

## In what way, if any, should the revelation that morality has evolved threaten our commitment to its demands?

In this essay I analyse Sharon Street's objections to moral realism, which is the view that there exist objective, stance-independent moral truths. Street argues, through the 'Darwinian Dilemma', that moral realism is unlikely given how evolution has shaped our moral beliefs. She posits, instead, a form of antirealism as a viable ethical theory, where moral truths are contingent on evaluative attitudes. I assess her takes on moral realism and antirealism with respect to prominent accounts on the subject. I conclude that moral realism faces too big a challenge in the Darwinian Dilemma but that her antirealism remains tenable. However, Street should be careful not to dismiss stronger, response-independent versions of moral realism too quickly.

### 1. The evolutionary origins of moral beliefs

Evolution gives us a scientific account of how characteristics of biological organisms change over successive populations. In this section I explain why evolution is a primary force behind moulding our evaluative attitudes. After attempting to debunk moral realism in section 2 I will use this claim as a springboard for proposing antirealism in section 3.

Our origins, in a way, look morally bleak: 'survival of the fittest'; self-preservation; death otherwise. So if we take many of our moral beliefs, especially those geared towards protecting the weak and vulnerable (e.g. the ill and the elderly), it is somewhat difficult to understand how we grew to be this way. Morality, at face value, then, does not seem to fit with evolutionary theory: protecting the 'unfittest' is often not conducive to our survival in the long run; we still do it; *modus ponens*, moral behaviour is unnatural. This nihilistic conclusion is known as the 'Placement Problem' and is relevant to this essay, for it casts doubt over the claim that morality arose naturally.

Putting aside any arguments for supernaturalism (e.g. God), we might still be able to see how morality emerged. Delving deeper into our species' history, we see the rudiments of what many consider to be moral behaviours. This was Charles Darwin's view, which I shall now discuss.

In *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* Darwin (1871) claimed that our moral origins can be traced back to 'lower animals' because, as a species, we gradually evolved from them:

*'[T]he difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, is certainly one of degree and not of kind.'*  
(Darwin 1871, p. 105)

This process began with the evolution of social instincts—instincts which drive us to take pleasure from serving a community of associated individuals. Darwin employed a four-stage account to explain how these developed into moral sense. We: 1) acquire social instincts; 2) grow moral conscience with human-distinguishing faculties of memory and self-reflection; 3) use language to guide future actions; 4) learn behavioural habits that strengthen the instinct in keeping with the norms of the community. Darwin considered social instincts to be acquired at the level of the group, whereby groups exhibiting more favourable traits amongst themselves flourished.

As an example, consider the instinct to be sympathetic towards members of the same group. Following an evolutionary history of iterating through steps 1 to 4, we can understand how we *still* act on this disposition when we express 'compassionate' evaluative attitudes with our sophisticated moral sense.

Frans de Waal (2003) claims that the origin of these instincts is of no mystery: all species rely on *cooperation* in some way. de Waal and Darwin paint a picture of morality which pertains to the 'continuity view': the view that morality slowly transitioned from social instincts as an outgrowth of evolution, moulding the evaluative attitudes which underpin our moral beliefs. This view does not apply to every

observable human trait, however, for we can undergo non-selective and partially selective evolutionary processes too.

But what, metaethically speaking, is especially moral about social instincts? They would not commit us to morality if we were inherently selfish beings. Our community-serving behaviours could simply be biological modes of enhancing self-preservation—for example, because we are driven by our genes, the best-suited of which proliferate across the species (Dawkins 1976). Morality would then have to be something we construct on top of our instincts, guiding and deflecting them accordingly. Notions like ‘altruism’ and ‘selflessness’ would hold no real meaning. ‘Instinctive sympathy’, as Darwin calls it, would be a self-concerned motivation sourced at the level of the gene. Hence, if we cannot delineate something moral in them, an argument which proposes that evolution commits us to morality is significantly weakened.

Nonetheless, evidence suggests animals closely related to humans act selflessly in a form of disinterested altruism (where no favour is expected in return). de Waal, for example, reports on various cases of consolation (de Waal and Aureli 1996) and justice (Feistner and McGrew 1989) observed in primates. However, while these and other cooperative instincts cannot be claimed to be moral *per se*, the *capacity* to do so may play an important role. Ants, for example, like chimpanzees, share food, an act that could be construed as moral; but they only do so on the basis of urges (de Waal 1989). If ants possessed a sense of evaluation or critical reflection, we could claim, as for chimpanzees, that the rudiments of morality were within their capacities.

I want to show that morality is actually contingent on evaluative capacities—the building blocks of evaluative attitudes such as desire and emotion. First, though, I will discuss what our evaluative attitudes mean for moral realism.

## 2. Derailing moral realism

**M**oral realism is the metaethical view that there exist such things as objective, stance-independent moral truths, which are true irrespective of our evaluative attitudes towards them (e.g. ‘Eating animals is wrong’, which may or may not come with justification depending on the realist’s approach). There are many arguments for and against realist views, which are outside the scope of this essay. In this section I only claim, primarily through the arguments of Sharon Street (2006), that our evaluative attitudes, expressed in the evaluative judgements of our moral beliefs, are a significant thorn in the side of moral realism.

Evolution shaped the content of many human values. Not all of them are conducive to survival and reproductive success (the currency of evolution). Seeking to enhance one’s self-esteem, for example, can be a self-defeating evaluative attitude (Bénabou and Tirole 2001); valuing one’s own life, in contrast, self-evidently cannot.

The question for a moral realist, however, is: did evolution shape our values in such a way that it located objective, stance-independent moral truths? According to Street’s two horns, the moral realist must either: (1) deny their relationship, which would render moral realism a big coincidence; or (2) find a way to relate to the two, which is improbable because our ancestors would need to have learned how to grasp objective, stance-independent moral truths. Street calls this double-edged challenge the ‘Darwinian Dilemma’.

### 2.1 Horn 1

The moral realist might contend that there is no relationship between evaluative judgements and objective, stance-independent moral truths: that, while the content of our evaluative judgements has been largely shaped by evolution, evolutionary forces did not track truth objectively. This implies evolution had a distorting influence on our evaluative judgements, which would need to arise from entirely different

phenomena to moral-truth-tracking (e.g. as a function of survival and reproductive success). But, due to the improbability of evolutionary forces coincidentally finding objective, stance-independent moral truths, this claim falters. For the most part, then, the moral realist is required to adopt a sceptical position on the veracity of our evaluative judgements with respect to objective, stance-independent moral truths.

Furthermore, our evaluative judgements appear somewhat arbitrary when we assess their development in terms of evolution's biological mechanisms. If an evaluative judgment against cannibalism is one of disgust, for example, it may have been evolutionary born from an instinct to avoid disease, not a connection to moral truth. Then the moral realist must battle against the odds to say why this evaluative judgement *happened to* develop from our social instincts in such a way that it landed on an objective, stance-independent moral truth. After all, the evaluative judgement, following a different dice-roll, could have been different. It could have been: 'Cannibalism is virtuous because it resourcefully provides food to my community.' Out of all the possible moral truths, Darwinian pressures *might* have found objectivity in one of these two evaluative judgements or in a myriad of other possibilities; but it seems unlikely. Remoteness from them, on the other hand, intuitively seems far more likely.

There are, however, limitations to Street's first horn. Street assumes that moral truths could look very different to how they look now because we can conceive all kinds of moral truths. But the moral realist could claim that moral truths necessarily had to be *these truths*. Maybe torturing babies, for instance, is impermissible in all possible worlds—can we really imagine otherwise?—and the content that evolution developed inside of us is completely immaterial. Perhaps, then, we should not pay too much credence to our evaluative judgments.

An adherent to non-natural moral realism (Wielenberg 2009) provides an argument of this form, claiming there is an objective form of morality which is not reducible to natural facts or properties in the world. Meanwhile, on account of naturalistic moral realism (McPherson 2017), though we can hold moral beliefs which are tracked by descriptive facts about the world, moral truths are independent of them.

Both of these response-independent approaches detach humans from their individual conceptions of morality. Arguably, this is absurd because only we can respond to moral properties in the world. If we believe Darwin's four-stage account, we possess moral consciences, use volition to self-reflect and remember, and communicate moral language. We would be jettisoning the only beings capable of moralising their manifest social instincts from morality.

Russ Shafer-Landau (2012) restricts what Street considers to be possible moral views in accordance with evolutionary forces. By envisioning all possibilities an agent is not always speaking a 'moral language'. If their evaluative attitude is such that they deem acts such as rape, betrayal, and sadism morally permissible, they could be appealing to semantically different concepts. What these exactly are, what dispositions they are acting on, and what moral framework they have built accordingly, Shafer-Landau offers little substance for. Nor is his argument that the content-narrowing forces on our perceptual beliefs have led us *away* from truths appealing, for he offers no reason why they *do not* move away from them; and so, in lieu of Shafer-Landau fleshing out his argument further, agents are still left with

*'...no moral knowledge...in the deeply appealing position of...moral scepticism—a coherent position that contains zero appeal.'* (Shafer-Landau 2012, p. 1)

Nevertheless, moral scepticism *is* a coherent alternative. Therefore, the moral realist needs to act with more philosophical potency to break free from it. For now Street should not be too worried. However, she needs to do more to convince us that moral facts could have been different.

## 2.2 Horn 2

If the moral realist claims that there is a relationship between evaluative judgements and objective, stance-independent moral truths, they must show how we, evolutionarily speaking, learned to track them. A claim that we can obtain *other* kinds of truth can hold water. For example, because our ancestors' senses,

whose genes flourished, had to track moving objects to catch prey, they had to *truthfully* track movements in the real world. But this kind of truth-tracking is not moral-truth-tracking, for which we need a unique explanation from the moral realist. I argue, like Street, that an adaptive account could suit the explanatory task: that is, our evaluative judgements are functions of value in evolutionary currency, not their objective truth or falsity (e.g. creating moral meaning and value in our lives from an unlikely god can inspire us to flourish).

This undermines moral realism because objective moral truth becomes an unnecessary evolutionary ingredient. Take the case of evolutionary mechanisms guiding us towards believing incest is objectively wrong. On an adaptive account we might say this judgement is held to inhibit incest for good evolutionary reasons (e.g. production of defective offspring). The moral realist, however, must go further to tie this judgement to an objective, stance-independent moral truth. Note, then, that Street's task, like mine, is not to debunk the idea of moral truth: it is not the case that our evaluative judgements cannot be true, only that they are not *necessarily* true.

But disassociating evaluative judgments and objective, stance-independent moral truths seems counterintuitive. In what possible world, for instance, could unprovoked, unjustified, and unadulterated pain be permissible? Such pain is inflicted and locatable in this world.<sup>1</sup> In such cases moral properties seem to supervene on physical properties. Darwinian pressures might have formed different evaluative judgements but these judgements share supervening features with our current judgements on account of this kind of pain. As such, we might be restricted to certain moral truths, challenging Horn 2 as it grants credence to the notion of moral-truth-tracking, where moral truth is a function of at least some evolutionarily formed properties in the real world.

However, I rebut this notion. While I accept evaluative judgements can be reduced in this way (in tune with the arguments of section 1), I challenge the appropriateness of reducing moral facts to non-moral genealogy (Joyce 2006). Simply put: expressed in non-moral terms, our genealogy cannot add meaning, or 'ontological richness' to the moral world. We need a compelling naturalistic theory which demonstrates reductive powers which inescapably hold practical authority over moral facts, else we can only tentatively hypothesise correlations between judgment and fact. It would not be meaningful to reductively understand one's experience of happiness in terms of biochemistry (e.g. through dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin, and endorphin levels). In the moral world, without qualification, we should restrict the study of moral claims to the moral realm alone. While a utilitarian expresses morality in terms of pleasure and pain, for example, where both can be traced in the physical world, their expressions of moral claims are in moral terms (e.g. 'The greatest good for the greatest number').

But could there be space for purely *rational* reflection to exist in a noumenal realm without the requirement of supervening on physical properties? This could provide moral space for moral beliefs which are detached from evaluative attitudes. Christine Korsgaard (2009) argues that we can be inescapably bound to morality through the transcendental authority of rationality. Over time we have grown increasingly sophisticated in thought—self-aware and intelligent like no other species (as far as we know). Such a view of morality pertains to the 'discontinuity view' because of morality's sudden onset (cf. continuity view). We thus have the faculty to be moral agents who are free of inclinations, removing any heteronomy (in Kantian terms).

Korsgaard's arguments, however, are recursive because she presupposes that humans can value valuing things, rendering rationality just an apparatus for reason-governed irrationality. For this and other reasons<sup>2</sup> her program fails to show how rationality can be *transcendentally* authoritative over our values. This

<sup>1</sup>Naturalistic moral realism, discussed on page 2, might be able to trace pain—say, through the sciences, to discern biological and psychological signs of it.

<sup>2</sup>A single, unified agent is a prerequisite of Korsgaard's theory. But can such an agent be identified in a human? Agents tend to be full of conflicting, transient desires, even when rationally manifesting them. Desires can also be relegated over time to create constant flows of rational inconsistencies which threaten the notion of single, unified agents in our personhoods.

rebuttal of her ‘procedural realism’ is reinforced by the Russian Doll Model (Preston and de Waal 2002), according to which empathy is hard-wired into unconscious emotional processes and based on stored representations of events, demonstrating higher cognitive processes to be the result of lower-level, animalistic desires.

Street also denies that rationality makes us capable of standing apart from our evaluative judgements. If rationality is employed, she says, it is used to evaluate our evaluative judgements. It is, therefore, always intertwined with and contaminated by them. We can rationally ignore certain evaluative judgements when forming moral positions, especially when we critically reflect on the ‘foreign influence’ of evolutionary forces, but, even when we do, we act on the basis of evaluative attitudes somewhere: whatever we rationalise, we respond to what we *value*.

Delineating objective, stance-independent moral truths in non-moral terms persists to be unsuccessful. I will now discuss Street’s constructivism in the hope that this antirealist approach can commit us to morality with moral truths that are *contingent* on our evaluative attitudes.

### 3. Street’s constructivism: a solution?

The rejection of moral realism does not necessitate the death of morality: constructivism gives us one way of locating morality. Street (2006) sets out her arguments against moral realism by defending her antirealist Humean constructivism, according to which moral truths, whilst not necessarily true, are contingent on evaluative attitudes. In this view ‘evaluative facts’ take the form: *X* is a normative reason to *Y*, where *X* is morally right or wrong in virtue of being ‘good, valuable, or worthwhile’ (e.g. ‘Eating animals is wrong *because* I value living creatures’). Evaluative attitudes, then, are the mental states behind our evaluative judgements: the normative reasons for believing something to be true. They justify our evaluative attitudes, where we are the moral-truth-makers of a *constructed* form of morality which is rooted in our animalistic desires.

Moral realists claim there exist evaluative truths independent of evaluative judgements. Street denies this by claiming that there exist evaluative truths which cannot be independent from *whole sets* of evaluative judgements ‘in reflective equilibrium’. ‘Hitler was morally depraved’ is a true claim because ‘valuing genocide’ was amongst Hitler’s evaluative attitudes, which we probably take negative stances towards in reflective equilibrium. Conversely, a moral realist would claim that Hitler was morally depraved regardless of his and our stances towards genocide.

Street avoids the Darwinian Dilemma because she can describe a relationship between evolutionary forces and evaluative truths. She embraces the scientific view that our evaluative starting points were shaped by evolution in an *adaptive* way. For example, our evaluative judgements such as ‘I should help others in my group’, ‘I should protect children’, and ‘I believe breaking bones is bad’ can be expressed in evolutionary currency. This also leaves room for evaluative error in the direction and dependence of reasoning (e.g. if we mistook someone to be part of our group when it was only the wellbeing of people of our own ‘kind’ we valued).

However, evaluative facts, even when coupled with evaluative normative reasons, give rise to absurdities conceived by ideally coherent eccentrics (Street 2009). In being able to live under an illusory sense of objectivity we can construct strange moral truths (Ruse 1986). We *could*, for example, live under a moral obligation to cabbages. Street claims there is nothing alarming about this kind of relativism though. It may be counterintuitive to believe that indifference to pain on Tuesdays or valuing torture is justifiable; however, the content of our values says nothing of the fact we *can* construct evaluative facts on the basis of evaluative attitudes in reflective equilibrium, circumventing the Darwinian Dilemma. These facts provide normative reasons, which tell us what people value. We are potentially powered by absurd attitudes; but this does not undermine their normative power.

But Street's antirealism seems to engender a self-concerned view of morality which is only expressed through an agent's point of view because it postulates that morality is underpinned by personal irrationalities. This view reality-matches with many behaviours we observe in everyday life: *a posteriori*, we know people are more likely to join social movements when they can orientate their attitudes towards the injustices being fought against; they tend to run for charities they have been personally most affected by, irrespective of the financial need; they can lament events involving inanimate objects which they culturally and historically value more so than they lament war, poverty, and famine in societies of people they cannot relate to; and so forth. But I argue this is not a philosophical problem: we are beings who can construct morality; to do so we must conceive it in our own terms.

### In conclusion

According to Darwin, our dispositions, when are rooted in social instincts, incline us to serve our communities (e.g. through empathy). Through our sophisticated cognitive tools we can tune into and critically reflect upon these hard-wired, evolutionarily formed dispositions to be 'moral'. We can thusly express evaluative attitudes as evaluative judgements in a recognisable moral language, enabling us to contrive evaluative facts based on what *we* value.<sup>3</sup>

We may think some of our attitudes absurd and selfish; our judgements may not compel us into action by injustice when there is rationale to say it should; however, evolution undoubtedly shaped many of the evaluative attitudes through which we can locate evaluative facts. As such, Street's antirealism effectively sidesteps the Darwinian Dilemma. Moral realism does not.

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<sup>3</sup>This position may lend itself to an egoist version of morality, where humans are self-concerned to appease *their* evaluative attitudes: doing 'moral' things for others would not really be altruistic.

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