chanced upon the moral truths. That much is right. The influence of (allegedly) distorting Darwinian forces, however, makes such epistemic luck unlikely. Dworkin doesn't deny the distorting influence, as Nagel does. Nor does he deny that there is a gap between the moral truths and adaptive beliefs. He simply suggests we satisfy ourselves with something like this: "How lucky that these distorting forces didn't distort this time!" To insist, just like that, that we are lucky is to presuppose exactly what is in question: the truth of our moral beliefs. In the context of the debunker's attack, this is question-begging. Compare this response to the optometrist: "I grant that I'm colorblind and therefore a poor detector of colors, but how lucky that, on this instance, I got it right!" Absent some independent check on my color vision, perhaps a set of labeled color cards, this looks like a terrible response to the optometrist and an implausible way to reassure oneself. Dworkin's response to the debunker looks equally bad.³⁸

Parfit makes a similar move. He also insists that we are justified, but he doesn't think it a matter of luck.

Street here assumes that, in forming our beliefs about what is worth pursuing, we cannot be responding to the intrinsic credibility of these beliefs [...]. If we find some belief intrinsically credible, and we know what we find intrinsically credible is more likely to be true, our finding this belief credible may give us an indirect reason to have this belief, and help to make it justified.³⁹

The first problem with Parfit's response is that the debunker doesn't assume that we *cannot* be responding to intrinsic credibility. She grants that we might be, but argues that, probably, we are not. At the very least, her point is this: evolution would have made us find certain beliefs intrinsically credible, even if they were false. Because of this, the debunker argues we do not

know that intrinsic credibility is a guide to the truth. So we cannot ground our beliefs in this way. To assume that we can is question-begging.

To see this, compare it to an analogous response to the optometrist:

I know I am colorblind but sometimes I can just tell that I see the colors. I know that when I can just tell in this way, I really do see the colors. So I am justified in at least some of my color beliefs.

The insistence on a reliable intrinsic-credibility detecting faculty is as implausible as a response to the debunker as is insistence on some infallible color-detecting faculty as a response to the optometrist.

Both Dworkin and Parfit seem to deny the debunker's conclusion, while accepting (explicitly in Dworkin's case) all of her premises. That is bad. Perhaps, then, Dworkin and Parfit are objecting at a different point in the argument. Perhaps they accept that we have good reason to think we're mistaken, but think we have some other, better reason to think that we aren't. For this interpretation, we must expand the debunker's argument so that it goes from *Mistaken* to *Skepticism* via an epistemic principle and a claim, for Dworkin and Parfit to reject, that we have no better reason to think that we aren't mistaken.

5. *Mistaken*. We have good reason to think that our moral beliefs are probably mistaken.
6. *Principle*. If you have good reason to think that your belief is mistaken, and no other, better reason to think that it is not mistaken, then you cannot rationally maintain it.
7. *No better*. We have no better reason to think that our moral beliefs are not mistaken.
8. *Skepticism*. We cannot rationally maintain our confidence in our moral beliefs.

This is an independently plausible interpretation of the debunker's argument. Street's own suggestion for an epistemic principle along these lines includes the clause that "as far as one knows[,] there is no other good reason" for our beliefs.⁴⁰ Elsewhere, she argues that we have no "non-trivially-question-begging evidence" that our judgments are true, so we cannot conclude that they are.⁴¹

The debate among Dworkin, Parfit, and Street thus reduces to what is a good reason for thinking we are not mistaken. The main problem for Dworkin and Parfit is that their reasons seem bad – non-existent, actually. I cannot see a way of rescuing these responses to the debunker's challenge.⁴² Fortunately, there are alternatives that aim to find the fault elsewhere.

One concedes that evolution influenced our beliefs, but argues that, fortunately, the true moral beliefs are adaptive. Thus, evolution has not lead us astray. This *tracking account* rejects *Off-track* and *Gap*: evolutionary forces aim at moral truth because believing the moral truths is fitness enhancing. Parfit presents the idea thus:

...just as cheetahs were selected for their speed, and giraffes for their long necks, the particular feature for which we were selected was our ability to respond to reasons and to rational requirements.⁴³

The thought is that we evolved to detect not only lions and bears but also reasons. But, reasons? Really? This minimalist version of the tracking response is nicely no-nonsense, but *prima facie* implausible. If it merely assumes that such tracking is adaptive, furthermore, it is also question-begging.⁴⁴

Third-factor accounts offer a better way to launch a similar defense. They aim to show that we would track moral truths, even if we did not evolve to detect them. The suggestion is that some third factor is both adaptive and somehow correlates with, or allows us to

know, the attitude-independent moral truth. By selecting for this unrelated but correlated adaptive feature, evolution indirectly selects for the moral truth. This response differs from the previous in accepting *Off-track* and denying only *Gap*. Evolutionary forces do aim at fitness, rather than truth, but this is unproblematic if the fitness enhancing beliefs correlate with the moral truths.

Consider two such suggestions. Wielenberg assumes that creatures like us have rights.⁴⁵ From this he concludes, for evolutionary reasons, that we are perfectly reliable at detecting that we have rights. His argument is briefly this. Although evolution doesn't directly select for creatures like us to truly believe they have rights, it does select for creatures with our advanced cognitive capacities. "In order to form the belief that one has certain rights," furthermore, "one must be able to have some grasp of the concept of rights".⁴⁶ Thus, in selecting for creatures like us to have certain advanced cognitive capacities, evolution selects for creatures with rights. If such creatures believe they have rights, they do. It is thus no coincidence at all that our moral beliefs match the moral truths. Evolution didn't push us away from those truths. It all but guaranteed that we would know them.

Enoch presents a structurally similar argument with a different starting point.⁴⁷

Selective forces have shaped our normative judgments and beliefs, with the 'aim' of survival or reproductive success in mind (so to speak). But given that these are by-and-large good aims – aims that normative truths recommend – our normative beliefs have developed to be at least somewhat in line with the normative truths.⁴⁸

Enoch starts by assuming that survival *is* good – that it is "by-and-large better than the alternative".⁴⁹ He then argues that evolution, by inclining us toward survival seeking, and the attitudes that accompany such tendencies, also inclined us toward the moral truth.

This is how third-factor accounts aim to vindicate our moral beliefs. They do not vindicate all of them at once – in fact, they only vindicate one or two. That is all we need, however, to begin a more thorough vindication.⁵⁰ Thus, it is no coincidence at all, on these views, that we could have moral knowledge.

The immediate worry is familiar: are such assumptions legitimate in this context? We do believe that survival is good and that we have rights. But aren't these moral beliefs what is called into question by the debunker's story?

Wielenberg directly addresses this. He argues that since the debunker's aim is to establish the conditional that "even if there are moral truths, human beings lack knowledge of such truths", it is unproblematic to assume the antecedent.⁵¹ But things are more complicated. Perhaps we may assume that there are moral truths – though this isn't obvious. But may we also make substantial assumptions about the particular contents of those truths? May we assume, for example, that we have rights, that pain is bad, or survival good? That is less clear, and gets to the heart of the debate between the realist and the debunker.

5. *The Upshot So Far*

I have considered six responses and found them all wanting. The first two are unappealing: rejecting realism is giving up and rejecting the science is unstrategic. The rest seem more or less directly question-begging. It's unclear, however, what would be a non-question-begging response to the evolutionary debunker. The whole debate rests on this difficult matter.⁵² Though we cannot resolve it here, we can make some progress by applying the lesson from Section 3.2, that different epistemological attacks require different responses. What one may legitimately assume in answer to one kind of skeptic may be illegitimate in response to another. The

debunker, if she succeeds, gives us reason to think that we are probably mistaken in our moral beliefs. In answering her, we cannot simply assume that those beliefs are true.

This is why so many responses seem question-begging. Some may be independently plausible, as stories about how we could have moral knowledge.⁵³ Others may rightly respond to some other skeptical challenge.⁵⁴ But the debunker isn't a skeptic, and she doesn't aim to show that moral knowledge is impossible. She aims to show that it is improbable. So perhaps debunkers and realists are talking past one another.

This diagnosis allows for a more charitable interpretation of the players in this debate. It allows us to make sense of defenders' responses as good responses to some challenge, even if they are inadequate responses to another. It also allows us to split the blame, since multiple challenges appear on both sides of the literature.⁵⁵ This suggests that there is more than one interesting argument here. The most interesting and formidable *evolutionary* argument, however, isn't a general skeptical one.

6. *Hope for Realists*

This is all well and good, but unfortunate for realism: its rescuers don't understand the trouble it's in. There is hope, however, for a more promising rescue. To see it, return to the reason that third-factor responses seemed question-begging. They begin, recall, with minimal moral assumptions, like that survival is good or that we have rights. But we can run a third factor-explanation with an even less controversial claim: that pain is bad.⁵⁶

From this we could argue as follows. Evolutionary forces select for creatures good at surviving. Such creatures will be good at avoiding pain. But pain is bad, so evolution has selected creatures with tendencies or judgments that track this. Recall why this too may seem question-begging. Morality, the debunker claims, could be about anything. It is conceptually possible that morality is about throwing ourselves off cliffs and causing ourselves pain. If it had been, evolution would have still inclined us to think it was about survival and pain avoidance. So we cannot trust our judgment that it is.

Perhaps, however, we should be reluctant to grant that morality could be about anything. Cuneo and Shafer-Landau argue that some basic moral claims (like the claim that pain is bad) are conceptual truths: if we don't have them, we don't have our concept of morality. If that is right, then it is not true that morality could be about anything, and we have some foothold against the debunker.⁵⁷ That is all that the realist needs to begin vindicating moral knowledge.

We could, however, make a similar move in a less theoretically loaded way. The debunker, recall, aims to provide evidence of error. Evolution influenced our moral beliefs, she argues, and evolution selects for survival. But moral truths could be about something else. This much is plausible: the moral beliefs and the adaptive beliefs come apart. But its plausibility is grounded in our substantive moral beliefs. It is because we think that morality is about more than reproductive success that we worry about being inclined toward valuing reproductive success. If we cannot make any substantive assumptions about particular moral norms, then morality could (conceptually) be about anything. But if morality could be about anything, then we have no idea what morality is about. So we have no idea if evolutionary forces would have pushed us toward or away from the truth. So we have no reason to think we are mistaken.⁵⁸

It won't do to insist here that we are still in trouble because we have no reason to think we're *not* mistaken. To insist that we must dismiss this possibility is, again, to confuse the debunker for the skeptic. The burden here, recall, is on the debunker to give us reason to think we are in error. It isn't on us to demonstrate that our beliefs are true. If the debunker can't give us reason to think we are wrong, she fails. We might have independent reasons to worry about skepticism. But the evolutionary debunker hasn't given us any.

This is a promising way for defenders of realism to go. Third-factor accounts, and maybe others, can be rescued if we can show that we are entitled to certain starting assumptions. The assumptions they need, after all, look to be exactly those that the debunker must grant if she is to establish her crucial premises, like *Off-track* and *Gap*. We might establish this with an argument about conceptual limits, or, more simply, one about the necessity of background assumptions: we cannot get anywhere if we start from nowhere. Notice, however, that if some such argument can ground, or at least entitle us to, our starting assumptions, we may be able to bypass the debate about third-factor or tracking accounts altogether. We could begin our response to the debunker by noticing that we need some assumptions about what morality is like to recognize that we might be wrong about morality. If she doesn't allow us this much, the debunker merely claims that some factor influenced our beliefs in some way. But this, by itself, is no challenge at all.

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Short Biography

Katia Vavova works at the intersection of epistemology and ethics. She is interested in what counts as evidence of our own error and how we should accommodate such evidence when we get it. She has recently written on the relationship between rational degrees of confidence and resilience in the face of disagreement and on evolutionary debunking arguments. Vavova is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Mount Holyoke College.

Notes

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¹ See Bedke (2009), Greene (2008), Joyce (2007), Kitcher (2007), Ruse and Wilson (1986), Ruse (1998), and Street (2006). Greene's challenge is narrower and Street's broader than the one I'll consider here. Many of the same considerations apply, however (see comments to this effect in Shafer-Landau (2012) and Vavova (2014)).

² This is how realism is defined in the relevant literature. Similar definitions are used elsewhere (see Shafer-Landau (2005) 15 on 'stance-independence'). The definition isn't entirely uncontroversial, however (see Sarksaune 2011). I focus on *moral*, rather than evaluative realism because it allows for the most familiar and vivid presentation of the problem. All I say applies *mutatis mutandis* to evaluative realism (cf. Street 2006), which may be broader than moral realism. Street (2009) argues that the evolutionary debunking challenge also threatens epistemic realism. I won't evaluate that here, but see Vavova (2014) for a comparison among these more or less ambitious arguments.

³ Street (2006: 114).

⁴ My focus here is on whether evolutionary arguments undermine moral knowledge. We may instead talk of them potentially undermining confidence, rational belief, or justification. The challenge can be raised in any of these terms with roughly equivalent results. I focus on knowledge because it provides a familiar and vivid presentation of the problem.

⁵ Cf. Street (2006: 112–113).

⁶ The form of the empirical claim matters insofar as different claims might undermine different sets of beliefs. It also matters how many beliefs are targeted, and how fundamental those beliefs are (cf. Vavova 2014).

⁷ Cf. Street (2006: 155).

⁸ But see Kahane (2011: 111) and FitzPatrick (2014).

⁹ E.g., Harman (1977) and Mackie (1977). Harman is a relativist, and therefore thinks there are no *realist* moral facts. Mackie is a kind of nihilist (an error theorist), who thinks there are no moral facts at all. Their challenges are importantly different from this debunker's.

¹⁰ There is more to the skeptic's challenge, of course. Specifically, the skeptic presents an argument with an epistemic principle that links the possibility of error that our ordinary fallibility raises to the conclusion that we lack knowledge. The specifics of the skeptic's argument are beyond the scope of this paper, but important for a more thorough comparison to the debunker's.

¹¹ Perhaps some beliefs, like Descartes' *cogito*, are exempt. But we all know how far that got him.

¹² On one interpretation, the contemporary debate about internalism and externalism in epistemology is a reaction to Cartesian skepticism. The goal, on both sides, is to articulate an epistemology that shows how knowledge (or at least justified belief) is possible (cf. Kornblith 2001, especially the introduction).

¹³ See Moore (1939) and more recently Pryor (2000).

¹⁴ Pryor (2000) defends Dogmatism, a view inspired by Moore's (1939).

¹⁵ Even the Dogmatist should be able to explain difference here. Though she holds that you can be justified in believing that *p* even if you cannot rule out skeptical hypotheses in which not-*p*, she rightly allows for more ordinary defeaters (see Pryor 2000). So even the dogmatist agrees that you cannot remain confident in believing *p* if you get good reason to think that not-*p*. Your *prima facie* justification is undermined. This, the dogmatist can say, is the difference between these cases. The skeptic makes salient the possibility of error. Unlike the optometrist, she doesn't make that possibility more probable by presenting *evidence* of your error.

¹⁶ Street (2006: 122).

¹⁷ Street (2006: 122).

¹⁸ Street (2006: 133).

¹⁹ Some moral realists take the moral truths to be necessary, and so may balk at this claim. For a good explanation of why this won't do as a response to the debunker's challenge, see Clarke-Doane (2012: 320).

²⁰ Cf. Street (n.d.: Section 9). Street puts the point in terms of low odds. I suspect she means something like prior probability, epistemic probability, or conceptual probability.

²¹ Street (n.d.: 21). Set aside what 'non-trivially-question-begging' means for the moment.

²² In part, I suspect, because it resembles Benacerraf (1973) and Field (1989)'s challenges to mathematical realism. The parallels are worth exploring (cf. Clarke-Doane 2012). But that there are parallels at all should raise suspicions. After all, evolutionary debunking arguments are only meant to undermine moral realism – they shouldn't undermine our mathematical beliefs too. Furthermore, insofar as this version of the debunker's argument resembles the Field/Benacerraf worry, it isn't empirical. The latter worry functions without an empirical premise about the origins of our mathematical beliefs. The resemblance should raise suspicion about the mathematical challenge too, since it also was meant to target only our mathematical beliefs. I'll show in a moment that, in fact, this version of the challenge overgeneralizes even worse than this. So both mathematical and moral debunkers should shun it.

²³ Compare to Bedke's 'Many Conceptual Possibilities' premise in his (2014).

²⁴ Likewise for the mathematical realist's opponent, insofar as she uses such reasoning.

²⁵ This is the important lesson of the considerations Elga raises about 'possibility of error' skepticism in his (n.d.).

²⁶ Nor is it what mathematical realism's opponents wanted.

²⁷ Street (2006: 122).

²⁸ See Street (n.d.).

²⁹ *Mistaken* is sometimes presented differently, as the claim that we *lack* good reason to think that our moral beliefs are *not* mistaken. Vavova (2014) argues that this alternative formulation is bad for the debunker because it collapses her challenge into a merely skeptical one.

³⁰ This is a bit metaphorical. The burden is on the debunker to specify it in a way that works for her argument.

³¹ Cf. Street (n.d.)'s defense of the claim that the argument doesn't generalize to our empirical beliefs.

³² Cf. Street (n.d.) on "internal skepticism".

³³ Perhaps this will never satisfy a skeptic, but we can distinguish between good responses to skepticism and ones that could convince the skeptic. We should hope there are some of the former, even if there are none of the latter. cf. Williamson (2007).

³⁴ This is Street's (2006) preferred option.

³⁵ Nagel (2012: 105).

³⁶ Recall Section 2.

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³⁷ Dworkin (1996: 125).

³⁸ It is important to notice here that this isn't an issue about what is dialectically appropriate, or what would convince the debunker. The complaint of question-begging is meant to have more bite in this context. The claim is that this sort of response just won't do, epistemically. We cannot use it to dismiss debunkers or optometrists, nor can we use it to assure ourselves. This is how I use 'question-begging' above and hereafter.

³⁹ Parfit (2011: vol. 2, 531).

⁴⁰ cf. Street (forthcoming) for the principle and Vavova (2014) for criticism.

⁴¹ cf. Street (n.d.).

⁴² Though they may well be good responses to some other epistemological challenge.

⁴³ Parfit (2011: vol. 2, 114).

⁴⁴ My own dismissal here is a bit quick, but see Street (2006) for a more careful argument that it is "scientifically implausible". An even better reason to reject it, however, is the second: that it is question-begging.

⁴⁵ See his (2010).

⁴⁶ Wielenberg (2010: 449).

⁴⁷ See his (2010) and (2011).

⁴⁸ Enoch (2011: 168).

⁴⁹ Enoch (2011: 168).

⁵⁰ Doing so would require a closer look at the science, perhaps, but also the use of rational reflection. Street (2006) argues that rational reflection cannot correct for evolution's unsavory influence. If our most basic moral beliefs are infected, and they are the starting points for our moral reasoning, then any result of that reasoning will also be infected. In other words, "garbage in, garbage out" (Greene 2008: 116). This is right only if we can't take some basic moral beliefs for granted. If we can, as third-factor theorists (but also others like Cuneo and Shafer Landau) argue, then we can potentially use reflection to correct for the influence of evolution.

⁵¹ Wielenberg (2010: 447).

⁵² For comments on it, see Street (n.d.), Vavova (2014), and Wielenberg (2010).

⁵³ I'm thinking here of Enoch, Parfit, and Wielenberg.

⁵⁴ Nagel's Dogmatism, for example.

⁵⁵ See Street passages from above, such as the one about coincidence. See also suggestions such as those made by Wielenberg that "some evolutionary debunkings gain an illegitimate air of plausibility by exploiting many people's moral skepticism (or at least skepticism about certain moral claims)" (2010: 463).

⁵⁶ Sarksaune (2011) proposes a third-factor account along these lines. Skarsaune also provides an interesting response to the question-begging worry:

Street thinks the realist is barred from giving this kind of response because realists are committed to the evaluative facts being independent of 'all our evaluative attitudes' – including the unreflective, affective responses involved in pleasures and pains. But on this point Street is arguing against a straw man: I will offer textual evidence to show that realists such as Nagel and Parfit do not take realist evaluative facts to be independent of the unreflective, affective responses necessary for sensations to be pleasant or painful. A more useful definition of 'realism,' I suggest, is that the evaluative facts are independent of our beliefs or judgments. (230)

⁵⁷ See Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014). This strategy of taking certain non-tautologous moral claims as partly definitive of morality is also suggested by FitzPatrick (2014) and Vavova (2014). For a more general statement of such a view, see Foot (1978: chs. 7–8).

⁵⁸ Schafer (2010) and Vavova (2014) suggest arguments along these lines.

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