Evolutionary Debunking of Moral Realism

1. Introduction: As we saw last time, John Mackie challenges our ability to know moral truths on the grounds that they’re too weird. A sufficient response to this challenge, then, is to simply offer an account of moral epistemology which entails that we COULD know moral truths. This was the purpose of Huemer’s ethical intuitionism account.

(In a similar way, the external world skeptic, who challenges our ability to know anything about external world objects, can be dismissed if a general epistemological account is offered which entails that we COULD have such knowledge. This was the purpose of Huemer’s phenomenal conservatism account.)

That’s fine if the accusation is that moral knowledge doesn’t seem POSSIBLE. But, what if the moral skeptic offers positive evidence for the conclusion that moral knowledge doesn’t seem PROBABLE. This is the goal of the evolutionary debunking skeptic.

Consider the difference, for instance, between: (a) Descartes casting doubt on your color perception via his evil demon thought experiment, and (b) an optometrist casting doubt on it with a color blindness test. The former merely entails that you MIGHT be wrong. The latter entails that you probably ARE wrong. (Huemer’s PC will not help you here.)

Similarly, the evolutionary debunking argument suggests that we have good reason to believe that, even if there WERE moral facts, and even if moral knowledge WAS possible, our moral beliefs are probably still false. Why? The evidence is based on an empirical claim; roughly that our moral beliefs have surely been influenced by evolutionary processes in such a way that we have no good reason to trust them.

2. The Evolutionary Debunking Argument: Debunkers point out that the moral beliefs that we have are exactly those which we would expect to see if they were the product of biological evolution. For instance, it is evolutionarily advantageous to believe that murder is wrong. (After all, any species which promoted murder would likely soon go extinct.) The moral prohibition against incest is another good example. It seems likely that (1) Our moral intuitions are the product of evolution. And (2), if they are merely the product of evolution, then they are merely those intuitions which best promote SURVIVAL and PROCREATION. They are not necessarily indicative of any objective moral truth. For instance, given ONLY evolutionary theory, we would expect evolved organisms to believe that, e.g., infanticide for no good reason is morally wrong EVEN IF THIS WERE FALSE. (For, note that, if there are NOT any moral facts about which actions are right or wrong, then all statements of the form <Killing babies is wrong> are false.)
The result is **Moral Skepticism**, the view that our beliefs about morality are unjustified.

[Skepticism, Not Nihilism: Note that this is not ethical Nihilism (i.e., the claim that there ARE NO moral facts), since in theory there COULD still be moral facts. Rather, it is the claim that, even if there ARE moral facts, we cannot KNOW them. (Though, by Ockham’s razor, we may be better off rejecting them altogether.)]

In argument form, the above has been (rough paraphrase of Vavova):

1. Our moral beliefs are (at least in part) the result of evolutionary processes. (*Influence*)
2. Evolutionary processes select for fitness, not moral truth. (*Off-Track*)
3. It is implausible that behaviors most conducive to survival are exactly the same as those which the objective moral truths would dictate, if there were such truths. (*Gap*)
4. We’ve no independent reason to think that our moral beliefs are correct. (*No Better*)
5. Therefore, if there ARE moral truths, our moral beliefs are likely mistaken. (*Mistaken*)
   
   *(And, obviously, if there are NOT moral truths, they’re mistaken too.)*

**3. Replies:** There seem to me to be four promising ways to reply to the debunker.

(1) **Counter-Examples:** Is it true that our moral intuitions are those that best promote our species’ survival, or the propagation of our “fittest” genes? There seem to be several ethical intuitions that we have which HINDER the survival of the fittest. For instance:

- We ought to care for the sick and/or elderly.
- Killing people with genetic diseases or disabilities is morally wrong.
- Slavery is morally wrong.
- Rape is morally wrong.
- Eugenics programs are morally wrong.

If moral sentiments were just selected for evolutionarily, not to get at objective moral truths, but to produce the sort of behavior that is best suited to promoting the survival of the fittest, how likely is it that we would feel very strongly about the above?

**Reply:** Debunkers are often able to tell a story about each of the above. For instance, about how our chances of survival are greater in social scenarios, where we all learn to work together and protect and help one another, etc. Yet, things like rape and slavery, etc., would disrupt our ability to maintain peaceful societies. And so on…

*[Can you tell an evolutionary story to explain each of the above? Are you satisfied with these evolutionary explanations?]*
[Note: Huemer criticizes the debunker’s evolutionary “explanations” as being so vague that, no matter WHAT sorts of intuitions we had, the evolutionary psychologist would have some evolutionary story they could tell. Ordinary moral intuition is **deontological** (i.e., some KINDS of actions are wrong; e.g., killing, stealing, lying, etc.). But, what if our intuitions had been **utilitarian** (i.e., that the right actions are those that maximize the group’s total happiness)? Easy: A species that maximizes happiness and minimizes suffering is more likely to survive. Or, **egoism** (i.e., that the right actions are those that maximize MY happiness, aka, always look out for #1)? Easy: A species where every individual looks out for its own interests is more likely to survive. And so on. In order for the debunker’s claim to have any force, it needs to be the case that deontological intuitions (i.e., respect all individuals, never use others as means, even if it sometimes means sacrificing personal goods, or the greater good, etc.) are much more likely, given natural selection, while other moral systems are not. Otherwise, the debunker’s claims are not falsifiable. (Consider for a moment: What **WOULD** it take to falsify their claim?)]

(2) **Third Factor:** Perhaps true MORAL beliefs were not necessary for ‘fitness’ or survival, but some OTHER thing WAS conducive to it—and this other thing (this third factor) also happens to yield true moral beliefs as a side-effect.

For instance, you can see stars in the night sky. Now imagine a debunking opponent: “A-ha!” they say. “There is no good reason to believe that the ability to see stars is conducive to survival. Having this ability is not evolutionarily advantageous. Therefore, we have no good reason to think that our visual experience of stars reliably represents anything that actually exists in the real world. So, you belief in stars is unjustified.” The obvious reply seems to be: “But, good vision IS conducive to survival—e.g., seeing tigers, fruit, rivers, mates, etc.—and, it just so happens, when an organism has vision good enough to see THOSE things, they ALSO gain the ability to see stars.”

Michael Huemer says something similar in his *Ethical Intuitionism* about moral beliefs: Ethical intuitions are not some DISTINCT faculty that we have, as if we have some moral “6th sense”, like a nose capable of sniffing out moral truths. Rather, ethical intuitions are merely a product of the same faculty that our mathematical intuitions are a product of.

When it **SEEMS** to you that 2+2=4, this is a product of REASON. Similarly, when it **SEEMS** to you that, e.g., we ought to minimize suffering, this is ALSO a product of reason. Now, the ability to reason and problem-solve WAS adaptive in at least SOME contexts—but the moment we acquired this general ability, we automatically acquired the ability to also engage in MORAL reasoning. Just as reliable eyesight is likely to enhance one’s ability to survive, a reliable faculty of reasoning is also likely to do this. As such, we actually have reason to TRUST our ethical intuitions rather than doubt them!
**Reply:** Perhaps the ability to REASON is evolutionarily advantageous, but moral reasoning requires something to reason ABOUT. At the very least, there need to be some foundational moral claims which are not the result of moral reasoning, but are suggested to us by brute, foundational ethical intuitions. And isn’t the debunker’s whole point that such intuitions are suspect?

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**[Rebuttal: A Crash Course in One Route to Moral Realism:** Perhaps some foundational moral claims are analytically true? E.g., <Suffering is bad> and <Happiness is good>. If so, then we have our value claims; i.e., claims about good and bad. But, ‘better’ just means ‘more good’, and ‘worse’ just means ‘more bad’. When we’re faced with two options, and one is BETTER than the other, isn’t it automatically true that we have more reason to choose the better option? Finally, if ‘You OUGHT to do X’ just means ‘X is the thing that you have the most reason to do’, then we not only have our value claims (about good and bad), but our normative claims too (about right and wrong).]

(3) **IBE & Moral Convergence:** In his TEDx talk, Huemer also gives us empirical reasons to think that evolution is NOT a good explanation of our moral beliefs.

For all the complaints that philosophers never agree on anything, philosophy HAS gotten much closer to a consensus in at least one area: Ethics. For instance, in recent history, there has been a convergence toward (a) recognizing the moral equality of all persons, (b) promoting respect for the dignity and value of all individual persons, and (c) opposing gratuitous coercion and violence. (Huemer labels these ‘liberal values’—as in, promoting individual liberties, or freedoms; not to be confused with the democratic party.)

The revolution in ethics (abolishing slavery, recognizing equal rights for women and all races, reducing war, reducing torture & capital punishment, etc.) accompanied the revolution in all other areas—science, math, and so on. What explains the shift in these other areas? Surely not an adaptive genetic mutation. The changed happened WAY to fast to be explained evolutionarily. Best explanation: There were objective truths to be discovered, and WE BEGAN DISCOVERING THEM! The same should be said of ethics. As Huemer says, in conclusion,

“**The reason why slavery was abolished was: It was unjust.**” (whoa, imagine that!)

(4) **Evolutionary Debunking Proves Too Much:** As we’ll see next time, evolutionary debunking may be a double-edged sword. For, the claim has been that, because the moral belief-forming mechanism is the product of evolution, its output is unreliable. ...Can this same argument be extended to NON-moral belief-forming mechanisms, such as perception? Stay tuned.