GET REAL(ISM): EVOLUTIONARY DEBUNKING ARGUMENTS AND MORAL
REALISM

by

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To my parents.

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Abstract

Genealogical arguments which aim to undermine some aspect of ethics by referring to its supposed evolutionary origin have become both more common and more philosophically substantive in recent years. In this thesis, I present what I take to be the strongest evolutionary debunking argument aimed against the meta-ethical view of moral realism. Specifically, I present Sharon Street's Darwinian Dilemma. I then consider the strongest responses given in defense of moral realism by Derek Parfit and Russ Shafer-Landau. I give reason to reject most of Parfit's and Shafer-Landau's responses and then suggest that due to a lack of justification for our moral beliefs (if moral realism is true) we ought to have a lower level of credence in them.

List of Abbreviations Used

EDA   Evolutionary Debunking Arguments

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Chapter One: Introduction

1: What's Ahead

Genealogical debunking arguments are not a new philosophical development. In the 4th

century BC, Euhemerus used alleged facts about the origins of religious beliefs to

undermine their credibility. Nietzsche and Marx also used genealogical critiques in order

to undermine religion. Nor is the thought that Darwinian evolutionary considerations

pose a threat to the justification or truth of our moral beliefs particularly new. Richard

Joyce notes that soon after the release of Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, "One fierce

critic wrote that if Darwin's view became widely adopted 'the consequences would be

disastrous indeed! We should be logically compelled to acquiesce in the vociferations of

[those] who would banish altogether the senseless words "duty" and "merit"…'" (Joyce,

1). Others, including Joyce, have provided their own philosophically substantive

evolutionary objections to ethics.

Although neither genealogical debunking arguments nor evolutionary objections

against ethics are particularly new, in recent years there has been an emergence of

philosophically rigorous arguments grounded in Darwinian evolutionary considerations

which are meant to call into question various aspects of ethics. Some of these

arguments aim to undermine all forms of ethics, others aim only at moral realism, and

still others aim at only certain specific moral intuitions. Further, these arguments go

about undermining their various targets in different ways. Some purport to actually

show the falsity of various ethical claims. Others simply purport to undermine our

justification for particular ethical claims. Proponents of these arguments include Joyce, Michael Ruse, and Sharon Street.

In Chapter Two, I present what I take to be the strongest objection which is both aimed at moral realism and grounded in evolutionary considerations, namely, Street's argument as presented in *A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value*. Street's argument, which she calls The Darwinian Dilemma, holds that evolutionary forces have had a significant impact on our basic evaluative tendencies throughout our species' evolution and this has had a significant distorting influence on the conscious evaluative judgments we now hold. Accepting this, it would be a massive coincidence if our moral beliefs were true. This in turn undermines any justification we might have for our moral beliefs, if moral realism is true.

In Chapters Three and Four I will consider the strongest responses which are meant to defend moral realism from these evolutionary considerations. These responses come from Russ Shafer-Landau and Derek Parfit. Although both Parfit and Shafer-Landau give different, and numerous, arguments in defense of moral realism, they both present as one of their strongest arguments the claim that many of our moral beliefs are in fact not evolutionarily adaptive in terms of reproductive success. They argue that if this is the case, then the main reason for thinking that evolutionary forces have greatly affected our current moral judgments, namely that our moral beliefs are highly evolutionary adaptive, will have been shown to be false.

Chapter Three focuses on Parfit's response to evolutionary arguments like Street's. He argues, among other things, that there are two relevant sets of beliefs, specifically, non-normative beliefs about the world and also normative beliefs about reasons. He holds that normative reasons would have been superfluous in terms of reproductive success since non-normative beliefs about the world can be, and are, motivating by themselves. Accepting this, he holds that there is no reason to think that evolutionary forces are responsible for our normative beliefs about reasons. I argue against Parfit's response, holding, among other things, that his argument differentiates normative and non-normative beliefs in an unjustifiable manner.

Chapter Four focuses on Shafer-Landau's defense of moral realism from evolutionary objections. He argues, among other things, that evolutionary objections are dependent upon a kind of unjustifiable empiricism and further, that if successful, they would prove too much, undermining the very philosophical faculties on which they are reliant. I argue that Shafer-Landau's arguments fail to save moral realism. I do this in part by arguing that he misunderstands Street's empiricism requirement, and further, that he misunderstands what is epistemically required of those who adopt evolutionary debunking arguments.

Chapter Five concludes by suggesting that although the responses given by Shafer-Landau and Parfit should lower our credence in The Darwinian Dilemma, the dilemma still poses a significant problem not just for moral realism, but for various meta-ethical theories. Further, I give reason to think that even if Shafer-Landau and Parfit's responses show that we can have some moral knowledge if moral realism is

true, evolutionary considerations should still lower our credence in *most* moral beliefs.

Finally, I suggest what might follow from this lower level of credence in our moral

beliefs.

Chapter Two: Street's Evolutionary Objection

2: The Darwinian Dilemma

In her article, "A Darwinian Dilemma For Realist Theories of Value", Sharon Street

challenges the view that realist theories of value are compatible with natural science.

More specifically, she argues that evolutionary forces have had a great impact on

human evaluative attitudes and that realism can give no satisfactory account of the

relation between these evolutionary forces and the independent evaluative truths that

realism requires. This is because if realism denies that there is any relation between

these evolutionary forces and any independent evaluative truths, any justification for

moral knowledge is undermined. This route undermines moral knowledge because if

there is no relation, then we have no strong reason to think that our evaluative

judgments are tracking any independent truths. If they were to be aligned with the

independent moral truths, this would be due to sheer luck. However, if realism posits a

relation, the only possible account would be a tracking account. A tracking account,

roughly, is an account which holds that some faculty or set of beliefs, say, our moral

beliefs, correspond to some other thing, say, independent moral facts, in a way such

that if the moral facts were different, then our moral beliefs would be different as well.

But, such an account is unacceptable on scientific grounds because it is not as clear,

parsimonious, or strong with regards to explanatory power as other scientific theories.

These two untenable options form what Street refers to as The Darwinian Dilemma,

which in turn suggests that all evaluative judgments are lacking sufficient justification to

be knowledge if moral realism is true. In this chapter, I first provide a more detailed

summary of her argument; I then provide a formalized account so as to make clear

which parts of Street's argument are being challenged by various objections.

2.1: The Scope of The Darwinian Dilemma

Street's evolutionary debunking argument takes aim at realist theories of value. This set

of theories share a commitment to the claim that there are at least some evaluative

truths or facts that hold independently of all of our evaluative attitudes. Street holds

that evaluative truths or facts are:

> …facts or truths of the form that *X* is a normative reason to Y, that one should or
> ought to *X*, and that *X* is good, valuable, or worthwhile, that *X* is morally right or
> wrong, and so on. *Evaluative attitudes*… include states such as desires, attitudes
> of approval and disapproval, unreflective evaluative tendencies such as the
> tendency to experience *X* as counting in favour of or demanding *Y*, and
> consciously or unconsciously held evaluative judgements, such as judgements
> about what is a reason for what, about what one should or ought to do, about
> what is good, valuable, or worthwhile, about what is morally right or wrong, and
> so on. (110)

In order to best understand what exactly Street is taking aim at, some clarifications are

necessary. Claiming that the truth of some evaluative claim *y* holds independently of

one's making *that particular* evaluative judgement is not sufficient to make one a realist

about value. This is because certain anti-realists, say, some kinds of constructivists,

could also hold that the truth of *y* is not dependent upon one holding *y*, but rather, it is

dependent upon *y* being among the evaluative judgements one would make in reflective

equilibrium.

What separates value realists from value anti-realists is that the former hold that

there are some evaluative truths which are true regardless of *all* of the evaluative

judgements we make, or that we might make upon reflection. So, although the claim

that "Hitler was morally bad," is dependent, in part, upon *Hitler's* evaluative judgements

towards things such as genocide and dictatorial power, the claim is not at all dependent

upon *our* evaluative judgements relating to Hitler being morally bad (or any other

evaluative judgements other than Hitler's evaluative judgments about genocide and the

like). It is this independence from evaluative attitudes that defines value realism.

This independence from evaluative attitudes is what Shafer-Landau refers to

elsewhere as 'stance-independence' (Moral Realism: A Defence, 15). More specifically,

Shafer-Landau uses stance-independence[1] in describing the essence of moral realism,

the view which holds that:

> …(i) sincere moral judgements express beliefs, rather than conative attitudes;
> (ii) some of these beliefs are true; and
> (iii) such beliefs, when true, are not true by virtue of being the object of, or being implied by, the attitudes of (even idealized) agents. ("Evolutionary Debunking", 1)

Although this definition is not unanimously accepted, it does seem to be aligned with

the most basic idea behind moral realism, namely, "the idea that there is a moral reality

that people are trying to represent when they issue judgements about what is right and

wrong" ("Evolutionary Debunking", 13). We can therefore understand Street to be

aiming at moral realism (among other things) when making her evolutionary debunking

argument. This being the case, I will hereafter speak of Street's challenge to moral

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[1] Shafer-Landau defines stance-independence as the view that "there are moral truths that obtain independently of any preferred perspective, in the sense that the moral standards that fix the moral facts are not made true by virtue of their ratification from within any given actual or hypothetical perspective" (Moral Realism: A Defence, 15).

realism instead of value realism, since the former is both included in the latter and all that I am interested in for the purpose of this thesis.[2]

One of the main ways in which various kinds of moral realism diverge is especially important in understanding the scope of Street's arguments. This crucial divergence is between moral naturalism and non-naturalism. These accounts differ in how they construe the nature of or moral facts or truths. Roughly, moral naturalism holds that there are moral facts or properties and further, these facts or properties are identical to, or constituted by, natural facts or properties. Further, moral naturalism holds that moral facts or truths are the kinds of things that can play a role in causal explanations. Moral non-naturalism, however, holds that there are moral or evaluative facts or truths and these are not identical with or reducible to any kind of natural fact. Further, they are not the kinds of things that play a role in causal explanation (Street, 112).

Street holds that non-naturalist versions of moral realism are straightforwardly subject to her Darwinian Dilemma; it is less clear whether naturalist versions of moral realism are equally vulnerable. She holds that naturalist versions of moral realism which she understands to be genuinely realist will be subject to the Darwinian Dilemma but those versions which she holds are not genuinely realist will not be subject to the dilemma. A naturalist version of moral realism is genuinely realist, according to Street, if

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[2] One might think that moral realism and value realism are obviously interchangeable. However, this seems too quick. Moral realism has some obvious limits to its scope. It almost certainly does not concern itself with the truth of the claim: "Chocolate ice-cream is better than vanilla." However, value realism might, in addition to being concerned with moral realism, be concerned with the truth of any number of claims ranging from "Chocolate ice-cream is better than vanilla," to "Mark is a better barber than John."

it takes it "that *which* natural facts evaluative facts are identical with is independent of our evaluative attitudes" (137). Naturalist versions of moral realism which do not meet this requirement are taken by Street to not be genuinely realist meta-ethical theories. More will be said about how 'genuinely' naturalistic accounts of moral realism are affected by The Darwinian Dilemma towards the end of this chapter.

2.1.2: An Informal Account of The Darwinian Dilemma

Evolutionary debunking arguments (hereafter EDAs) typically challenge our justification for moral knowledge (at least, moral knowledge on a realist account) by suggesting that our moral faculties, beliefs, or intuitions can be best explained as the product of evolutionary forces. Further, such arguments hold that these forces push us towards intuitions or beliefs which are evolutionarily advantageous or adaptive but not necessarily those that are true, since these beliefs would be just as advantageous if they were false as if they were true. Given the nearly limitless number of psychologically possible moral beliefs or intuitions, it would therefore be a massive coincidence if our moral beliefs or intuitions were not only advantageous, but also true.[3] Since we have no reason to think our moral beliefs or intuitions are true (other than that they *could* be true thanks to a massive coincidence), we are not justified in thinking they are true. Assuming that moral beliefs require justification if they are to count as an instance of

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[3] We should think that there are a nearly limitless number of psychologically possible moral beliefs because we could hold that pretty much any action, say, hopping on one leg, hopping on one leg while humming, etc., is morally good, bad, praiseworthy, etc. Given the nearly limitless number of possible actions, the number of psychologically possible moral beliefs is likely incredibly large.

knowledge, EDA's therefore hold that we are left with the conclusion that we are incapable of having any moral knowledge if moral realism is true.

Street's argument adheres to this general archetype. Street holds that although our conscious, evaluative attitudes, such as: "Stealing my neighbour's lawnmower while he is away at a lawnmower-repair conference is wrong," are not direct products of evolution or evolutionary forces, our more basic evaluative tendencies, which surely predate such conscious evaluative attitudes about lawnmowers and the like, have been at least significantly influenced by Darwinian selective pressures. What exactly constitutes our more basic evaluative tendencies obviously requires elucidation. In discussing such basic evaluative tendencies, Street says, "[they] may be understood very roughly as an unreflective, non-linguistic, motivational tendency to experience something as 'called for' or 'demanded' in itself, or to experience one thing as 'calling for' or 'counting in favor of' something else" (119). Basic evaluative tendencies, on Street's account, therefore seem to be something like the most basic desires or mental states that initially pull us towards performing (or not performing) some action. Street suggests that such basic evaluative tendencies are what is felt by a bird who experiences some kind of motivational pull towards feeding its children or by a chimpanzee who experiences some threat to its offspring as 'demanding' some protective response.

These basic evaluative tendencies can explained as proto versions of our conscious, linguistically formulated evaluative judgments. The latter include the propositions which we often take to be moral principles such as "It is wrong to kill." Basic evaluative tendencies are proto forms of evaluative judgments; they represent the

propensity or impulse towards certain actions which seem called-for in some sense. Basic evaluative tendencies would include one's immediate feeling of wanting to intervene when one walks in to a room where another adult is physically attacking a child or one's immediate feeling of disgust and badness when one learns about a case of incest involving one's close friends.

Although the notion of basic evaluative tendencies is still somewhat murky, it should be clear enough to understand the basic form of Street's argument. In essence, Street's Darwinian Dilemma holds that our most basic evaluative tendencies have been greatly influenced by evolutionary forces (various selective pressures). Because these basic evaluative tendencies have had, by hypothesis, a large impact on our conscious evaluative judgements, our conscious evaluative judgements (which are identical to, or simply include our moral judgements) have been, to a great extent, indirectly shaped by evolutionary forces. Further, these evolutionary forces either have some relation to the independent truths that realism posits or they do not. If one holds that there is no relation between the selective pressures and the independent truth that realism posits, then our moral beliefs seem clearly unjustified on a realist account since if they happened to be true, this would be a matter of sheer luck. Further, if one holds that there is some relation between the selective pressures and the independent truth that realism posits, then seemingly the best argument for this is that selective pressures tracked these truths. However, insofar as this explanation is a scientific one, it is subject to the usual standards of scientific evaluation. So it must better explain why humans make certain evaluative judgments than all other extant scientific hypotheses. However,

Street holds that an alternative explanation for why we make the normative judgements we do which refers simply to how adaptive these judgements are and not to their relation to independent truths fares better than the tracking account. Therefore, regardless of the realist's position on the relation between evolutionary forces and the independent truths realism posits, the realist is not justified in holding that our normative judgements track the kind of independent truths posited by realism.

2.1.3: Formalizing the Argument

Formalized, Street's argument is understood as follows:

P1: Our most basic evaluative tendencies have most likely been greatly influenced by evolutionary forces.
P2: Our conscious evaluative judgements are greatly influenced by our most basic evaluative tendencies.
P3: If our conscious evaluative judgements are greatly influenced by our most basic evaluative tendencies and our most basic evaluative tendencies have been greatly influenced by evolutionary forces, then our conscious evaluative judgements have most likely been greatly influenced by evolutionary forces.
P4: Our conscious evaluative judgements have most likely been greatly influenced by evolutionary forces.
P5: The moral realist can either hold that the evolutionary forces which have most likely greatly influenced our conscious evaluative judgements have some relation to the independent truths posited by moral realism or they have no relation to these truths (and not both).
P6: If the moral realist holds that the evolutionary forces that have most likely greatly influenced our conscious evaluative judgements have no relation to the independent truths posited by moral realism, then it would be a massive coincidence if these conscious evaluative judgements *were* true and the realist therefore has inadequate justification for holding them to be true.
P7: If the moral realist holds that the evolutionary forces that have most likely greatly influenced our conscious evaluative judgements have some relation to the independent truths posited by moral realism, the only explanation for this relationship one can give is that of a tracking relationship. However, such a relationship is a scientific explanation and because there is a better scientific explanation for our evaluative judgements which posits no relation to the independent truths posited by moral realism, one is not justified in holding that there is some relationship between our conscious evaluative judgements and the independent truths posited by moral realism. This being the case,

the moral realist has inadequate justification for holding any conscious evaluative judgements to be true.[4]

P8: If P6 & P7, then regardless of whether the moral realist affirms or denies a relation between the evolutionary forces that have most likely greatly shaped our conscious evaluative judgments and the independent truths posited by moral realism, she has inadequate justification for holding any conscious evaluative judgment to be true.

C1: Therefore, regardless of whether the moral realist affirms or denies a relation between the evolutionary forces that have most likely greatly shaped our conscious evaluative judgments and the independent truths posited by moral realism, she has inadequate justification for holding any conscious evaluative judgement to be true.

2.2: Defending P1

P1 has already been briefly explained, but it likely requires further motivation to be

made plausible. Premise P1 says that:

> Our most basic evaluative tendencies have most likely been greatly influenced by evolutionary forces.

As a reminder, our most basic evaluative tendencies are roughly understood as

"unreflective, non-linguistic, motivational [tendencies] to experience something as

'called for' or 'demanded' in itself, or to experience one thing as 'calling for' or 'counting

in favor of' something else" (Street, 119). These most basic evaluative tendencies are in

some sense a 'proto' version of our full-fledged conscious evaluative judgements. These

full-fledged, conscious evaluative judgements require not only our most basic evaluative

judgements, but also "a reflective, linguistically-infused capacity to judge that one thing

counts in favour of another, and to step back from such judgements and call them into

question" (Street, 118).

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[4] Here I understand true as aligned with the independent truths posited by moral realism and conscious evaluative judgment as a moral proposition one believes.

When considering the plausibility of P1, it will be important to note the (potentially) phenomenal costs or benefits, measured in terms of reproductive success, of having some basic evaluative tendencies. Consider the extraordinary cost in terms of reproductive success for one of our pre-hominid ancestors to have a basic evaluative tendency which holds that another organism being one's own offspring constitutes a reason to harm that organism. Such a basic evaluative tendency would almost certainly result in organisms who possess it quickly dying out and taking the detrimental evaluative tendency with them. Or, conversely, consider the extraordinary benefit in terms of reproductive success to an organism that considers another organism being its offspring as a reason to protect that organism from potential threats. Accepting this, different basic evaluative tendencies can greatly affect an organism's chance of survival and reproduction, either negatively or positively. Street argues that because of this, "…it is only reasonable to expect there to have been, over the course of our evolutionary history, relentless selective pressure on the content of our evaluative judgments" (114). Further, she says

> In particular, we can expect there to have been overwhelming pressure in the direction of making those evaluative judgements which tended to promote reproductive success (such as the judgment that one's life is valuable), and against making those evaluative judgments which tended to decrease reproductive success (such as the judgment that one should attack one's offspring). (114-115)

When looking at the evaluative judgements typically made by human beings today, these judgments support this hypothesis. Although there are a nearly unlimited number of basic evaluative judgements we could make, we notice a striking pattern, across both time and culture, with regards to what basic evaluative judgements humans

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do tend to make. Street suggests the following list of basic evaluative judgements as an

example of those that are both common and highly adaptive:

(1) The fact that something would promote one's survival is a reason in favor of it.
(2) The fact that something would promote the interests of a family member is a reason to do it.
(3) We have greater obligations to help our own children than we do to help complete strangers.
(4) The fact that someone has treated one well is a reason to treat that person well in return.
(5) The fact that someone is altruistic is a reason to admire, praise, and reward him or her.
(6) The fact that someone has done one deliberate harm is a reason to shun that person or seek his or her punishment. (115)

When asking what could explain the prevalence or widespread acceptance of such

beliefs, Street suggests that evolutionary biology can provide the best answer.

Specifically, evolutionary biology explains that we hold these beliefs because they

tended to promote survival and reproduction better than alternative judgements; it can

do this with reference to things such as kin selection or the biological theory of

reciprocal altruism.

In contrast to (1) – (6), we can consider the following possible basic evaluative

judgments:

(1') The fact that something would promote one's survival is a reason against it.
(2') The fact that something would promote the interests of a family member is a reason not to do it.
(3') We have greater obligations to help complete strangers than we do to help our own children.
(4') The fact that someone has treated one well is a reason to do that individual harm in return.
(5') The fact that someone is altruistic is a reason to dislike, condemn, and punish him or her.

(6') The fact that someone has done one deliberate harm is a reason to seek out that person's company and reward him or her. (Street, 116)

Basic evaluative judgements such as (1') – (6') would, ceteris paribus, decrease the survival and reproductive success of those who made them. As such, if these judgements were made with any frequency, this would constitute good reason to think that Darwinian selective pressures have not influenced our basic evaluative judgements. However, judgements like those listed in (1') – (6') are seldom made, but, judgements like those listed in (1) – (6) are *very often* made. This gives good reason to think that Darwinian selective pressures have had great influence on our basic evaluative tendencies.

Street gives an additional argument in favour of thinking that our basic evaluative judgements have been greatly influenced by evolutionary forces such as natural selection. Specifically, she argues that the continuity between our commonly held evaluative judgements and the more basic evaluative judgements or tendencies made by non-human animals, especially those closely related to us supports the hypothesis that our evaluative judgements have been greatly influenced by evolutionary forces. Street asserts that it seems reasonable to conceive of certain animals, say, chimpanzees, as "in some primitive, non-linguistic sort of fashion, [experiencing] certain things in the world as *calling for* or *counting in favour of* certain reactions on their part" (117). For instance, chimpanzees almost certainly view many actions that would promote their chance of survival or reproduction as in some sense 'called for'. Further, as Street notes:

> …at some basic motivational level, chimpanzees seem to experience the fact that another chimpanzee has helped them, whether by sharing food, grooming them, or supporting their position within the group hierarchy, as 'counting in favour of' assisting that other individual in similar ways. (117)

This continuity between non-human animals' basic evaluative judgements or tendencies and both our most basic evaluative judgements and our conscious, full-fledged evaluative judgements seems best explained by the same evolutionary forces acting on humans and non-human animals. Other explanations might refer to non-human animals' ability to grasp independent moral truths, but this is likely implausible. Or, they might posit that non-human animals' basic evaluative judgements have been greatly influenced by evolutionary forces but humans' highly similar evaluative judgements have not been influenced by evolutionary forces in the same way. However, this is both unnecessarily and unjustifiably complicated.

These arguments are not taken to prove beyond a doubt that evolutionary forces are entirely responsible for humans having the basic evaluative judgements that they tend to have. Nor are they taken to prove, beyond any doubt, that evolutionary forces have even had a great influence on our basic evaluative judgements, even if other forces have also had an impact. Rather, these arguments are taken to show that that evolutionary forces have *most likely* had a great impact on our most basic evaluative judgements. Empirical evidence may verify or refute this hypothesis at a later time. However, these arguments do seem sufficient to justify the belief that our most basic evaluative judgements have most likely been greatly influenced by evolutionary forces. Street argues that this *likelihood* of great influence is enough to undermine the justification required for moral knowledge (on a realist account).

2.3: Defending P2

P2 holds that:

> Our conscious evaluative judgements are greatly influenced by our most basic evaluative tendencies.

This is not to say that our conscious evaluative judgements are solely determined by our most basic evaluative judgements. Several other factors, ranging from rational reflection to cultural influences, affect which conscious evaluative judgements we eventually adopt. As Street notes, it is not the case that "…we automatically or inevitably accept the full-fledged evaluative judgments that line up in content with our basic evaluative tendencies" (Street, 12). The thought behind P2 is simply that our most basic evaluative tendencies have a great influence on our conscious evaluative tendencies, even if the latter are not wholly determined by the former. That is to say, "had the general content of our basic evaluative tendencies been very different, then the general content of our full-fledged evaluative judgments would also have been very different, and in loosely corresponding ways" (Street, 120).

It should be noted that our most basic evaluative judgements or tendencies may have a very strong or a very weak influence, or somewhere in between, on our conscious evaluative judgements. If our most basic evaluative judgements have only a weak influence on our conscious beliefs, then the Darwinian Dilemma would be in trouble. However, we should think that the influence has likely been quite large. This is because the other factors which influence our conscious evaluative judgements, such as rational reflection or cultural influences, seemingly cannot work in a way that is independent of our most basic evaluative judgments. That is to say, even if we were to

rationally reason about which conscious evaluative judgements we should adopt, it is

unclear what kind of reasoning we could do that would not rely (at least heavily) on our

most basic evaluative judgements. Rational reflection will most likely try to make one's

set of conscious evaluative judgements more (or perhaps maximally) coherent, or in

some other sense more epistemically virtuous. However, this will not rid the set of

conscious evaluative judgements of influence from our most basic evaluative

judgements. So, it at least initially seems as if our most basic evaluative judgements

have a great impact on our conscious, full-fledged evaluative judgements.[5] Of course,

this is an empirical matter which future evidence may settle. However, in the meantime,

the hypothesis that our most basic evaluative judgements have a great influence on our

conscious evaluative judgements has strong initial plausibility.

2.4: Defending P6

P6 and P7 form the two horns of the Darwinian Dilemma. As P5 noted, one can either

hold that there is no relation between evolutionary forces and the independent truths

posited by realism (P6) or one can hold that there is some relation (P7). P6 forms the

first horn of this dilemma; it holds:

> P6: If one holds that the evolutionary forces that have most likely greatly
> influenced our conscious evaluative judgements have no relation to the
> independent truths posited by moral realism, then it would be a massive
> coincidence if these conscious evaluative judgements *were* true and one
> therefore has inadequate justification for holding them to be true.

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[5] Here I follow after Street by using 'full-fledged evaluative judgments' as referring to those judgments which are not simply the unreflective experience of having one thing demand another, but rather, when one has a reflective, linguistically infused judgment which holds that one thing counts in favour of another, and further, one is able to step back from that judgment and call it into question.

P6 is not a particularly attractive option for the realist who is trying to defend realism

from evolutionary debunking arguments. The problem with the option, as Street notes:

> …is that if one takes it, then the forces of natural selection must be viewed as a purely distorting influence on our evaluative judgments, having pushed us in evaluative directions that have nothing whatsoever to do with the evaluative truth. On this view, allowing our evaluative judgments to be shaped by evolutionary influences is analogous to setting out for Bermuda and letting the course of your boat be determined by the winds and tides… (121)

Of course, there is a chance that the evolutionary forces will happen to push our most

basic evaluative judgements towards the truth, just as there is a chance that the winds

and the tides will push your boat towards the shores of Bermuda. However, the

probability of this happening is incredibly low given the number of logically possible

evaluative judgements and independent truths.[6] Even if the relevant evolutionary forces

did, as a matter of sheer luck, happen to bestow us with evaluative judgments that

corresponded with the independent truths posited by realism, it would almost certainly be the

case that we would still be without any moral *knowledge* since our justification would be

undermined by the unreliability of our belief forming mechanism (evolutionary forces forming

evaluative judgements).

One might object that even if evolutionary forces have had a purely distorting

influence on our evaluative judgements, this distorting influence can be overcome with

rational reflection. This view is appealing; after all, we are not unreflective beings who

adopt a new conscious evaluative judgement for every one of our most basic evaluative

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[6] One may object that we simply would not evolve to have unreliable cognitive mechanisms. However, there is no strong reason to think this if we understand *unreliable* as something like not reliably tracking the truth. Imagine that the moral truth is that death is the only thing that is intrinsically good, and it is better the earlier in one's life it occurs. Clearly having an unreliably moral faculty (which is a cognitive faculty) would be advantageous here insofar as it would keep us from pursuing death so readily.

judgements. However, as I previously noted, it is likely the case that rational reflection

will not be able to rid one's set of evaluative judgements of the influence from

evolutionary forces since all that rational reflection can do is make a set of evaluative

judgements more coherent or otherwise epistemically virtuous. As Street notes, "in

rational reflection, one does not stand completely apart from one's starting fund of

evaluative judgments: rather, one *uses* them, reasons in terms of them, holds them up

for examination in light of others" (124). One might object to this view, but, it seems as

if the burden is on such an objector to explain how else rational reflection can shape our

evaluative judgements if not by reference to other evaluative judgements.

2.5: Defending P7

Affirming a relation between the evolutionary forces which have shaped our evaluative

judgements and the independent truths posited by realism is the more attractive route

for the moral realist to take. This is the route taken by P7. It states:

> P7: If one holds that the evolutionary forces that have most likely greatly
> influenced our conscious evaluative judgements have some relation to the
> independent truths posited by moral realism, the only explanation for this
> relationship one can give is that of a tracking relationship. However, such a
> relationship is a scientific explanation and because there is a better scientific
> explanation for our evaluative judgements which posits no relation to the
> independent truths posited by moral realism, one is not justified in holding that
> there is some relationship between our conscious evaluative judgements and the
> independent truths posited by moral realism. This being the case, one has
> inadequate justification for holding any conscious evaluative judgements to be
> true.

P7 obviously requires some unpacking, as well as further support.

P7 is attractive to many of us seemingly because we think that a great deal of

our evaluative judgements are true while also thinking that the content of many of

these evaluative judgements have been greatly influenced by evolutionary forces. The overlap between independent evaluative truths posited by moral realism and our evaluative judgements requires explanation, and, further, this explanation should not be a simple coincidence.[7] That is to say, the realist must explain what kind of relation there is between our evaluative judgements and the independent truths posited by realism.

Street suggests that there is one realist account of the relation that is attractive, prima facie. This account holds that evolutionary pressures tracked the independent truths posited by realism. That is to say, it is a tracking relation. This proposal (the *tracking account*) seems plausible if for no other reason than it seems advantageous to come to believe a truth over a falsehood, regardless of the *kind* of truth or falsehood in question. As Street notes, the tracking account therefore puts itself forward as a scientific explanation:

> It offers a specific hypothesis as to how the course of natural selection proceeded and what explains the widespread presence of some evaluative judgments rather that others in the human population. In particular, it says that the presence of these judgments is explained by the fact that these judgements are true, and that the capacity to discern such truths proved advantageous for the purposes of survival and reproduction. (127)

However, since the tracking account purports to be a scientific explanation, it is subject to the usual standards of scientific evaluation. That is to say, it is in competition with all other relevant hypothesis with regards to parsimony, clarity, and the quality of response it gives to the relevant explanandum**.**

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[7] This is, at least partially, because, as mentioned above, the likelihood of such a coincidence would be so small as to deprive one of the justification required for moral knowledge.

The adaptive link account, as proposed by Street, is one such alternative hypothesis which is meant to explain why humans make the evaluative judgments they do, rather than alternative judgments. The adaptive link account holds that:

> …tendencies to make certain kinds of evaluative judgments rather than others contributed to our ancestors' reproductive success not because they constituted perceptions of independent evaluative truths, but rather because they forged adaptive links between our ancestors' circumstances and their responses to those circumstances, getting them to act, feel, and believe in ways that turned out to be reproductively advantageous. (127)

It should not seem particularly odd that natural selection causes organisms to have some mechanism, such as basic evaluative judgments, which serve to link that organism's circumstance or relevant stimuli, such as perceiving a threat to its offspring, with a response or behaviour that tends to promote survival, such as posturing oneself to dissuade other organisms from aggressive behaviour. Such stimuli-response relationships seem to be common. A more straightforward or intuitive example is the "automatic reflex response that causes one's hand to withdraw from a hot surface…" (Street, 127). All of these pairings of circumstances with a certain response are ones that would tend to promote the reproductive success of organisms who possessed them. Further, we do not have reason to think of the circumstance-response pairing involving basic evaluative judgments as being any odder than those involving things like an automatic reflex response.

The adaptive link account is only one of many plausible alternatives to the tracking account, however, it is both simple and highly plausible; for this reason, I will be treating it as the strongest challenger to the tracking account. To elucidate the

differences between the adaptive link account and the tracking account, consider the

following judgments as suggested by Street:

1) The judgment that something would promote one's survival is a reason to do it.
2) The judgment that the fact that someone is kin is a reason to accord him/her special treatment.
3) The judgment that the fact that someone has harmed one is a reason to shun that person or retaliate against him/her. (Street, 128)

Both the tracking account and the adaptive link account explain the high prevalence of

these judgments by positing that making these judgments somehow contributed to our

ancestors' reproductive success. However, the tracking account holds that these

judgments contributed to our ancestor's reproductive success because these judgments

were true and it was advantageous to understand these evaluative truths whereas the

adaptive link account holds that these judgments contributed to our ancestor's

reproductive success simply because "…they got our ancestors to respond to their

circumstances with behaviour that itself promoted reproductive success in fairly obvious

ways…" (Street 129). So, with regards to 1 – 3, the adaptive link account simply posits

that "…as a general matter, it clearly tends to promote reproductive success to do what

would promote one's survival, or to accord one's kin special treatment or to shun those

who would harm one" (Street, 129).

This cursory explanation of both the adaptive link account and the tracking

account should be sufficient to compare them using some of the typical measures of

scientific adequacy, specifically, parsimony, clarity, and the quality of response it gives

to the relevant explanandum (in this case, why humans tend to make the evaluative

judgments they do instead of others). Street argues that the adaptive link account is superior to the tracking account according to all three respects.

Street argues that determining which account is more parsimonious is quite straightforward. The tracking account has to posit something quite significant that the adaptive link account does not, namely, independent evaluative truths. The tracking account requires these independent truths to explain why certain evaluative judgments are both advantageous and commonly adopted whereas the adaptive link account does not need to make reference to any independent evaluative truths. In this straightforward sense, the adaptive link account is clearly more parsimonious. Further, there is no reason to think that the tracking account is more parsimonious than the adaptive link account with regards to other features.

Determining which account fares better with regards to clarity is slightly more difficult than determining which account is more parsimonious, however, we still have strong reason to think that the adaptive link account is much clearer. The tracking account posits that making a certain evaluative judgment was more advantageous than making some other evaluative judgment because the former judgment was true. However, it is entirely unclear why adopting an evaluative truth that corresponds with an independent evaluative truth (as posited by realism) would be advantageous to an organism. Further, the answer cannot simply be "because they are true," since, upon examination, it is clear that believing a truth is not necessarily more advantageous than believing a falsehood. Although it is obviously advantageous to grasp certain truths, say, that there is a large cliff three feet in front of one's current position, there are other

truths that simply do not promote one's reproductive success at all, say, knowing how many blades of grass there are in the world. Further, there are instances in which grasping the truth is actually *disadvantageous* in terms of reproductive success whereas grasping a falsehood (at least, certain falsehoods) would be maximally advantageous in terms of reproductive success. To illustrate this point, imagine the following two situations. Young Jill has an infection of the everything, a rare kind of infection that affects every part of the body. Jill will most likely die. However, if she believes that she will likely live, her chances of dying will only be 60% whereas if she believes she will likely die, her chances of dying will be 95%. In this situation, it is clearly most advantageous for Jill to believe that she will likely live, even though this is a falsehood. Or, we can imagine an even more clearly relevant example. Suppose we concede that there are independent evaluative truths, as realism posits. Further, suppose it is true that one ought to value her own death, and the death of her kin. Surely coming to grasp this evaluative truth would not only fail to be advantageous in terms of reproductive success, but rather, it would be hugely disadvantageous or maladaptive. Further, most alternatives to this evaluative judgement (such as, 'it is only sometimes true that one ought to value her own death and the death of her kin'), although false, would be more advantageous to hold (with it being clear that something like 'value the continued existence of oneself and one's family' being maximally advantageous in terms of reproductive success, although it would also be false).

Accepting the previous arguments, it should be clear that grasping a truth is not necessarily more advantageous than grasping a falsehood. However, one might argue

that it is *generally* more advantageous, in terms of reproductive success, to grasp a truth than a falsehood. Although this broad claim has initial plausibility, given the countless number of truths which seemingly provide no advantage (say, how any blades of grass there are on my lawn, my neighbour's lawn, my neighbour's neighbour's lawn, and so forth), even this incredibly broad claim seems to unjustified. We are therefor left still asking how exactly it is that grasping an evaluative truth rather than a falsehood is, ceteris paribus, advantageous with regard to reproductive success. Further, this gives strong reason to think that the adaptive link account fares better than the tracking account with regards to clarity since we are still unsure exactly how an evaluative judgment being true in some independent sense makes it more advantageous for one to grasp than a similar falsehood.

The final measure of scientific adequacy which will be discussed here is the quality of response the relevant theory or hypothesis gives to explain the relevant explanandum. That is to say, which account is better "at actually illuminating the phenomenon that is to be explained, namely why there are widespread tendencies among human beings to make some evaluative judgments rather than others" (Street, 132). We are essentially asking which account better explains why we make judgments similar to (and including) 1 – 3 and not judgments similar to (and including) (1') – (6'). Street holds that the adaptive link account provides a clear and complete answer to such questions. It can, and does, simply assert "…that ancestors who made evaluative judgments of these kinds, and who as a result tended to respond to their circumstances in the ways demanded by these judgments, did better in terms of reproductive success than their counter-parts" (Street, 132). The tracking account's answer to such questions is not nearly as clear or complete however. Seemingly, the tracking account answers

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that we have these basic evaluative judgments simply because they are true. We value

survival because it is *true* that one should value survival, or that survival is good. We

think that one should protect one's kin because it is *true* that one should protect one's

offspring. However, these responses fail to adequately answer three questions related

to the original question of why we typically make the evaluative judgments that we do.

Specifically, the following three questions go unanswered:

A) Why is there such a strong overlap between evaluative judgments that are true
   and those that are adaptive?
B) Why is there a tendency to make certain evaluative judgments (say, that non-
   group-members deserve less moral consideration than group-members) which
   we may later decide upon reflection are not true?
C) Why do we not have any of the nearly limitless number of useless or actually
   actively maladaptive evaluative judgments that are logically possible alternatives
   to evaluative judgments we do make?

There is seemingly no plausible answer that the tracking account can give to A without

running into the parsimony or clarity problems previously discussed. Although the

adaptive link account can explain B by referring to how advantageous certain beliefs

have been (say, favouring in-group members), the tracking account seems forced to say

that we have these beliefs, such that in-group members are morally more important,

because they are true. This is obviously problematic though, given that we now lean

more towards impartial benevolence or at least not favouring in-group members to a

much greater extent than non-in-group members. C might be the most troublesome for

the tracking account. Although the adaptive link account can simply say that we do not

typically make useless or maladaptive evaluative judgments because these judgments

would not have been favoured by natural selection, the tracking account must simply

assert that these evaluative judgments are false and that is why we tend not to make

them. This is unconvincing given there is no argument which can support this other than one which relies on the very basic evaluative tendencies which are being called into question.

We are left to conclude that the adaptive link account is superior to the tracking account as judged by the chosen, and quite typical, measures of scientific adequacy. The adaptive link account has the most explanatory power while also being clearer and more parsimonious. The adaptive link account can make sense of the (seeming) mishmash of evaluative judgments that we tend to believe by showing that "they forge links between circumstance and response that would have been likely to promote reproductive success in the environments of our ancestors" (Street, 134). The tracking account, however, does not have similar explanatory power. Rather, in the end, it simply reiterates that we *do* believe or disbelieve some evaluative judgment; it fails to explain *why* we believe or disbelieve certain judgments in a meaningful or helpful way. This being the case, the tracking account becomes untenable.

One final point must be made to justify P7, specifically, that a tracking account is the only account a realist can give to explain the relation between selective pressures on our evaluative judgments and independent evaluative truths that she posits. A realist might accept that the tracking account is untenable while still holding that some other account could explain the relation between selective pressures on our evaluative judgments and independent evaluative truths (as posited by realism) that is friendly to realism. However, this is not so. The essence of realism is that there are independent truths that hold independently of all of our evaluative attitudes. But, as Street notes,

> …because [realism] views these evaluative truths as ultimately independent of our evaluative attitudes, the only way for realism both to accept that those attitudes have been deeply influenced by evolutionary causes and to avoid seeing these causes as distorting is for it to claim that these causes actually in some way *tracked* the alleged independent truths. There is no other way to go. (135)

Therefore, if one is to abandon the tracking account, one must accept that selective pressures either pushed us away from independent truths or pushed us in ways that had no relation to the truth. Accepting that the tracking account is insufficient, we are again left with the conclusion that there is no relation between our most basic evaluative judgments and the independent truths posited by realism. This, in turn, gives reason to think that one has inadequate justification for holding any conscious evaluative judgements to be true (if moral realism is true, or if one adopts moral realism).

2.6: Naturalist Versions of Value Realism

Non-naturalist versions of value realism have been said to lie straightforwardly within the target of the Darwinian Dilemma. It is slightly less clear how naturalist versions of value realism are affected by The Darwinian Dilemma however. Street defines value naturalism as holding "that evaluative facts are identical with or constituted by (certain) natural facts, and that evaluative facts are the kinds of things that play a role in causal explanations" (112). She further argues that naturalist versions of value realism are subject to The Darwinian Dilemma if they hold "that *which* natural facts evaluative facts are identical with is independent of our evaluative attitudes" (137). That is to say, a naturalist version of value realism is genuinely realist, and subject to The Darwinian Dilemma, if it establishes the relationship between natural facts and evaluative facts totally independent of our evaluative attitudes. Further, Street holds that a naturalist

version of value realism cannot simply define the good as being determined by which evaluative attitudes people currently have and then positing that when different groups refer to different natural properties as good, they are not actually disagreeing because they have different actual goods.

Supposedly naturalist versions of value realism which do not fit Street's account are considered to be not genuinely realist and therefore not subject to The Darwinian Dilemma. However, Street holds that genuinely realist versions of value naturalism are subject to her Darwinian Dilemma because of how they establish the correct natural-normative identities. She takes it that how value naturalists like David Brink and Nicholas Sturgeon establish natural-normative identities, that is, which natural facts evaluative facts are identical with, is typical for most value naturalists. These naturalists hold, roughly, that we establish natural-normative identities by taking our best normative theory and our best theory of the rest of the world. That is, we must take our best normative theory, presumably the one that fares best with regards to parsimony, clarity, and the quality of response it gives to the relevant explanandum, and see what it holds to be good and bad; we can then try to determine which natural properties overlap with our judgments about goodness and badness. However, this is where Street thinks The Darwinian Dilemma kicks in. She says,

> The genuinely realist value naturalist posits that there are independent facts about natural-normative identities. But the value naturalist also holds that in trying to figure out what those identities are, we will have to rely very heavily on our existing evaluative judgments. Yet, as we have seen, those evaluative judgments have been tremendously influenced by Darwinian selective pressures. (140)

It is in using our evaluative judgments that naturalist versions of value realism run into the two horns of The Darwinian Dilemma. They can assert that there is some relation between our evaluative judgments and the independent truths we are trying to uncover, namely, those about natural-normative identities, or they can deny any relation. Whichever horn is chosen, the same problems are faced by the naturalist as the non-naturalist. This leads Street to conclude that any genuinely realist version of value naturalist will be just as susceptible to The Darwinian Dilemma as non-naturalist versions of value realism discussed previously.

2.7: The Oddity of Street's Taxonomy

It must be noted that Street's account of which theories are genuinely realist is something of an aberration. For instance, she holds that Peter Railton's brand of realism is in fact, not genuinely realist. This should strike many as odd. Railton reasonably suggests that his account "…might well be called 'stark, raving moral realism', but for the sake of syntax" (Railton, 165). Street understands his account as holding, roughly, that an individual's non-moral good is identical to what that person would desire to desire under conditions of full information. Although Railton wants to hold that it is objectively true that one's individual non-moral good is identical to what that person would desire to desire under conditions of full information, Street rejects his view as genuinely realist because "On such a view, there is an important sense in which we need only alter our evaluative attitudes in order to change the evaluative facts, for by altering our evaluative attitudes we change which natural facts the evaluative facts are identical with" (Street, 137). So, on Railton's account, if what Michelle would desire to desire under conditions of full

information is her own happiness, then her non-moral good is identical to (in part) her own happiness. However, if Michelle undergoes a significant change in her evaluative attitudes such that she would no longer desire to desire her own happiness under conditions of full information, then her individual non-moral good would no longer be identical (in part) to her own happiness. Street holds that this is an important sense in which one need only alter one's evaluative attitudes in order to change the evaluative facts. Because this is possible on Railton's account, Street denies that it is genuinely realist.

Determining whether we ought to consider Railton's account to be genuinely realist, or, more broadly, whose taxonomy of natural and non-natural realism we ought to adopt, is beyond the scope of this thesis. Because of this, going forward, I will be concerned solely with non-natural versions of moral realism. Although one might be able to give sufficiently convincing reason to consider Railton's account, and accounts like it, to be not genuinely realist, for now I want to simply assume that his account is genuinely realist but also not subject to The Darwinian Dilemma. Because of this, when I refer to moral realism, I hereafter mean non-natural moral realism.

2.8: Going Forward

C1 should now be seen as highly plausible, given the arguments provided for P1 – P7. However, there are strong and initially plausible objections that must be considered. In Chapter 3, I discuss objections raised by Derek Parfit in *On What Matters*. In Chapter 4, I discuss objections raised by Russ Shafer-Landau in *Evolutionary Debunking, Moral Realism and Moral Knowledge*. In Chapter 5, I address further objections not raised by

Parfit or Shafer-Landau, and then suggest a further problem for moral realism posed by

Darwinan considerations.

Chapter Three: Parfit's Response to EDAs

3: Against Normative Skepticism

Derek Parfit, in *On What Matters*, argues against the kind of skepticism towards moral

realism which Street has advanced. Specifically, Parfit defends a view which he labels

rationalism, which holds, among other things that "we can respond non-causally to

intrinsic credibilities and epistemic reasons…" (510). Further, "as well as being able to

respond to reasons, we can justifiably believe that there are such normative reason-

involving epistemic truths" (Parfit, 510). This brand of rationalism is at odds with Street's

Darwinian Dilemma largely because the former posits the existence of stance-

independent truths which allows for this intrinsic credibility and epistemic reasons

whereas the latter denies such independent truths.

Parfit takes evolutionary objections which are meant to undermine the

possibility of moral knowledge (whereby moral knowledge is understood as involving

stance-independent truths) to hold the following:

Naturalist Argument for Normative Skepticism

(1) Our normative epistemic beliefs were often advantageous, by causing us to have true worldly beliefs which helped us to survive and reproduce.
(2) Because these normative beliefs were advantageous, natural selection made us disposed to have them.
(3) These beliefs would have had the same effects whether or not they were true.
Therefore
(4) These beliefs would have been advantageous whether or not they were true.
Therefore
(5) Natural selection would have disposed us to have these beliefs whether or not they were true.
(6) We have no empirical evidence for the truth of these beliefs.
(7) We have no other way of knowing whether these beliefs are true.

Therefore
We cannot justifiably believe that these beliefs are true. (Parfit, 512)

Although I do not think this argument captures the essence of Street's Darwinian Dilemma because it is aimed at all normative beliefs, Parfit's objection to (1) is potentially problematic for Street's view and it therefore must be adequately addressed. I will address this before going on to those of Parfit's objections which are more specifically tailored to The Darwinian Dilemma. These more focused arguments are concerned with our practical reasons and whether our moral beliefs are all actually evolutionary advantageous or not.

(1) is meant to represent the view that normative epistemic beliefs are and were beneficial because they motivated us to hold those beliefs which were true. So, if some early humans believed it to be likely that:

(C) the next tiger that they meet would be carnivorous, (Parfit, 514)

Then it would have been beneficial to also believe that

(C)'s likelihood of being true gave them a reason to believe that (C) was true (Parfit, 514).

This is because the normative belief would have motivated one to actually adopt (C).

So, (1) is in essence arguing that normative epistemic beliefs, that is, epistemic beliefs about what we have reason to do or believe, are beneficial because they cause us to adopt non-normative alethic epistemic beliefs, which are, roughly, beliefs about

something's likelihood of being true.[8] Parfit objects to (1) however, arguing that

normative beliefs would not have been beneficial in terms of reproductive success. This

is because he thinks that the relevant non-normative alethic epistemic beliefs would

have been sufficient to make our early ancestors act in the various advantageous ways.

He says,

> Such normative beliefs would have seldom been advantageous. In most cases, it
> is enough to have the alethic belief that some worldly belief is likely to be true. If
> we believe that some tiger is likely to be carnivorous, most of us would fear this
> tiger. Some rash people may have no such fear. Buy few such people would be
> helped by believing that (C)'s likelihood of being true gave them a reason to
> believe (C). (Parfit, 514)

Normative epistemic beliefs are therefore, according to Parfit, largely superfluous from

an evolutionary standpoint. In another example, Parfit asks us to consider cases in which

we believe that:

(D) certain facts imply that some belief must be true.

He holds that in such cases, we could also believe:

(E) these facts give us a decisive reason to have this belief,

However, he holds that these kinds of normative beliefs are even less likely to have

been advantageous, saying "When we believe that some belief *must* be true, we nearly

always believe that this belief *is* true" (Parfit, 514)

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[8] On Parfit's account, normative epistemic beliefs are beliefs about what we have reason to believe; that is, normative epistemic beliefs are reason implying. Because of this, Parfit holds that the belief that some argument *x* is valid is not a normative belief since all we mean by validity is that if the argument's premises are true, then its conclusion is also true, and this claim is not reason implying. However, the belief that if some argument is valid and has true premises, then we have decisive reason to accept that argument's conclusion, is normative since it implies a reason. Conversely, non-normative alethic epistemic beliefs merely *imply* the truth of something, or they suggest that some worldly belief is likely to be true. They do not do imply or suggest the truth of something in a normative way which necessarily gives us reason to adopt those beliefs, however.

Parfit's argument fails to prove what he thinks it does. Consider (D):

(D) certain facts imply that some belief must be true.

If we concede that (D) would be advantageous, in evolutionary terms, without (E), this still does not get around the evolutionary objection which Street, among others, has raised. This is because the evolutionary objection suggests, among other things, that in certain domains, what we regard as reasons to think that some proposition or fact implies that some other proposition or belief must be true might be simply the product of evolutionary forces which are indifferent to the truth. Imagine the following modified version of (D).[9]

> (D*) the fact that torturing a child causes that child pain implies that it is bad to torture that child.

Or,

> (D**) the fact that I do not like being tortured means that it would be wrong for me to torture my neighbour simply because he is a classics scholar.

These facts are of the same nature as (D), but, admittedly, in order to be advantageous, they may not need to be supported by the relevant version of (E), say,

> (E*) The facts represented by (D*) give us decisive reason to believe that it is bad to torture that child.

It therefore seems that we can accept the distinction between non-normative alethic epistemic beliefs and normative epistemic beliefs that Parfit has suggested, admit that the latter cannot be assumed to be a direct product of evolutionary forces, and still get a successful evolutionary objection off the ground. This is because we can now assert

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[9] This is not to say that the EDA proponent wants to challenge all norms of implicature; rather, she simply wants to challenge some of them, namely, those relating to moral beliefs.

that some kinds of non-normative alethic epistemic beliefs can be explained as products of evolutionary forces which are not truth-tracking and further, these kind of non-normative alethic epistemic beliefs are what we use when forming (perhaps later on in our evolutionary history) normative epistemic beliefs. This view holds that we likely form normative epistemic beliefs, possibly as post-hoc explanations, based on certain of our non-normative epistemic beliefs (most likely, those involving right, wrong, good, bad, etc.). Further, this argument should not undermine our non-moral non-normative epistemic alethic beliefs since our reason to doubt non-normative moral epistemic beliefs does not apply to our non-normative non-moral alethic epistemic beliefs.

One might not find this reply to Parfit compelling. Even if this is the case, it is actually unclear how threatening Parfit's objection to (1) is with regards to The Darwinian Dilemma. As he says, (1), and his response to it, "…applies most plausibly to those of our normative epistemic beliefs that are grounded on beliefs about what is certain or likely to be true in the non-normative alethic sense. These are the only normative epistemic beliefs that I am here discussing" (513). (1) and Parfit's relevant objection seem to have very little to do with the kinds of moral beliefs which Street's arguments are most concerned with, such as (A) – (C), and, more importantly, those moral beliefs which are the most fundamental to our set of moral beliefs, such as (A) – (C). Consider the following moral beliefs:

(A) Pain is morally bad, all things being equal.

(B) Pleasure is morally good, all things being equal.

(C) A world with greater equality is better than a world with the same over all amount of utility and disutility but less equality, all other things being equal.

(A) – (C) are not, in any meaningful sense, normative epistemic beliefs "that are

grounded on beliefs about what is certain or likely to be true in the non-normative

alethic sense" (Parfit, 513). Consider the following moral beliefs:

> (A*) I have reason not to stab Mark with a rusty syringe because doing so would cause him pain,
>
> (B*) I have reason to inject Mark with morphine after he has been stabbed with a rusty syringe because doing so will bring him great pleasure.
>
> (C*) I have reason to give Mark the same amount of ice cream as I give to Nicole, since they both like ice-cream equally.

(A*) – (C*) are normative epistemic beliefs which are "grounded on beliefs about what

is certain or likely to be true in the non-normative alethic sense." However, it should be

patently clear that these normative beliefs' justification is dependent upon our

justification for beliefs like those represented in (A) – (C). As long as normative beliefs

which are not "grounded on beliefs about what is certain or likely to be true in the non-

normative alethic sense," are still threatened by evolutionary objections, Parfit's reply

does little to salvage moral knowledge.

3.1: Practical Reasons

Parfit presents what he takes to be the EDA proponents' argument against just our

practical and moral beliefs. He formalizes it as follows:

> (1) These normative beliefs were often advantageous, by leading us to act in ways that helped us to survive and reproduce.
> (2) Because such beliefs were advantageous, natural selection made us disposed to have them.
> (3) These beliefs would have had the same effects, by leading us to act in the same ways, whether or not these beliefs were true.
> Therefore
> (4) These beliefs would have been advantageous whether or not they were true.

Therefore
(5) Natural selection would have disposed us to have these beliefs whether or not they were true.
Therefore
We cannot justifiably believe that these beliefs are true. (525-526)

Parfit accepts 3 – 5. He objects to (1) on the same basis that he objected to (1) in the Naturalist Argument for Normative Skepticism. That is, he holds that our early ancestors did not need to have normative epistemic beliefs in order to be motivated to act in the right ways. He argues that,

> (A) it was advantageous for early humans to be motivated to act in ways that would lead them to have children, and would promote the survival and hedonic well-being of themselves and their children, (527)

is true. However, he argues that

> (B) it was often advantageous for early humans to believe that they had reasons to promote the survival and hedonic well-being of themselves and their children, (527)

is likely false. If (B) is indeed false, then (1) is in trouble. I take it that a similar response as I gave above to this objection can be made with regards to moral and practical beliefs since we can very plausibly hold that although our normative epistemic beliefs were not a direct product of evolutionary forces, they are an indirect product since they are dependent upon our non-normative moral epistemic beliefs; however, let us concede that this response does not work for this set of beliefs. (1) can likely still be sufficiently motivated.

As Parfit notes, normative skeptics might claim the following:

(E) though these normative beliefs were not themselves advantageous, they were indirectly produced by natural selection. Early humans came to have these aims, and to act in these ways, because these aims and acts were advantageous. Later humans then came to believe that they had reasons to have these aims, and to act in these ways. (528-529)

Parfit objects to this line of reasoning, however, arguing that things such as the belief that "the nature of agony gives us a strong reason to want to avoid being in agony," cannot be explained by (E) (529). This is because he holds that it is false that "natural selection caused us [to] believe that we have this reason because this belief was advantageous, by motivating us to avoid agony" (529). Parfit holds this to be false because we did not need to believe that we had such reasons in order to be motivated to avoid agony; as with the normative epistemic beliefs discussed earlier, he argues that these beliefs about what we have reason to do are superfluous from an evolutionary standpoint since we are typically sufficiently motivated by non-normative epistemic beliefs. This leads Parfit to assert (L), which holds:

(L) when we remember what it is like to be in agony, we seldom need to believe that we have practical reasons to want to avoid such agony. (530)

Parfit then suggests that if we ask *why* we believe that we have epistemic and practical reasons like those about agony, the answer is simply that such beliefs are obviously true. Although this response has the epistemic virtue of simplicity, the EDA proponent can, at least as plausibly, hold that we are strongly inclined towards avoiding agony due to evolutionary reasons, which have likely formed something like a stimuli-response reaction against agony in humans as in almost all other animals, and further, we simply form post-hoc normative beliefs about how we have reason to avoid agony because, as Parfit notes, we tend to respond to reasons. This response may actually be simpler while

also having more explanatory power. This is because if we hold that humans believe

that we have reason to avoid agony because we form such beliefs as post-hoc

explanations for our basic evaluative tendencies, then we have come to hold that we

have reason to avoid agony for the same reason that other animals act in ways so as to

avoid agony, namely, because it is adaptive. However, if one adopts that we believe that

we have reason to avoid agony because it is obviously true, then one must hold that we

adopt this belief for much different reasons than motivate non-human animals to act in

ways so as to avoid agony. This seems like an incredibly large coincidence which we

simply need not posit.

3.2: On What's Assumed

Parfit, as a rationalist, obviously holds that there are "*independent* normative truths,

such as truths about what matters, and about what is good or bad, in the reason-

implying senses" (531). Street denies that we have any way of recognizing such truths,

holding that even if they existed, it would be incredibly unlikely that we would believe

them. This is because she holds that the independent normative truth could be

anything, including that what is morally good is hand-clasping, or writing the number

587 over and over again. Accepting this, it seems as if the odds that our values coincide

with those things that are independently good or worth pursuing are quite low, since

this overlap would have to be explained by pure coincidence or sheer luck. Rationalists

like Parfit will object to Street's argument because they do not think that it would be a

matter of sheer luck if our normative beliefs were true, rather, they want to say that we

can be responding to the intrinsic credibility of such beliefs. Although Street admits that

we have the power of rational reflection which goes along with our normative

intuitions, she holds that the intuitions which make us think that a happy and productive

life would be much better than a life of counting blades of grass are wholly unreliable.

Street defends this view as such,

> (L) though the power of rational reflection might lead us towards such
> independent normative truths, this power would be too weak. In this conflict,
> the evolutionary forces would win. (Parfit, 532)

(L) is defended by the belief that rational reflection must start with certain normative

beliefs or premises. Street refers to these beliefs as our starting fund of evaluative

judgments. Given that Street thinks that the beliefs which make up our starting fund of

evaluative judgments bear no relation to the truth (since they are thoroughly

contaminated by evolutionary forces), she holds that we are not justified in thinking that

rational reflection would enable us to correct for evolutionary influences.[10]

Parfit argues that even if the beliefs which make up our starting fund of

normative beliefs were produced by natural selection, "these beliefs are *not* badly

mistaken, but correspond to some of the independent normative truths. Pain *is* bad, and

we *do* have strong reasons to promote the survival and well-being of ourselves and our

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[10] This is because, as discussed in Chapter 2, it is not clear what rational reflection can do other than make our belief set more coherent or otherwise epistemically virtuous. One may object that, if successful, rational reflection can weed out false beliefs, thereby giving us greater justification in the remaining beliefs. However, it is again unclear how rational reflection could do this, since it typically, in other domains, weeds out false beliefs by making a belief set more coherent or epistemically virtuous, or by making sure that our various epistemic norms are aligned with individual beliefs. But if we are worried that all of our moral beliefs are distorted by evolutionary influence, then it seems as if rational reflection will not be able to weed out false beliefs as it would in other domains.

children" (Parfit 532-533). When Street considers a similar objection, she responds that

it takes for granted:

> The very thing called into question by my argument – namely that we are not hopeless as normative judges. The reply trivially assumes that we are *correct* to think that staying alive, developing one's capacities, family and friendship, and so on, are independently worth pursuing. (qtd. in Parfit 533)

She further argues that in order to answer her objection, the moral realist must show

that evolutionary forces have led us to form true moral beliefs, and further, this must be

done without making any (unwarranted) assumptions about which normative beliefs are

true. Parfit holds that:

> What Street here requires us to do is impossible. Some whimsical despot might require us to show that some clock is telling the correct time, without making any assumptions about the correct time. Though we couldn't meet this requirement, that wouldn't show that this clock is not telling the correct time. In the same way, we couldn't possibly show that natural selection had led us to form some true normative beliefs without making any assumptions about which normative beliefs are true. This fact does not count against the view that these normative beliefs are true. (533)

Suppose it is impossible to show that our moral beliefs are true or even just

generally truth-tracking without making any assumptions about which moral

propositions or beliefs are true. Should we take this as a flaw in Street's argument? I

take it that we should not precisely because Street's argument only holds that we

cannot assume the truth of any of our moral beliefs because we already have reason to

doubt those moral beliefs. That is, if we did not currently have reason to doubt these

beliefs, Street would hold that there would be nothing objectionable about assuming

the truth of some of them in order to vindicate the rest. Street's argument therefore is

not that it would never be permissible for one to assume the truth of some of her moral

beliefs in order to vindicate the rest; if one had no strong, independent reason to doubt one's moral beliefs, then one would be justified in assuming the truth of some of them. However, Street holds that our moral beliefs have already been undermined to the extent that assuming their truth would be in some sense illegitimate. Therefore, Street is only saying that it is illegitimate to assume the truth of some of our moral beliefs given those beliefs' current epistemic status.

This line of reasoning should not seem odd. Other belief sets are impossible to vindicate without assuming the truth of at least some of their fundamental beliefs. However, if we have reason to think the relevant belief set is critically flawed or unjustified, then assuming the truth of some of its specific beliefs is illegitimate. Suppose I hold the following beliefs.

(A) 3+3=12
(B) 4+4=10
(C) 10+12=22
(D) 3+3+4+4=22

If asked to prove the truth of (D), I could not do so without assuming the truth of (A) and (B). However, if one questions (D) because when one adds 3+3+5+5, one counts 16, and objects that one cannot assume (A) or (B)'s truth in arguing for (D), this seems perfectly legitimate precisely because we have reason to doubt (A) and (B). So long as one has sufficient reason to doubt the most fundamental beliefs in some belief set, it does not seem at all unreasonable to say that one cannot assume those beliefs to be true in order to vindicate some other portion of that belief set. In beliefs sets that are autonomous, this certainly does make it harder, or perhaps impossible, to vindicate the relevant

beliefs once the most fundamental beliefs have been undermined. Still, this leaves us to

conclude that so long as we do have reason to doubt what Street refers to as our initial

starting fund of moral beliefs, Parfit's objection that one cannot vindicate our moral

faculties without assuming those beliefs to be true is of little concern.

3.3: Evolutionary Forces, Normative Intuitions, and Rational Reflection

Parfit offers an objection, similar to those raised above, which holds that our most basic

normative beliefs were produced by evolutionary forces. Further, these beliefs have had

a great impact on our power of rational reflection. Parfit gives the following reasons in

favour of his objection:

(1) if our normative beliefs were primarily produced by evolutionary forces, then we
    would have adaptive beliefs which we currently do not have and we would not
    have some non-adaptive beliefs which we currently do have;
(2) We can often give an equally plausible evolutionary explanation for either of two
    conflicting normative beliefs;
(3) And, EDA proponents such as Street are often talking about cultural evolution,
    which does not obviously have the same power to undermine moral knowledge
    as biological evolution does.

In what follows, I consider (1) – (3) and give what I take to be the most plausible

responses which are friendly to the EDA proponent.

(1) is a common objection raised against evolutionary debunking arguments.

Similar objections have been raised by Shafer-Landau and Peter Singer, among others.

Parfit holds that our normative belief set is missing some adaptive beliefs and also

contains some seemingly non-adaptive beliefs; this suggests that our normative belief

set is not primarily a product of evolutionary forces such as natural selection. The moral

beliefs Parfit suggests as problems are the following:

(1A) The belief that we have strong reasons to try to have as many surviving children as we can would be advantageous, but we do not have this belief.

(1B) The adoption of The Golden Rule, which has occurred within many societies, is not advantageous.

(1C) We are slowly coming to believe that all people's wellbeing matters equally, and this belief is "clearly not the product of evolutionary forces." (538)

I take it that (1A) is not particularly problematic for two reasons. The first being that it is

not at all clear that a normative belief that we have strong reasons to try to have as

many surviving children as we can would be advantageous. If every couple tried to have

as many children as they thought could survive past the first few years of life,

populations, even in the small communities that our earliest ancestors would have lived

in, would have grown exponentially in a way that was not at all advantageous to the

society and therefore, would have most likely been disadvantageous for the parents and

off-spring as well. Cultures where this belief was common would likely have faced

problems of food and resource scarcity. One might object that this would have to be

taken into account when calculating the number of children which can survive for an

adequate amount of time. That is to say, maybe the most children that a couple can

have and expect to survive (assuming most couples act in the same way) is closer to

two, three, or four, not fifteen, twenty, or thirty. But if one wants to make this move, it

is not at all clear that we do not currently hold the normative belief that we have strong

reason to try and have as many surviving children as we can. Although Parfit thinks that

there is no normative belief supporting having children (going so far as to say that

people who choose not to have children are often revered and praised), this seems

wrong. Couples who choose not to have children are often seen to be, at the very least,

missing out on something valuable. Further, the reason some couples seem

praiseworthy for not having children is precisely because others think that they are

giving up something good or desirable, that is, having children, in order to benefit

others, say, by committing their time to issues effecting public welfare. Although this is

slightly different from having the belief that having as many children as possible is

morally good or praiseworthy, it does seem to point towards a normative belief which is

supportive of having children.

If one doubts this response to (1A), there is another response to be had.

Evolutionary forces do not leave us with maximally adaptive traits. Most, if not all,

human adaptations could be swapped out with another possible adaptation which

would be more effective. Given the abundance of calories available to most modern

people, we could support a higher body temperature (than our ancestors were able to)

which would in turn make us less susceptible to various kinds of infection. Having a

slightly higher average body temperature than we currently do would likely be a

beneficial adaptation, however, our not having a higher average body temperature than

we currently do does not change this fact. It simply means we have not evolved to have

this trait yet (which is not to suggest that we will inevitably, but rather that we might).

We can give the same reply to (1A), saying that even if this belief is adaptive, we can still

explain why we do not have it yet without undermining the truth or plausibility of

evolutionary forces or natural selection. (1A) therefore seems at least weaker than

Parfit suggests.

(1B) seems not particularly problematic because it rests on what is likely a factual mistake. Parfit argues that many cultures have come to adopt The Golden Rule. Although this is an empirical matter which requires empirical research, it seems implausible to say that almost any person, let alone any culture, holds that The Golden Rule is actually a correct action guiding moral maxim. Almost everyone holds that although they would like to be dealt with lightly after they, say, murdered a child, they still ought not to treat a child murder lightly. There are many situations where The Golden Rule makes what we think of as the right moral prescription, say, prescribing that one not steal one's neighbour's oxen when one's neighbour is off attending to a grass fire elsewhere, but these prescriptions likely *can* be explained by plausible evolutionary theories. (1B) therefore seems to require further empirical evidence, but, on the face of it, does not seem to undermine the EDA proponent's argument.

Although Parfit assumes that the belief that everyone's welfare matters equally, which is supposedly becoming more common, is clearly not adaptive, this does not seem to actually be clearly true.[11] Again, this is an empirical matter which requires empirical evidence. But it is not intuitively unreasonable to say that believing in something like roughly impartial benevolence could be the result of our starting fund of normative intuitions which are a product of evolutionary forces and something like consistency reasoning, which leads us to think that we do not want others favouring their family over us (to any great extent), and, assuming we are roughly the same, this

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[11] Dennett suggests that anytime a philosopher uses the word "surely," one should stop and question the premise since it is likely an unexamined truism. Surely this is true, and I take it that Parfit's use of "clearly" likely ought to be seen as equally alarming.

means that we ought not to favour our family over others (to any great extent). This move is obviously far too quick to count as decisive evidence. I intend it only to show that this belief in roughly impartial benevolence ought not to be seen as some kind of defeater to EDA proponents and their theories.

(2) holds that we can often give equally plausible evolutionary explanations for either of two conflicting normative beliefs. That is to say, one might be able to give as plausible an evolutionary explanation for why humans evolved to, say, have toenails as one could for why we evolved not to have toenails (if this were the case). This is a strong objection and, if it is shown to be true, it should undermine the EDA proponent's level of credence in her own view somewhat. However, it is by no means devastating. Imagine that we discover some new species of bird in the jungle. We come to believe that this species of bird has either a sharp, pointed beak because this kind of beak allows birds to find and eat small insects under the large rocks which are common where the bird lives, or it has a dull, flat beak because this kind of beak allows birds to grasp larger insects, of which there are many in its environment, with greater ease. Both explanations are roughly as plausible, given the facts about this bird's environment. Does this mean that we should not think that the bird evolved to have either one of the two beaks hypothesised due to evolutionary forces? It should not, unless there is a better (read, more epistemically virtuous) prediction and explanation of what kind of beak the bird has. If there is no better, non-evolutionary prediction and explanation of what kind of beak the bird has, then there is no reason to rule out the evolutionary explanations just because they are of roughly equal plausibility. Rather, it just means that we ought to

think that one of the two accounts is right. Of course, the fact that there are two equally good beliefs must make each of these beliefs slightly less justified; after all, these beliefs are based on something like an argument to the best explanation. However, this move is still successful so long as one of these two explanations is still stronger or more plausible, even after considering the conflict with the other possible evolutionary explanation, than any non-evolutionary explanation one might give.

In the case of our moral beliefs, unless one can actually offer a better (again, read more epistemically virtuous) account of how we came to have the basic normative beliefs and tendencies that we do have without making reference to evolutionary forces, it seems as if we should simply conclude that the most plausible evolutionary explanation is right, and, if there are competing evolutionary explanations of roughly equal strength, then we can at least assume that one of the two (or more) explanations are right. For those who do not find this response convincing, it may be epistemically justifiable to assign evolutionary objections like Street's Darwinian Dilemma less weight. However, a tu quoque argument might end up applying here. If one can give an explanation for our normative beliefs and tendencies which does not refer to non-truth-tracking evolutionary forces, the explanation likely have to refer to how it was advantageous to develop the ability to be rational. As Parfit suggests, "just as cheetahs were selected for their speed, and giraffes for their long necks, we were selected for our rationality, which mostly consists in our ability to respond to reasons" (515). However, we may be able to tell an equally plausible story about how it was evolutionarily advantageous to simply form the appropriate stimulus-response pairings and not

develop the ability for rational thought. If this is the case, then the realist is not much better off than the EDA proponent here.

(3) is simply under-motivated, if nothing else. It is not at all clear that cultural evolution should be seen as less undermining to moral knowledge than biological evolution, although this matter will likely require more evidence to be presented either for or against group selection in evolutionary theory. However, there is no obvious reason to think that normative beliefs which are advantageous on a cultural or group level are any more related to independent truths than are normative beliefs which are advantageous to individual organisms. Until more is said about this, or group selection is shown to be insufficiently motivated itself, this objection is not particularly worrisome to the EDA proponent.

Parfit raises one final objection which may be worth noting. He suggests that Street holds both:

(Q) For our normative beliefs to be justified, we must have some empirical evidence for their truth.

And,

(R) If our normative beliefs are about these alleged independent normative truths, we could not have such evidence. (538)

Further, he objects that although Street takes this to how that we cannot justifiably believe that any such beliefs are true, this conclusion is unwarranted since the same objection also applies to modal beliefs about necessary truths, such as mathematical and logical truths, in which we have a high level of credence. I take it that Parfit misrepresents Street's view here, insofar as she is not claiming that every belief requires empirical evidence to be justified, but, rather, if some phenomenon or datum is

completely and adequately explained by some empirical explanation, we have no reason

to disregard that explanation for one that has no more explanatory power. However,

because Shafer-Landau launches a similar objection, I will give a more lengthy reply to

this in the next chapter.[12]

3.4: A Further Response to Parfit

Parfit divides beliefs into two relevant sets, specifically, non-normative epistemic alethic

beliefs, that is, beliefs about what is likely to be true, and normative epistemic beliefs,

that is, beliefs about what we have reason to believe. This taxonomy is helpful to Parfit

as it allows him to cordon off a set of beliefs which are so specific that they may be

superfluous in terms of evolutionary advantageousness but which he also wants to say

constitute our normative beliefs. However, we have strong reason to reject this

taxonomy.

Parfit's taxonomy simply separates our beliefs about the likelihood of truth from

our normative beliefs, however, we often think that truth is itself a normative concept.

Parfit wants to deny this, but this denial seems to be sufficiently disconnected with

common usage and understanding of the concept of truth that what follows from it with

regards to our normative beliefs will likely be irrelevant. Parfit argues that concepts such

as validity are not intrinsically normative. When considering the claim that some

argument *x* is valid, Parfit says: "Some people would call this claim normative. But I am

using 'normative' in a narrower, reason-implying sense" (506). He suggests that since an

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[12] For more, see page 73.

argument being valid simply means that if its premises are true, then so is its conclusion, it is not itself reason-implying. Parfit suggests the following as the relevant normative belief about validity:

> (I) If we know that some argument is valid, and has true premises, these facts give us decisive reason to accept this argument's conclusion. (506)

However, this seems to be disconnected from the way we actually use the term and understand the concept of validity. Very few people actually consciously hold (I), however, if someone objects that someone else is being illogical, or that his argument is invalid, this is understood to be in itself normative. That is to say, if John accuses Mike of being illogical, or of giving an invalid argument, those claims themselves *are* taken to be normative; they are taken to suggest that Mike ought to do something different and change his beliefs, and this is not dependent upon also expressing (I). If one accepts this, then the distinction Parfit draws between normative epistemic beliefs and non-normative alethic epistemic beliefs is undermined. This in turn gives us reason to doubt that normative beliefs are superfluous in evolutionary terms since many of the beliefs which Parfit labels as non-normative, and which are required for the beliefs which he labels as normative to be possibly superfluous, are actually normative beliefs themselves.

3.5: Going Forward

This chapter has presented and responded to what I take to be the strongest arguments against The Darwinian Dilemma which have been raised by Parfit. Although some of these arguments should undermine our confidence in The Darwinian Dilemma, or other

evolutionary debunking arguments, none of them seem to be clear defeaters. In the

next chapter, I consider the strongest arguments against The Darwinian Dilemma which

have been raised by Shafer-Landau.

Chapter Four: Shafer-Landau's Defense of Moral Realism

4: The Generic EDA

In "Evolutionary Debunking, Moral Realism and Moral Knowledge", Russ Shafer-Landau

presents what he takes to be a formalized, generic version of EDAs which aim to

undermine one's justification for moral beliefs. Shafer-Landau suggests that most

justification-debunking EDA's have a structure close to the following:

> D1: If moral realism is true, and if evolutionary forces have thoroughly shaped our moral faculties in ways that are doxastically discriminating (i.e., such that they dispose our moral faculties to generate beliefs with certain propositional contents rather than others), then it would be a massive coincidence were our moral faculties reliable.
> D2: If it would be a massive coincidence were our moral faculties reliable, then absent any independent confirmation of their reliability, there is decisive reason to believe that our moral faculties are unreliable.
> D3: There is no independent confirmation of the reliability of our moral faculties – their reliability can be confirmed only by showing that they have generated moral beliefs in which we have a high degree of warranted confidence.
> Therefore,
> D4: If moral realism is true, and evolutionary forces have thoroughly shaped our moral faculties in doxastically discriminating ways, then there is decisive reason to believe that our moral faculties are unreliable.
> D5: Evolutionary forces have thoroughly shaped our moral faculties in doxastically discriminating ways.
> D6: If moral realism is true, then there is decisive reason to believe that our moral faculties are unreliable. ("Evolutionary Debunking", 4)

Shafer-Landau concedes that D2 and D3 are both plausible. However, he wants to

challenge D1 and D5.

4.1: Against D5: The Natural Reply

D5 is challenged on the basis that genealogical critiques, such as EDAs, are plausible only

insofar as they imply a means of determining the origins of our moral faculties.

However, such means would also provide us with limits for the relevant genealogical

critiques (EDA's in this case) since they will show which beliefs or subset of moral

faculties are unaffected by things such as evolutionary forces. If there are moral beliefs

or certain kinds of moral faculties immune to evolutionary forces, they can serve as

benchmarks for assessing the truth of other beliefs that *do* originate in evolutionary

forces. Shafer-Landau thus argues that the realist can resist EDA's if she can locate

moral beliefs meeting the following three conditions:

(i) they are immune from evolutionary influence;
(ii) we can know which beliefs those are; and
(iii) such beliefs are highly presumptively warranted. ("Evolutionary Debunking", 6)

These beliefs could then be used to evaluate beliefs with evolutionary origins. Shafer-

Landau calls this the Natural Reply. He presents it as follows:

N1: If some of our highly presumptively warranted moral beliefs are not the product of
evolutionary influence, and we can know which ones are thus immune, then we can
utilize such beliefs to ascertain the plausibility of those that are the product of
evolutionary pressures.
N2: Some of our highly presumptively warranted moral beliefs are not the product of
evolutionary influence.
N3: We can know which beliefs those are.
Therefore,
N4: We can utilize such beliefs to ascertain the plausibility of those that are the product
of evolutionary influences. ("Evolutionary Debunking", 6)

If The Natural Reply holds, it raises significant problems for D5. If one were to discover

that one had a significant number of warranted moral beliefs which were immune to

evolutionary forces, one could possibly resuscitate the warrant of at least some of one's

moral beliefs *with* evolutionary origins Further, if it turned out that most of one's beliefs

with evolutionary origins were actually warranted, it would also be at least possible that

one could confirm the reliability of one's moral faculties *simpliciter.* Motivating The

Natural Reply is therefore one promising strategy for those looking to defend realism against EDA's.

Shafer-Landau argues that the primary evidence for the influence of evolutionary forces on our moral beliefs and faculties is the degree to which our most basic and widespread moral intuitions and beliefs are highly adaptive. This being the case, he suggests that if one were able to find warranted beliefs which are not adaptive, one would then have excellent reason to think that these beliefs do not have an evolutionary origin (or that they have not been subject to evolutionary pressures). He suggests that prime examples of such non-adaptive moral beliefs include compassion for vulnerable strangers, kindness to small animals, and tendencies towards impartial benevolence. Insofar as these beliefs do not seem to be obviously adaptive, there is reason to doubt that their origins are evolutionary.

As Shafer-Landau notes, proponents of EDA's can simply object that even such non-obviously adaptive beliefs are *indirect* products of evolutionary forces. If evolutionary forces are responsible for certain, obviously adaptive belief sets which in turn produce specific, non-obviously adaptive beliefs, these latter beliefs are still the product of evolutionary forces. However, Shafer-Landau holds that even if *many* of our non-obviously adaptive moral beliefs can be explained away as indirect products of evolutionary forces, the onus is on the evolutionary debunker to explain how *all* non-obviously adaptive moral beliefs are the product, either direct or indirect, of evolutionary forces.

The Natural Reply is intuitively strong. We generally agree that, before evolutionary considerations are introduced, common moral beliefs are highly warranted; even if some of them turn out to be misguided or unjustified, say, intuitions prohibiting incest, our set of moral beliefs is sufficiently warranted so as to constitute knowledge (if the beliefs also turn out to be true). So, even if we discover some reason, such as evolutionary considerations, which undermines many of our moral beliefs, those which are not specifically disproven by such considerations may remain sufficiently warranted or justified. Tailored to Street's specific Darwinian Dilemma, The Natural Reply might assert something like the following: Even though many, perhaps even most of our most basic evaluative judgments are the product of evolutionary forces which track advantageousness and not truth, some of our most basic evaluative judgments, specifically, those that are not evolutionary advantageous, likely belong to some other set which we are justified in thinking does track the truth. This being the case, there are some basic evaluative judgments, moral beliefs, and moral judgments which are sufficiently warranted. Further, this means that Darwinian considerations are not nearly as threatening to moral realism as Chapter 2 suggested.

If The Natural Reply goes through, Street's Darwinian Dilemma is in serious trouble, even though the number of moral beliefs which possess sufficient justification will be much smaller according to realism than it was before evolutionary considerations were introduced. Peter Singer in "Ethics and Intuitions" pursues just such an argument, asserting that Darwinian considerations make it such that we should reject certain moral beliefs, such as the special worth of in-group members, while accepting other moral

beliefs as likely true, such as those concerning impartial benevolence, since these latter

beliefs would not have been advantageous, suggesting they are not simply evolutionary

products. I take it that The Natural Reply, as described, does not adequately defend

moral realism from Darwinian considerations if it is the case that many of our moral

beliefs which initially seem non-adaptive or even maladaptive can actually be plausibly

explained as evolutionary advantageous.

The Natural Reply essentially asserts that there are two relevant sets of moral

beliefs, judgments, or basic evaluative judgments, specifically, those that are

evolutionarily advantageous and therefore likely not truth tracking and those that would

not have been evolutionarily advantageous to our ancestors and therefore *are* likely

truth tracking. Further, The Natural Reply proponent will likely hold that it is strongly

intuitive to hold that at least some of our moral beliefs fall in the latter, truth tracking

set. The evidence for this assertion is, in all likelihood, that they seem, intuitively, non-

advantageous or even maladaptive. This is because much, even most of the time we

have very little empirical evidence which would support the proposition that moral

belief *x* would have been maladaptive in historical situation *z* (some moral beliefs, such

as 'death is the most valuable thing', being maladaptive are likely supported by

empirical evidence). Indeed, barring any evidence to the contrary, it is likely right to say

that certain moral beliefs seeming highly maladaptive gives one adequate reason to

think that those beliefs indeed are or were maladaptive and therefore are not a product

of evolutionary forces. However, I want to suggest a conditional which I take to be

undermine The Natural Reply. I will refer to this conditional as The Sufficient Reasons

Argument**:**

> The Sufficient Reasons Argument**:** If many of the exemplar moral beliefs that we
> intuitively think of as being non-advantageous or even maladaptive are actually
> shown to be sufficiently explained by well-supported evolutionary theories or
> hypothesises then we lack sufficient justification for thinking that the other
> moral beliefs which seem to us to be non-advantageous or even maladaptive are
> actually non-advantageous or maladaptive.[13]

> If The Sufficient Reasons Argument is true, then the EDA proponent does not

need to show how *all* moral beliefs are evolutionarily advantageous, rather, she must

only show that a sufficient number of the beliefs which seem to be maladaptive or non-

advantageous actually are adaptive or sufficiently explained by accepted evolutionary

theories. This task is significantly more manageable than the original task set forth for

the EDA proponent by Shafer-Landau.

The Sufficient Reasons Argument likely requires further explanation and defense

however. The motivation behind The Sufficient Reasons Argument is as follows. The

Natural Reply holds that there are two (relevant) sets of moral beliefs, and that one of

these sets (the set of moral beliefs which are non-adaptive) is, at least largely,

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[13] Something needs to be said about what constitutes 'sufficient justification.' I cannot even provide a
rough estimate as to what exactly constitutes sufficient justification, but this is not a problem unique to
my account. However, the concept of sufficient justification should be highly intuitive. If tasseography, the
reading of tea leaves, by some individual has accurately predicted who will win The World Series every
year for the last 50 years, that tea reader predicting that The Yankees will win The World Series this year
will likely count as sufficient justification for one to hold that The Yankees will win The World Series this
year. However, if the reader has only predicted 45 games, it is less clear is this counts as sufficient
justification to believe her current prediction. Further, if she has only predicted one game correctly, this
clearly is not sufficient justification for adopting her belief about The Yankees winning this year's World
Series. So, although I, or philosophers more generally, cannot yet define what exactly constitutes
sufficient justification, it should be clear that we at least have shared intuitions about it in many if not
most cases.

unaffected by distorting evolutionary forces and is therefore likely truth-tracking.

Further, the evidence for this latter set containing one or more moral propositions, that

is, the evidence for it not being a null set, is that there are moral beliefs or intuitions

which seem non-adaptive. Since these beliefs seem non-adaptive, we are supposedly

justified in thinking that they belong in the set of moral beliefs or intuitions which are

truth-tracking, at least barring any evidence to the contrary. However, this argument

assumes that we have reason to think that because a moral intuition *seems* non-

adaptive that it is non-adaptive; however, if it turns out that many of the moral beliefs

which *seem* non-adaptive to us are in fact properly understood as adaptive, we lose

justification for thinking that moral intuitions which seem non-adaptive *are* actually

non-adaptive. That is, our supposed evidence for there being moral beliefs which are

non-adaptive ceases to constitute (at least sufficient) evidence. Essentially, Shafer-

Landau sets the epistemic bar too high for the EDA proponent. The EDA proponent does

not need to prove that *all* moral beliefs are adaptive or evolutionarily advantageous,

rather, she can show that we have insufficient reason to think that any common moral

beliefs are actually maladaptive. If the EDA proponent can give a sufficient evolutionary

explanation which shows that many of the exemplar cases of moral intuitions which

seem non-adaptive are actually adaptive, the onus would then be on the moral realist to

prove that there are moral intuitions or beliefs that actually are non-adaptive. Further,

since this cannot be done simply by saying that these beliefs seem non-adaptive, this poses a problem for the moral realist. [14][15]

I take it that The Sufficient Reasons Argument is supported by current epistemic norms, but, because it is being applied to a somewhat odd case, this may not be clear. An analogous case not involving moral beliefs should help clarify the relevant epistemic norms. Imagine the following: Michael asserts that there are two kinds of cats; those who have cats for parents and those who have something other than cats for parents. His evidence for this is that there are twelve young cats in his neighbourhood and of those twelve, he has only seen six of them with their feline parents. However, Zara asserts that *all* cats have cats for parents. Her evidence for this is that she has seen four of the six cats which Michael thought did not have cats for parents walking around at night, when Michael does not watch cats, with their cat parents. It seems that Michael`s evidence for there being cats who do not have cats for parents, which is something like

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[14] It must be noted that the moral realist would be justified in rejecting EDA style objections if she could show that moral beliefs which seem to us be to highly adaptive are actually maladaptive or otherwise not sufficiently explained by evolutionary theory.

[15] It should be noted that there is some question as to what would count as evidence in favour of some evolutionary account and how much of this evidence would be sufficient to justify our adopting some account, or holding it to be true. The how much evidence is needed question will run into problems of ambiguity which are common to all discussions of justification, but this should not be particularly worrisome. More interesting, and perhaps troubling for the EDA proponent, is the question of what kind of evidence we can actually have or give in favour of various evolutionary accounts. Some may argue that there is no evidence that is sufficiently strong to *prove* some evolutionary account true. This seems like too strong of an assertion. It is not implausible to think that as AI and computational modeling technologies become more advanced, we will be able to run simulations about how we evolved. Of course, simulations may support more than one conflicting evolutionary account. However, we can see which of these accounts fare best in terms of novel predictions; assuming that at least one fares sufficiently well, it seems as if we would have very strong reason to think that the theory or account was true, or in some sense, correct. Although such simulations and the required technologies are likely a ways away, their plausibility should show that there are at least some ways in which we may be able to give evidence for some evolutionary account.

he has seen cats in the day who do not seem to have cats as parents, is undermined by

Zara's having shown that there are several cats who seem to be without cat parents

during the day but who do in fact have cats as parents. Further, if a sufficient amount,

say, four out of six, ten out of fourteen, or maybe ninety-five out of one hundred, of the

cats who seem to be with cats as parents during the day turn out to indeed have cats as

parents, it seems that the epistemic onus shifts to the person who thinks that there are

cats who have non-cat parents to provide new evidence for this position. To say that

Zara must see every young cat with its cat parents in order to be justified in asserting

that all cats have cat parents is an odd and unjustifiable epistemic practice.[16] When

there simply is not enough evidence to say with total certainty that all x's are y's (or that

all x's are not y's), if the evidence for some x's being y's is undermined and we have

good reason to think that many and possibly most x's *are y's*, then it seems as if the

epistemic onus does befall the agent who wants to say that some x's are not y's. If one

accepts this, then The Sufficient Reasons Argument holds. If one is able to show that

many of the exemplar cases of moral intuitions or beliefs which seem non-adaptive are

in fact adaptive, then one epistemic onus is on the moral realist to prove that there are

actually some non-adaptive moral beliefs or intuitions.[17]

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[16] At least, this holds if we assume that Zara and Michael are not able to do the research necessary to determine what kind of parents every cat has. That is, the epistemic norms in play here are ones for when one does not have all of the evidence needed to be certain about some judgment.

[17] It should be noted that if the moral realist could show that there is even one moral belief that is definitively non-adaptive, and not explained by evolutionary influences, then this would be sufficient evidence to disprove the claim that all moral beliefs are adaptive or at least not maladaptive.

I have suggested that the epistemic bar is not set as high for the EDA proponent

as Shafer-Landau has suggested. This is because the EDA proponent does not need to

show that all non-obviously adaptive moral beliefs are in fact adaptive, only that *many*

of the exemplar non-obviously adaptive moral beliefs are in fact adaptive. However, the

epistemic bar is still set high enough to warrant concern by the EDA proponent. In order

for The Darwinian Dilemma, or something like it, to go through, non-obviously adaptive

moral beliefs or intuitions, like those suggested by Shafer-Landau, must be sufficiently

explained by some evolutionary account. However, providing such an account for many

of these beliefs is a much more manageable task than providing such an account for *all*

of these beliefs. As Shafer-Landau notes, this leaves the success of the Darwinian

Dilemma, and The Natural Reply, dependent upon future empirical evidence**.** This

should be troubling for both the EDA proponent and the moral realist, so more needs to

be said by both parties.[18] In the remainder of this chapter, I consider and reject further

defenses of moral realism as provided by Shafer-Landau. In Chapter 5, I propose a

modified evolutionary objection, which I label *The Missing Set Argument*, which should

be cause for concern for the moral realist and goes through whether or not we think

that The Natural Reply is successful.[19]

4.2: Against D1

D1 holds:

> D1: If moral realism is true, and if evolutionary forces have thoroughly shaped
> our moral faculties in ways that are doxastically discriminating (i.e., such that

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[18] Although one may hold that this result is worse for the EDA proponent since the moral realist has the more initially plausible position, namely, that we can know that certain moral beliefs are true.

[19] For more on *The Missing Set Argument*, see page 85**.**

they dispose our moral faculties to generate beliefs with certain propositional contents rather than others), then it would be a massive coincidence were our moral faculties reliable.

Shafer-Landau argues that debunkers have not been sufficiently clear about the precise nature of the coincidence suggested by D1. He therefore suggests several possible interpretations and gives reasons to think that these interpretations fail. In what follows, I argue that Shafer-Landau's objections to Street's interpretation of D1 fail.

4.2.1: The Empiricist Argument

Shafer-Landau understands Street's Darwinian Dilemma as holding that the best confirmed empirical account of our moral intuitions or beliefs does not suggest their reliability, and, if this is the case, it would be a massive coincidence were these intuitions or beliefs reliable. Shafer-Landau suggests the following formalized version of Street's argument:

E1. If moral realism is true, and if evolutionary forces have thoroughly shaped our moral faculties in doxastically discriminating ways, then the best-confirmed empirical account of the origins of our moral faculties does not imply their reliability.
E2. If the best-confirmed empirical account of the origins of a doxastic faculty does not imply its reliability, then it would be a massive coincidence were that faculty reliable. Therefore,
D1. If moral realism is true, and if evolutionary forces have thoroughly shaped our moral faculties in doxastically discriminating ways, then it would be a massive coincidence were our moral faculties reliable. ("Evolutionary Debunking", 25)

Shafer-Landau argues that this understanding of the coincidence suggested by D1 fails because E2 is likely false. He is almost certainly right. His first objection to E2 holds that an empirical account of certain doxastic origins can be both the best-confirmed account available and evidentially non-compelling. That is to say, the best empirical account of certain doxastic origins may still be "…the best of an epistemically

dubious lot" ("Evolutionary Debunking", 25). This being the case, the best empirical

account of some doxastic origins implying those doxastic faculties' unreliability does not

necessarily justify thinking those doxastic faculties are unreliable.

Shafer-Landau's second objection to E2 holds that its truth would prove too

much. He argues: "The best-confirmed empirical account of the origins of our

philosophical faculties does not imply their reliability. Central philosophical premises are

not empirically confirmable" ("Evolutionary Debunking", 25). So, if we accept E2,

consistency demands that we hold our philosophical faculties to be unreliable, but most

debunkers do not want to make such a concession. This is with good reason; if one

concedes the unreliability of our philosophical faculties, this seems to undermine the

Darwinian Dilemma. Further, Shafer-Landau asserts that beliefs generated by our moral

faculties are likely not beliefs which are subject to empirical confirmation. He says,

"Indeed, so long as there in any plausible form of an is-ought gap, empirical claims

cannot imply normative truths" ("Evolutionary Debunking", 25).

I take it that Shafer-Landau is right when he asserts that E2 is likely false.

However, I take it that E2 is not a charitable recasting of Street's view. This is because

Street does not simply believe that the best-confirmed empirical account is always

sufficiently good to warrant acceptance. Rather, she must hold that the best confirmed

empirical account of some thing ought to be accepted if it is the case that it both is the

best-confirmed empirical account *and* it is, in some sense, a sufficiently good

explanation of the relevant datum/phenomenon/etc. The latter half of the disjunct is

crucial; surely no one would assert that the best-confirmed empirical account of some

thing always ought to be adopted, precisely because of the objection Shafer-Landau

raises. However, if the best-confirmed empirical account also sufficiently explains the

relevant datum or phenomenon then it is unclear why we should not accept it, assuming

that there is not some other account which better explains the datum or phenomenon.

One might think that this simply assumes some kind of extreme empiricism, but I take it

that this is not so. Although sometimes one may be justified in assuming some kind of

non-empirically justified explanation (perhaps as is the case with regards to most of our

beliefs about modal necessity), when the best-confirmed empirical account adequately

explains *all* of the relevant datum, we simply have no reason, or justification, not to

accept is (unless there is some other account which better explains the datum). Not

accepting it would, at the very least, go against the value of parsimony while adding no

value. Therefore, if it is the case that Street's naturalist explanation of our moral

intuitions sufficiently explains all the datum associated with them and is also the best

available explanation, there simply is no reason to refrain from adopting the best-

confirmed empirical account of our moral faculties. (It is crucial to note that this is a

conditional which only holds if Street's account sufficiently explains all of the relevant

data and is also the best *available* explanation).

I have already touched upon the merits of Street's naturalistic account.

However, one aspect of our moral intuitions which Street's account does not cover does

require further explanation, namely, our belief that our moral beliefs are in some

stance-independent sense, true. If Street's account cannot explain this datum, then

Shafer-Landau does have sufficient reason to claim we ought not accept the best-confirmed empirical account.

I take it that there is a sufficiently good explanation that Street's account can give as to why we generally think that at least some of our moral intuitions or beliefs are true in a stance-independent manner.[20] The explanation is that we are more likely to adopt beliefs which we think are true; that is to say, we are most likely to adopt moral beliefs if we think that they are objective, or in some stance-independent sense, true, and our adopting these beliefs is evolutionary advantageous. Typically, we are not nearly as motivated to adopt propositions which are not believed to be false as we are to adopt propositions which we believe to be true. When asked, "Why should I believe that 2+2=4?" the best, and most motivating answer one can give is almost certainly "Because it is true," or rather, "Because you think it is true." Although one could also respond by saying, "Because it will make you better off," or, "Because I say so," such answers are typically not very motivating. It seems reasonable to assert that we have evolved to find truth motivating in some strong sense. This being the case, it seems that the only way for moral beliefs to be motivating in the way required for them to be adaptive or evolutionarily advantageous is for their possessors to believe that the claims are true. This explanation, which is available to Street, when combined with the rest of her account, provides a total explanation of the data which requires explanation. This

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[20] This may actually be a somewhat contentious claim. At least some philosophers seem to want to claim that common sense morality generally adheres to some kind of ethical relativism; that is to say, at least some philosophers think that most laymen adopt ethical relativism, even though said philosophers might think that the laymen are wrong to do so. However, almost everyone wants to assert the stance-independent truth of at least some paradigmatic moral beliefs, such as "Torturing children for fun is morally bad."

being the case, Shafer-Landau has no reason to assert that we ought not adopt the best-confirmed empirical account if that account is also the best account overall, since this account sufficiently explains the relevant datum/phenomenon/etc.[21] It is also worth noting that the seemingly problematic analog of philosophical reasoning now seems unavailable to Shafer-Landau, if it is in fact the case that philosophical reasoning cannot be adequately explained by the best-confirmed empirical account. This is because we are not obligated to accept the best confirmed empirical account, even if it is also the best account overall, if it is the case that this account does not sufficiently explain all of the relevant data. That is to say, we can adopt Street's line of reasoning and not be obligated to accept the best empirical account of something when all other accounts are even worse.

Shafer-Landau's assertion that beliefs generated by moral faculties are not the kinds of beliefs which are subject to empirical confirmation deserves a response. He is likely right that specific moral beliefs are not the sorts of things which can be shown to be true by empirical considerations in most cases. "Torturing children for fun is bad," cannot be proven true simply by showing that other, strictly empirical propositions are true, say, "Children scream when they are tortured." However, the justification for thinking that moral beliefs are true can certainly be undermined by empirical considerations. An exemplar case will illustrate this point. Jackie has the moral belief that homosexuality is wrong. She has held this belief for as long as she can remember.

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[21] One may justifiably reject an account of something even if that account is both the best empirical account and the best account overall, but, this is only justifiable in cases where the account does not adequately explain the relevant data.

However, one day, she learns that when she was a teenager, she was hypnotized by members of the Hypnotists for Traditional Values organization. Through further research, Jackie also comes to know that most members of Hypnotists for Traditional Values want others to believe that homosexuality is immoral, they are admittedly indifferent to moral truths, and finally, that she did not believe that homosexuality was immoral before she was hypnotized by the obscure group of hypnotists. Admittedly, these empirical considerations do not provide any substantive evidence for the moral belief that homosexuality is moral (permissible, praiseworthy, or any such thing), but, it surely undermines any justification Jackie has for thinking that her belief that homosexuality is immoral is true in a stance-independent sense. I take it that most EDA proponents are not claiming that empirical considerations or evidence actively prove that there *are* no moral truths; rather, they are suggesting that empirical evidence or consideration undermines our justification for believing that any given moral belief is true in a stance-independent sense in much the same way Jackie's moral belief is undermined by empirical considerations or evidence.[22] Accepting this, Shafer-Landau is wrong when he asserts that "...unless one is willing to give up on the truth and credibility of all normative claims, we will have to accept that empirical inquiry alone will fail to reveal the truth and epistemic status of our normative beliefs" ("Evolutionary Debunking", 25).

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[22] I take it that there are somewhat uninteresting ways in which empirical considerations can in fact disprove moral beliefs; the moral belief "Children born with one leg should be euthanized because they will grow up to be unhappy" can be proven false by empirical evidence which shows that children born with one leg tend to grow up to be extremely happy individuals.

In light of the arguments raised by Shafer-Landau, I suggest a new recasting of

Street's argument. It holds:

E1. If moral realism is true, and if evolutionary forces have thoroughly shaped our moral faculties in doxastically discriminating ways, then the best-confirmed empirical account of the origins of our moral faculties does not imply their reliability.
E2*. If the best-confirmed empirical account of the origins of a doxastic faculty does not imply its reliability, and that account both sufficiently explains all of the relevant data and is the best account available, then it would be a massive coincidence were that faculty reliable.
E3: The best-confirmed empirical account also sufficiently explains all of the relevant data and is the best account available.
Therefore,
D1. If moral realism is true, and if evolutionary forces have thoroughly shaped our moral faculties in doxastically discriminating ways, then it would be a massive coincidence were our moral faculties reliable.

I take it that this recasting of Street's argument is significantly stronger than the one

originally presented by Shafer-Landau. Further, I take it that it is sufficiently plausible

such to shift the epistemic onus onto the moral realist with regards to explaining why

we ought to favour an account of our moral faculties which holds that our moral beliefs

are true in some stance-independent sense.

4.2.2: Moral Semantics and D1

Shafer-Landau gives one more argument against D1 which is worth considering. He

argues that there may be certain conceptual constraints on what counts as a moral

view. Some views, such as the badness of survival, the goodness of torturing children, or

the permissibility of random aggression, may simply not be moral views because we

may accept "a moral semantics according to which certain moral propositions are

reference-fixing, such that denial of (enough of) these propositions shows that an agent

is no longer talking about *morality* at all" ("Evolutionary Debunking", 11). Shafer-

Landau holds that this account of moral semantics does not require any kind of question-begging where we simply assume that some moral propositions are true. Rather, he thinks that this account of moral semantics "presupposes minimal semantic competence with moral concepts" ("Evolutionary Debunking", 12).

Shafer-Landau is probably right that this move is not question begging, but he is probably wrong that such an account of moral semantics represents how we actually do use moral language. According to such an account of moral semantics, someone who denies a sufficient number of moral propositions which we take to be true is not using moral terms in the same way that we are. Someone who fails to affirm a sufficient number of relevant moral propositions is therefore not speaking the same moral language as we are. However, we typically do not think this is the case. When referring to the ethics adopted by the white supremacist, or the pedophile, or the sadomasochist, we seldom say, or think, that these people are failing to grasp the way in which we use the relevant moral terms of good, bad, right, wrong, etc. Rather, we think that they are just mistaken about what we have reason to think is good, bad, right, wrong, etc. We think that these outliers understand the concept which these moral terms are meant to represent; we simply think that they are wrong in their judgments about what constitutes an instantiation of these moral concepts. If we imagine a non-moral analog, this point should be made clearer. If we were to discover someone who claims that black-tar with rotten fish bits is the best flavour of ice-cream and this person also chooses to eat black-tar with rotten fish bits ice-cream when offered a choice of it or one of the standard flavours, we do not think that this person fails to understand what

we mean by 'the best ice-cream'; this is especially clear if he makes it explicit that he

understands 'best ice-cream' as meaning the ice-cream with the most enjoyable flavour,

aroma, etc. In such a case, we simply think that the man is wrong about what is actually

the best ice-cream, not about what the concept of best ice-cream is meant to pick out.[23]

Analogously, if the white supremacist, the pedophile, or the sadomasochist seems to

use the moral language in a coherent sense, that is, he agrees that goodness generally

ought to be brought about, badness generally ought to be avoided, all things being

equal, and that if something is morally required then one ought to do it, and so on, then

it seems as if he is speaking the same moral language as we are, he just uses that

language to assert many false moral propositions. This holds even if he defines the good

as suffering and badness as preferences being satisfied.

If one is not totally satisfied with this response, there is at least one strong

reason to think that Shafer-Landau's account of moral semantics actually fails to give

reason to think that someone is not speaking our moral language if he denies all of the

moral propositions we hold. This is because there does not seem to be a strong reason

to require any one specific number or percentage of moral claims to be affirmed over

any other number or percentage of moral claims in order for one to be speaking our

moral language. That is, we have no more reason to think that one must affirm 10%,

20%, or 99% of our commonly accepted moral propositions in order to be speaking our

moral language. It seems as if any number we choose will be largely arbitrary. The best

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[23] Of course, this example might require us to be Platonists about ice-cream, a somewhat odd view. Even if one denies that there is a best ice-cream in this sense, the analogy should still clarify the problem with Shafer-Landau's moral semantics argument.

way to avoid this arbitrariness will likely be to say that we should go with either a maximally high number or a maximally low number, but if we go with a maximally high number then one must agree with *all* of the moral propositions held by some set of agents in order to be speaking their moral language. This would then make moral disagreement necessarily impossible. This would be an untenable entailment of Shafer-Landau's account of moral semantics. It therefore seems as if we would be best off not requiring one to affirm any commonly accepted moral propositions in order to be speaking our moral language, even if we accept Shafer-Landau's account of moral semantics.

4.3: Fair Exclusions

Parfit and Shafer-Landau both raise questions about to what extent one can legitimately assume the truth of some moral propositions in order to redeem or otherwise help restore warrant to moral beliefs or propositions which are clearly threatened by genealogical critiques. Both argue that we must, and we can, assume the truth of at least some moral propositions. Shafer-Landau suggests that the reasoning which leads the EDA proponent to argue that one cannot assume the truth of any moral beliefs in order to validate other moral beliefs would prove too much, insofar as it would undermine any justification we have in our perceptual beliefs or other cognitive faculties. The EDA proponent can be understood as arguing that certain moral beliefs, the ones we hold, would be adaptive regardless of whether or not they are true, but,

this is not the case for perceptual beliefs; thus, only the latter beliefs are likely truth-

tracking. However, Shafer-Landau notes:

> We can know that adaptive perceptual practices are also reliable ones only if we
> already have a sense of which perceptual judgments are true and which are
> false. We can tell that dispositions to hold false perceptual beliefs are likely to be
> maladaptive only if we can identify some false perceptual beliefs, show that they
> tend to undermine fitness and make inferences from those cases. If we were in
> no position to know which perceptual beliefs are false, then we could not know
> that false perceptual beliefs tend to be maladaptive. ("Evolutionary Debunking",
> 24)

So, without assuming the truth of some perceptual beliefs, we cannot say with any

confidence which beliefs are adaptive and which are maladaptive. Thus, if assuming the

truth of some paradigmatic moral beliefs is not allowed, neither is assuming the truth of

any paradigmatic perceptual beliefs. This seems to raise a significant problem for the

EDA proponent who wants to hold that we can have confidence in our perceptual

beliefs but not our moral beliefs.

I take it that this argument fails to properly understand the dilemma. The EDA

proponent is trying to show that our beliefs about the natural sciences, which are at

least dependent upon and a consequence of, our perceptual beliefs, are in conflict with

our moral beliefs.[24] Doing this is the main task of the Darwinian Dilemma. Once this is

done, we have three options. We can either

A) Assume the truth of both belief sets and be left with an inconsistency which is
   likely quite large, since these are some of our largest belief sets and the
   inconsistency between them would be quite fundamental.
B) Assume the truth of neither and be left without any moral or perceptual
   knowledge, a rather large and seemingly unnecessary loss.

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[24] Our beliefs about the natural science are at least dependent upon and a consequence of our perceptual
beliefs insofar as we would have no justification for the former without the empirical evidence we learn
about through the latter and we think that the latter *strongly* suggest the former are true.

C) Assume the truth of only one belief set and reject the truth of the other (that is, assume the truth of either our perceptual beliefs or our moral beliefs, and then reject the truth of our other belief set).

I take it that C is the most attractive option, largely because it should be obvious which belief set we should reject, specifically, our moral beliefs. This is because we have a much greater degree of certainty about our perceptual beliefs on the whole than we do about our moral beliefs, on the whole. Further, if we were to reject our perceptual beliefs, our moral beliefs would be, at best, of little use, and at worst, completely unsupported. So, we can understand the EDA proponent as arguing in favour of C, and further suggesting that we ought to reject the truth of our moral beliefs rather than our perceptual beliefs since the latter are more fundamental and more important to the coherence of our general belief sets. Accepting this, there is no obvious problem when one assumes the truth, of at least some, of one's perceptual beliefs while also refusing to assume the belief of some of one's moral beliefs in order to validate one's moral faculties.

4.4: Going Forward

Shafer-Landau's objections certainly partially undermine The Darwinian Dilemma, but they are not strong enough, either taken individually or as a set, to justify thinking that The Darwinian Dilemma has been defeated. Objections aimed specifically at Street's empiricist argument seem to be of little concern. However, although The Natural Reply does not require as much of the EDA proponent as Shafer-Landau originally argued, it illuminates how much *is* required of the EDA proponent in order to sufficiently justify her argument. The Natural Reply's success, as well as the success of The Darwinian

Dilemma, therefore seems to be contingent upon further empirical evidence. Accepting

this, we must now ask what we ought to do if we are not entirely sure of the strength of

EDAs such as Street's Darwinian Dilemma. Chapter 5 will focus on this issue.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

5: A Trichotomy

Chapter 2 presented what I take to be the strongest evolutionary debunking argument against moral realism, namely, Street's Darwinian Dilemma. Chapter 3 and 4 considered what I take to be the strongest objections to Street's Darwinian Dilemma; these have come from Parfit and Shafer-Landau. Given the reasons provided in favour of and against the Darwinian Dilemma, and EDA's more generally, there are three interesting judgments we can make about the success of the Darwinian Dilemma. We can hold any one of the following:

(A) The Darwinian Dilemma is sound and therefore, if non-natural moral realism is true, then our moral faculties being reliable would be hugely coincidental,

(B) The Darwinian Dilemma is not a problem for non-natural moral realism because at least one of the arguments against it succeeds or because at least one of its necessary premises is false,

(C) Or, the strength of the Darwinian Dilemma is unclear, although it is at least somewhat tempting.

Shafer-Landau takes it that these are also the same three judgments relevant to "determining the propriety of enlisting substantive moral claims in attempts to reply to the Darwinian Argument" ("Evolutionary Debunking", 34). He suggests that if one accepts A, then the warrant we once had in our moral beliefs would be gone and enlisting those beliefs to re-establish the warrant would be illicit. Further, if one accepts B then one is certainly justified in invoking substantive moral claims in order "to bolster the impression of reliability of our moral faculties" ("Evolutionary Debunking", 34). Shafer-Landau suggests that C is the most interesting scenario however. I take it both that C is the most interesting scenario, and, further, that the reasons given so far likely

make C the most justified or supported judgment. Because of this, this chapter will focus on two additional arguments which might affect The Darwinian Dilemma's strength. It will then go on to consider what we should do given the strength of this evolutionary objection.

5.1: Shafer-Landau's Formal Strategy of Faculty Vindication

Shafer-Landau argues for a method of faculty vindication which he thinks could restore warranted confidence in our moral beliefs or faculties if we accept C; he calls this method The Formal Strategy of Faculty Vindication. The Formal Strategy of Faculty Vindication is the most promising way to go about restoring warranted confidence in our moral beliefs because other methods of faculty vindication, such as internal coherence strategies or independence strategies are not applicable to our moral beliefs or faculties both because we have doubts about their reliability and because they range over an autonomous domain of inquiry. Internal coherence strategies seek "to establish the reliability of a doxastic faculty F by showing that it generates many F-beliefs in which we have great confidence" ("Evolutionary Debunking", 35). However, we cannot use this method of faculty vindication because the beliefs generated by our moral faculties are the same ones we are worried are unreliable. Independence strategies attempt to "vindicate the reliability of a doxastic faculty F by showing that F-beliefs are confirmed by various non-F beliefs in which we have great confidence" ("Evolutionary Debunking", 35). However, our moral beliefs range over an autonomous domain of inquiry, so it is unlikely that we will be able to justify them with non-moral beliefs.

Enter the Formal Strategy of Faculty Vindication "which seeks to vindicate the reliability of a doxastic faculty by showing that it is identical to, or a species of, a (kind of) doxastic faculty in which we independently have a high degree of warranted confidence" ("Evolutionary Debunking", 35). Shafer-Landau suggests that with regards to our moral faculties, the best candidate to serve as the basis of a successful formal strategy is the faculty which generates a priori beliefs; "It may be that there is one such faculty, or an interrelated set of them, that ranges over a wide variety of belief contents" ("Evolutionary Debunking", 35). Shafer-Landau suggests that the mental operations which cause non-moral a priori beliefs might even be the very same ones that cause a priori moral beliefs and that this would give strong reason to think that our moral faculties are reliable, at least with regards to a priori moral beliefs. Most impressively, "…confidence in this reliability would not have been gained by assuming the truth of some substantive moral beliefs, or by seeking to confirm such beliefs by means of nonmoral beliefs" ("Evolutionary Debunking", 36). That is, if one accepts that our faculty or faculties which are responsible for our a priori beliefs are reliable, and further accepts that our faculty or faculties which are responsible for at least many of our moral beliefs are simply a subset or species of the former faculty or faculties, then one can assume that our moral beliefs are formed in a reliable way. Further, much to the realist's credit, our moral beliefs have been validated within having to simply assume the truth of any of them, even those that are most fundamental.

Suppose that Shafer-Landau is right and our moral faculties are in important and relevant respects akin to the faculties which generate a priori beliefs. If it is the case that

we already have some reason to doubt our moral faculty's reliability (which does not also apply to the more general faculties which generate all a priori beliefs), The Formal Strategy of Faculty Vindication will fail to vindicate its reliability. This is because The Formal Strategy of Faculty Vindication will likely only be useful when we have very few or no other ways of gauging a faculty's reliability; in situations where we have reason to doubt some faculty's reliability, and this reason does not also undermine the reliability of the general family of faculties which the original faculty belongs to, the more general set of faculties' reliability provides little reason to believe that the more specific faculty which is undermined by some consideration is also reliable. This is because some faculty being similar to some other reliable faculty carries little epistemic weight; this means that if there is already some reason to doubt the faculty which is not known or believed to be reliable, and the reason does not apply to similar faculties which we do think are reliable, The Formal Strategy of Faculty Vindication simply is not strong enough to vindicate those faculties whose reliability is already in question. This is simply to deny that The Formal Strategy of Faculty Vindication is sufficiently strong to vindicate our moral faculties in this case, even if it is somewhat relevant.

To illustrate this last point, consider the following. Jack has been deaf for his entire life, but his sense of sight, smell, and taste have all proven incredibly reliable over his many years of life. If Jack were to undergo a new miracle surgery which were to give him auditory perception, it seems right, prima facie, to say that Jack would be justified in holding his newly acquired perceptual beliefs, specifically, his beliefs about what he hears, to be reliable, barring his having strong reason to think otherwise. That is to say,

if Jack walks out of the operating room and for the first time hears a bird chirp as he also happens to see a caged bird, he is justified in thinking that the bird really did just chirp and that he heard it. This is, at least in large part, because the faculty responsible for hearing is most closely related to those responsible for seeing, smelling, tasting, and the like, and these latter faculties have proven hugely reliable. Here Shafer-Landau's Formal Strategy of Faculty Vindication works well. However, imagine that Jack comes to discover that, during the operation, the surgeon dropped his scalpel and thoroughly damaged the only part of Jack's brain which is responsible for hearing. Further, we know that when this part of the brain is damaged, people tend to have auditory hallucinations while also failing to hear sounds that do actually occur. When Jack comes to know of the surgical mishap, it seems as if he should doubt many of his auditory seemings. When he hears a loud booming sound while sitting in his living room, he would be unjustified in thinking that the sound was caused by something other than his brain damage. But it is important to note that his other perceptual beliefs which are most closely related to his hearing were unaffected by the surgical mishap; given this, they are still reliable. Surely this does not mean that their reliability should give Jack significantly greater credence with respect to his auditory seemings. This is precisely because when some faculty's reliability is undermined by something which does not also affect those faculties most closely related to it, The Formal Strategy of Faculty Vindication simply is not strong enough to vindicate the faculty which has been called into question. Given this, it seems that The Formal Strategy of Faculty Vindication will be of very little help to the moral realist if we already think that there is significant reason to doubt our moral beliefs or

moral faculties and that this reason does not also threaten our other a priori belief forming faculties. Moving forward, I will consider an argument which is meant to tip the scales further in favour of The Darwinian Dilemma. I will then suggest that most other meta-ethical theories do not seem to fare significantly better than realism and consider what follows from this.

5.2: The Missing Set Argument

Street's Darwinian Dilemma has, most likely, been partially undermined by arguments such as The Natural Reply which function by suggesting that there are some moral beliefs which are likely truth-tracking, and further, that these beliefs can be used to vindicate other moral beliefs whose origins we are more sceptical of. Moral realists may think that although arguments like The Natural Reply are superfluous since EDA's do not have the initial plausibility that their proponents assume they do, such arguments are certainly sufficient to quell any concerns raised by these genealogical critiques. Conversely, EDA proponents such as Street may think that arguments like The Natural Reply, which are the moral realists' best defense, are simply instantiations of wishful thinking which fail to realize or admit of the strength of EDAs. I want to suggest an objection, supported by evolutionary considerations, which I think both presents a threat to moral realism and holds even if arguments such as The Natural Reply go through. I call this objection The Missing Set Argument.

Moral realists, including Shafer-Landau and Singer, try to defend moral realism by arguing that even if we have to reject some of our moral beliefs because they are not truth-tracking, we are justified in thinking other moral beliefs are true; that is, these

moral realists admit of evolutionary forces affecting our moral beliefs, but they also claim that we can overcome this influence in certain ways. Suppose this is right. Suppose some propositions, such as Sidgwick's axiom about impartial benevolence which holds: "The good of any one individual is of no more importance, from the point of view (if I may say so) of the Universe, than the good of any other; unless, that is, there are special grounds for believing that more good is likely to be realised in the one case than in the other," can be known to be true (Sidgwick, 382). The EDA proponent can admit of these types of moral beliefs' truth but still hold that moral realists should have very little credence in their moral judgments or moral beliefs about actions. This is because the moral realists have strong reason to think that they are ignorant of a large set of possibly true moral propositions, namely, those that are significantly maladaptive and further, these beliefs will likely be relevant to their various moral judgments.[25] That is to say, perhaps we can know that certain of our moral beliefs which are adaptive or even non-adaptive but also not highly maladaptive are true. This does not give us any reason to think that there is not an incredibly large set of moral beliefs, namely, those that are significantly maladaptive, which we do not have moral intuitions or basic evaluative tendencies about because they were selected against by evolutionary forces, but which are true.

Of course, simply being ignorant of some great amount of knowledge does not always, or even typically, imply that we cannot know many other things. If one does not

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[25] The 'they' here refers to non-natural moral realists, as I am suggesting that they are ignorant to a large set of moral propositions if moral realism is true. But, if the argument is successful, and moral realism is true, then we are all ignorant to this set of moral beliefs or propositions.

know how many blades of grass are on his lawn, or his neighbour's lawn, or his

neighbour's neighbour's lawn, and so on, he can still know that there are only two trees

in his own backyard. But The Missing Set Argument does not work this way, simply

implying that because we are ignorant about many beliefs, we cannot know many other

things. Rather, The Missing Set Argument holds that when it comes to actual moral

judgments about actions, our decisions are almost always made by weighing various

moral considerations. When deciding whether to help a motorist with a flat tire, I must

also consider whether the passengers in my car should be made to wait. Surely if I am

driving my pregnant wife to the hospital and she is at risk for complications, I ought not

take the time to change another person's flat tire. Even in seemingly obvious or simple

cases, we must weigh various moral considerations. If a trained doctor sees a small child

with a nail in his hand, we are confident that the doctor should stop and help the child,

even if she will not be paid for her help. We think this largely because we think that the

doctor has a duty of beneficence, among other things. But, this is assuming that it is

morally preferable to endure a moderate pain for a short amount of time if doing so will

let one live a happy and productive life. But it might be morally true that what is morally

required of one is always to minimize pain as much as possible and that this is the

strongest moral consideration. This belief would be hugely evolutionary maladaptive,

but I have argued we have no strong reason to think this belief is not true. Further, if

this belief were true, then the doctor ought not remove the nail from the child's hand,

in turn causing some temporary pain, but rather, she should euthanize the child as

painlessly and quickly as possible. The Missing Set Argument does not merely hold that

there are things we do not know and that we therefore cannot know other things.

Rather, it holds that when it comes to making moral judgments, many different moral

beliefs are relevant; and typically these beliefs must be weighed against each other.

However, there are many, many moral beliefs, namely those that are hugely

maladaptive, which are likely also relevant to our moral judgments, but which we do not

know or believe.

The Missing Set Argument is essentially an epistemic one. It holds that there is at

least one large set of moral beliefs which we cannot come to know (because we cannot

have the intuitions necessary to form these beliefs) but which might be true. Further,

these maladaptive moral beliefs are relevant to our moral judgments and we have no

reason to think that a higher percentage of possible adaptive moral beliefs are true than

possible maladaptive moral beliefs. Given this, we should be sceptical of most of our

moral judgments or beliefs about the moral permissibility of actions, among other

things, since the missing moral propositions will likely be relevant to the permissibility of

most actions.

To illustrate the epistemic reasoning relevant to this argument, imagine the

following analog involving non-moral beliefs.

> **Jack's Missing Set:** Jack is the head economist for the nation of Countrystan. He
> has been asked by the President to determine this year's budgetary surplus.
> Normally, this would be an easy task. Jack would simply subtract the
> government's expenditure (what it spends on various services, loan repayments,
> etc.) from its income (from taxes, investments, etc.). However, at the moment,
> Jack only has the numbers for this year's income. He knows that Countrystan's
> income for the year is $1,000,000,000. However, he has not received any
> numbers for this years' expenditure. Further, he is unable to access expenditures

from recent years because of a recent office fire which destroyed all of the treasury's records. Because of this, if Jack is forced to make an estimate about the budgetary surplus, he should have an incredibly low level of credence in it. This is because he is missing a large set of information which is likely relevant to his estimate.[26]

Jack's situation is analogous to ours with regards to moral beliefs. We can divide the moral truths which determine an action's permissibility (or goodness, badness, praiseworthiness, etc.) into those that would have been significantly maladaptive or disadvantageous in terms of reproductive success to our ancestors and moral beliefs which would not have been significantly maladaptive or disadvantageous in terms of reproductive success to our ancestors. Further, we have strong reason to think that we cannot come to know the moral truths which fall into the set of beliefs which were significantly maladaptive or disadvantageous in terms of reproductive success to our ancestors. Since we have no reason to think that this set of beliefs is any less relevant to an action's permissibility than the other set of moral beliefs, we should think that we are missing a large number of the moral beliefs which represent the moral truths which determine an action's permissibility.[27] In this sense, we are in a position much like Jack's. We seem to be missing one of two necessary sets of beliefs. This should significantly undermine our confidence in our moral judgments about actions (or almost

[26] I say 'likely relevant' because it might be the case that there has been no expenditure and the only number Jack needs to know if the country's income. Although, even in this case the expenditure still seems relevant, so it might *always* be relevant. Further, again The Missing Set Argument applies because the knowledge which is missing is relevant to the final judgment being made.

[27] "…a large number…" is obviously ambiguous. There is at least one strong argument in favour of thinking that the number of true maladaptive moral beliefs is larger than the number of true adaptive moral beliefs. Specifically, in other domains, we typically think that there are innumerably many more maladaptive adaptations than adaptive ones. For instance, with regards to body temperature, we think that adaptive body temperatures are probably those ranging from 95 – 100 degrees Fahrenheit; however, when thinking of maladaptive body temperatures, we can say that the range would be anything lower than 95 or anything higher than 100

any other moral judgment which isn't simply a ceteris paribus claim about goodness).

Further, this will likely be a problem for moral realism if one thinks that an ethical

theory should be capable of being used as a decision making procedure, since the

appropriately low level of credence we would have to adopt about most moral

judgments undermines how action guiding moral realism (or any normative theory

which is compatible with moral realism) can be. All other things being equal, this seems

to make moral realism a significantly less attractive meta-ethical option.

5.3: Do other non-error-theory accounts fare any better?

Street argues that her brand of constructivism sidesteps the dilemma she raised for

moral realism. She holds, "Antirealist views understand evaluative facts or truths to be a

function of our evaluative attitudes" (152). Largely because of this, she thinks that

evolutionary considerations do not threaten to undermine moral knowledge as

construed by constructivism. In explaining how evolutionary influences affect evaluative

truths, Street says:

> According to the antirealist, the relation between evolutionary influences and
> evaluative truth works like this. Each of us begins with a vast and complicated set
> of evaluative attitudes. We take the breaking of our bones to be bad, we take
> our children's lives to be valuable, we take ourselves to have reason to help
> those who help us, and so on. Our holding of each of these evaluative attitudes is
> assumed by the antirealist to have some sort of causal explanation, just like
> anything else in the world. And the antirealist grants without hesitation that one
> major factor in explaining why human beings tend to hold some evaluative
> attitudes rather than others is the influence of Darwinian selective pressures….
> Whatever explanation the natural and social scientists ultimately arrive at is
> granted, and then evaluative truth is understood as a function of the evaluative
> attitudes we have, however we originally came to have them. (153)

So, it would not be uncharitable to characterise Street's brand of constructivism as

being a largely function based account. This resembles Phillip Kitcher's view in his book,

The Ethical Project. Kitcher describes his account, which he calls Pragmatic Naturalism,

as being a function based account which holds, roughly, that what is right is determined

by the function ethics has evolved to serve. Street would not disagree with this, saying:

> What exactly is the relation between selective pressures and evaluative truth on
> this view? It may be put this way: evaluative truth is a function of how all the
> evaluative judgments that selective pressures (along with all kinds of other
> causes) have imparted to us stand up to scrutiny in terms of each other; it is a
> function of what would emerge from those evaluative judgments in reflective
> equilibrium. (154)

There is strong reason to think that Street's brand of constructivism, or any other

account of constructivism for that matter, cannot get around the problems she has

raised for moral realism, at least not without losing most or all normativity. This is

because the realist can seemingly only do one of two things in order to justify her

account. She can say that it is true in some stance-independent sense that the *right*

procedure (say, some kind of reflective equilibrium) will produce evaluative judgments

that are true (and these judgments are true because of their relation to the proper

procedure), or she can say that it is not *true* in some stance-independent way that the

right account can produce evaluative judgments which are true, but, that we can agree

that what follows from some process will be moral truths.

The first option is clearly off the table since the evolutionary forces which

undermine our basic evaluative judgments surely also undermine our knowledge about

meta-ethical matters as well. It is implausible to say that our meta-ethical beliefs would

not be at least partially dependent upon our moral beliefs which are undermined by

evolutionary forces. Shafer-Landau touches on a similar point, saying "[Street] does not

entertain the thought that her preference for constructivism, much less her preference

for the specific constructive function she endorses, is itself a product of possibly

distorting genealogical pressures" ("Evolutionary Debunking", 15). This argument goes

through if one holds that the basic procedure which constructivism relies upon to

produce moral truths is unique specifically to the moral realm (that is, it can only be

used to produce moral truths), which seems to be the most plausible route to go.[28]

The second option is not obviously much more attractive. If one wants to hold

that it is not *true* in some stance-independent way that the right account can produce

evaluative judgments which are true, but, that we can agree that what follows from

some process will be moral truths, then there are questions about how motivating or

normatively powerful this account will be to those who disagree with it. If the

constructivist takes this route and simply opts for some kind of contractarian meta-ethic

which holds that although it is not true in a stance-independent sense that some

procedure ought to be used (or can be used to produce moral truths), that procedure

has the ability to make moral prescriptions because many of us agree to that, it is not at

all clear why those who do not accept this account or its prescription should be

motivated to accept it. Some accounts, like Scanlon's contractualism or Gauthier's

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[28] One might hold that the procedure relied upon by some form of constructivism can produce various kinds of non-moral truths as well; if one were to hold this, one could likely get around the Darwinian Dilemma by simply asserting that in order to argue against moral truths, we would also have to argue against all other kinds of truth which are created by this constructivist account. However, this seems like an unattractive position to hold largely because we typically do not want to say that constructivism can give us non-moral truths. Although one might hold that constructivism can create or at least provide us with truths in other domains, such as in principles of justice or norms of cooperation, these seem to be moral domains where the legitimacy of constructivism is threatened by evolutionary considerations.

contractarianism may fare better than others here, although, if one disagrees with their

claims about what one has reason to do, it seems that neither theory has much to say,

since neither can say that such a dissenter is wrong in a stance-independent sense

about what is morally good or bad. Obviously more needs to be said to motivate this

objection, but it should be clear that if one goes this second route, one will at least face

many or even all of the same problems faced by contracualists and contractarians, at

least with regards to normativity.

5.4: A Humble Proposal

I have argued that we should find The Darwinian Dilemma to be at least highly tempting.

Although several objections likely need to be answered with empirical evidence before

we can be more confident about The Darwinian Dilemma's strength, it still has strong

initial plausibility. We must therefore ask what effects this new evolutionary objection

will have. Although considering all, or even most, of the relevant epistemic problems

and solutions raised by The Darwinian Dilemma is significantly beyond the scope of this

thesis, I will propose one way of proceeding. Often when our justification for holding

some belief, *x*, is undermined, we can drop that belief in favour of an alternative belief,

y, which has become the most justified belief. If early in the morning we think that it is

going to rain, but then as noon grows closer, we see blue skies, we ought to believe that

it is not going to rain. However, with regards to our moral beliefs, if we are worried that

they are unjustified, it is not as clear that we are *obliged* to adopt some alternative

belief (or set of beliefs) as it is when our non-moral beliefs start to seem troublingly

undermined. This is because now our epistemic obligations seem to have the weight

that they do largely thanks to our moral beliefs, but, if our moral beliefs are disregarded, it is not clear that our epistemic obligations will be all that forceful. So there is not as strong an obligation to switch our moral beliefs for some alternative (say, nihilism) as there is to switch our non-moral beliefs for some alternative when those beliefs are undermined. Accepting this, it seems as if one way forward is to say that we can maintain the same moral beliefs we have now until further evidence settles the debate concerning evolutionary objections, but, in cases of disagreement, we ought to be significantly less confident in our moral beliefs since our justification in them is undermined. This is at least one way we can proceed.

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