GENEALOGICAL CRITIQUES MATTER (BUT NOT FOR THE REASONS YOU MIGHT HAVE THOUGHT)

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Sharon Street's (2006) "Darwinian Dilemma" has received a good deal of attention in the recent metaethics literature. Briefly, Street claims that there is strong evidence that our moral beliefs are shaped by evolutionary pressures. Because of this, she maintains, the realist must either admit that there "is *no* relation between evolutionary influences on our evaluative attitudes and independent evaluative truths," or "claim that there *is* a relation between evolutionary influences and independent evaluative truths, namely that natural selection favored ancestors who were able to grasp those truths." The first option leads to unacceptable skepticism (or at best utterly mysterious reliability); the second "is unacceptable on scientific grounds" (Street 2006, 109).

Interestingly, most—Street included—seem to agree that it doesn't matter whether her *particular* story about the origins of our moral beliefs is true: "At the end of the day, then, the dilemma at hand is not distinctly Darwinian, but much larger. Ultimately, the fact that there are *any* good explanations of our evaluative judgements is a problem for the realist about value" (Street 2006, 155). Some realists flat out reject even the modest claim that facts about the origins of our moral beliefs pose *some* threat to realism.[1] Others admit that such facts *might* pose a threat, but only insofar as they preclude the possibility of moral beliefs' being reliable, and they does so much less than Street suggests.[2]

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[1] E.g., Dworkin (2011).

[2] See, e.g., Enoch (2011).

Given the state of the dialectic, it is tempting to conclude that the genealogical aspects of critiques like Street's are otiose.[3] What *really* matters, the thought goes, is only the quality of the realist's explanation for the reliability of our moral beliefs. The genealogy of those beliefs *would* matter if it precluded the possibility of such reliability. But it doesn't. Thus not only does the particular genealogical story we tell not matter; it doesn't even matter if we have *any* genealogical story *at all.* As Josh Schechter (m.s.) puts the point:

> But it does not seem like the problem is raised by the *presence* of a causal story of our [moral] judgments. Rather, the problem is raised by the *absence* of an explanation of our reliability. (Or, more accurately, the problem is raised by there being reason to think that there is no satisfying explanation of our reliability.) If we were to possess a satisfying explanation of our reliability, the fact that there was an irrelevant causal influence would be epistemically unproblematic.[4]

In what remains, I argue that it *can* matter whether we have (or have reason to believe there is) a good causal explanation of our moral judgements. It can even matter what that story is.

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Begin by noting a slight shift in Schechter's quotation above. He tells us that the important issue is whether we lack an explanation for the reliability of our moral beliefs. But then, parenthetically, he clarifies: We don't necessarily need an explanation, we just need reason to think there *is* one. This is crucial. For it leaves open the possibility that there might be reasons to believe that an explanation is

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[3] Shafer-Landau (2012) calls these "genealogical critiques." Famous instances include Nietzsche (1887) and Mackie (1977).

[4] I've tended towards similar views myself: "The real force of these arguments comes not from their claims about what the explanation of normative beliefs *is,* but rather what it is *not.* If normative beliefs are not explained by realistically-construed normative facts, then any robust connection between our beliefs and those facts might seem miraculous" (Faraci 2012, 35).

in the offing, even in the absence of any specific proposal—perhaps even in the absence of an ability to imagine what such an explanation might look like.

Consider Bonjour's famous case of Norman the Clairvoyant who, "under certain conditions that usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant with respect to certain kinds of subject matter." But, Bonjour explains, Norman "possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power, or for or against the thesis that he possesses it" (Bonjour 1980, 21).

Bonjour expects us to have the intuition that Norman is not justified in forming beliefs on the basis of his clairvoyance. For Norman, this is a reliable means of getting at the truth. But he has no reason to *believe* it is reliable, and likely many reasons to believe it is not. What matters for my purposes is that, under certain circumstances, Norman might be justified in forming beliefs on the basis of his clairvoyant seemings, *even if he has no idea whatsoever how doing so could be reliable.*

Suppose Norman consistently gains independent confirmation of his clairvoyant seemings. After it seems to Norman that the President is in New York, he turns on the television to discover that the President is, in fact, in New York. Over subsequent weeks and months, further seemings are confirmed. Surely Norman would be justified (or, at least, *more* justified) in thinking these seemings reliable, though he is no closer to understanding how this could be so.

Of course, as many will be quick to point out, it is doubtful that there is such a thing as "independent confirmation" in the moral case. But consider a different variation on Norman's story. This time, Norman receives no confirmation of his beliefs. What he *does* find is that his seemings consistently match those of a group of other suspected clairvoyants. We can make The Clairvoyants as large a group as you like, and we can add various other stipulations: Many of The Clairvoyants are separated by great distances, don't know each other, don't have similar backgrounds, personalities,

interests, etc. And all of this information is available to Norman. The point: Norman has no good explanation of this striking *convergence* amongst The Clairvoyants.

With no better explanation on hand, Norman might well come to suspect that the best explanation of this striking convergence is that The Clairvoyants are all tracking *something*. And the simplest explanation *may* be that they are tracking whatever it is their shared seemings are about. Certainly, if I found myself in Norman's position, I would begin to seriously suspect that this was the case, and I don't think I would be unreasonable for doing so. And yet, still, I would have no idea *how* it could be so.

This is where genealogical critiques gain a foothold. Suppose Norman is beginning to suspect that the best explanation of this convergence is his and the other Clairvoyants' reliability. But then he learns of some plausible, non-reliability-conferring causal explanation for all of the Clairvoyants' seemings. Surely Norman loses any justification he had for believing them reliable.[5]

The implications for the moral case are clear. If we demand that the realist provide an explanation for the reliability of our moral beliefs, then it seems right that what matters is not the explanation we *have* of those beliefs—evolutionary or otherwise—but the mere fact that we *lack* an explanation of their reliability. But this sets the bar too high: As in the two variations on the Norman case above, one may be justified in believing *that* one is reliable even if one has no

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[5] There are important connections between my argument here and Justin Clarke-Doane's (forthcoming), in which he argues that people offering genealogical critiques have confused a challenge to *justify* our moral beliefs with a challenge to explain their reliability. Clarke-Doane argues (convincingly, I think) that if we understand the reliability challenge as the challenge to show that our moral beliefs (on the assumption that they're true) are *modally secure*—e.g., sensitive and safe—offering a causal explanation for those moral beliefs is neither necessary nor sufficient for undermining confidence in their reliability. I am doubtful that this *is* how we should understand that challenge; but I'll set that aside here. The point is simply that if we accept Clarke-Doane's position, this paper can be read as outlining an important way in which genealogical critiques can be relevant to the justificatory challenge, even if they are not relevant to the reliability one.

explanation for *how* this could be the case. One circumstance in which an epistemic agent might be so justified is that of striking convergence.

Of course, it is an empirical question to what extent moral beliefs actually converge. I will not enter into this debate here. My point is conditional: Significant convergence is the sort of thing that can justify an agent's believing himself reliable, even in the absence of an explanation of that reliability. *If* there *is* significant convergence in our (basic) moral beliefs, and *if* we have no other plausible explanation of that convergence (or reason to believe there is one), then we might well be justified in taking our moral beliefs to be reliable, even in the absence of any sense of how this could be the case. Plausible genealogies for our moral beliefs are thus important for those—like Street—who seek to challenge the plausibility of a realist-friendly moral epistemology. Such explanations will likely explain the convergence better than the hypothesis that our moral beliefs are inexplicably reliable. In that position, the realist's only recourse is to offer a positive explanation of our reliability.

One final point: Earlier, I said I would argue not only that we need *some* genealogical story, but further (contra Street and others) that it matters what that story is. Here's why: Different genealogies are equipped to explain different possible sets of moral beliefs—and thus convergence amongst them. For instance, if we believed that it was morally good to sacrifice our children, an evolutionary story might well have trouble explaining this fact. A story in terms of cultural influence might explain it more easily. On the other hand, if moral convergence is cross-cultural, more localized genealogies might fail to explain this fact, thus leaving room for the realist to maintain that the best explanation of that cross-cultural convergence is (still mysterious, but explanatorily motivated!) contact with the moral truth.[6]

[6] Relevantly, Alex Plakias (m.s.) argues that Street's explanation is implausible in part because there isn't *enough* convergence, and that cultural explanations are a better way to set up the challenge against the realist.

Again, the precise nature and extent of moral convergence is an empirical matter. But one typical response to skeptical arguments from disagreement is to claim that disagreement is fairly rare when it comes to *basic* moral beliefs.[7] My contention is that if that response carries weight, then it also puts the realist in position to go on the offensive: If there is significant moral convergence, and none of the various non-reliability-conferring genealogical stories hold water, this in itself provides the realist fodder for arguing that the best explanation of that convergence is reliability, regardless of his ability to say how that works.

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[7] For an overview of arguments from moral disagreement, see Enoch (2009).