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The Problem with using Evolutionary Inferences in Moral Antirealism Arguments

In *A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value*, Sharon Street uses evolutionary psychology theory to oppose the realist claim that there are at least some evaluative facts or truths that hold independently of our entire set of evaluative attitudes, and to assert the stance of moral antirealism. For most of the paper, she focuses on responding to *non-naturalist* versions of value realism as opposed to *value naturalism*. The premises of Street's argument for moral antirealism are outlined below:

- (1) Human systems of moral, evaluative judgements are “thoroughly saturated with evolutionary influence” because natural selection has (indirectly) shaped human evaluative decision-making processes.¹
- (2) If human moral beliefs shaped by evolution in any way align with objective moral truths, then this would be coincidence.
- (3) Since we are not justified in thinking such a coincidence has occurred, we reject moral realism.

Her argument makes a convincing case that moral realism is inconsistent with evolutionary theory. However, an objection arises with her first premise concerning the relative reproductive success of moral judgements. Upon further examination, we will see that this objection reveals an inconsistency in her statements about the origins of our evaluative judgements when she makes a distinction between a “basic evaluative tendencies” and “full-fledged evaluative judgements” – where her argument about the evolutionary origins of reason seems to unintentionally undermine her first premise. Additionally, the notion that evaluative judgements

¹ Street, Sharon. *The Design Argument*. 114.

are entirely “saturated” with evolutionary influence implies a certain lack of validity of human thought that cannot be ignored.

One major line of the argument supporting Street’s premise (1) is as follows:

- (1) Human moral evaluative judgements are evolutionarily-evoked because...
 - (a) Some moral ideas have a good influence on reproductive success and other ideas have a bad influence.
 - (b) Were it to be the case that these pressures explained what we think morally, we would expect our moral beliefs to have evolutionary advantages.
 - (c) In light of this, it’s only reasonable to expect that there have been relentless selective pressures on the content of our evaluative judgements.
 - (d) Therefore, natural selection favored the moral, evaluative judgements that gave people a survival advantage (as opposed to the non-naturalist value realism that natural selection distorts from objective moral truths or the value naturalist’s view that natural selection tracks objective moral truths).

Street relies on this claim that our moral beliefs would have presumably had evolutionary advantages if there were relentless selective pressures acting on our evaluative judgements. She maintains that when we look at the content of morality, we find things that are very useful for reproductive success. But is it true that the content of traditional morality is truly survival enhancing? A possible objection arises here (objection 1) – take “thou shalt not kill” as an example of a widely held moral precept. A person who is prepared to kill when it is to his advantage will almost undoubtedly have an advantage over someone who is not, and yet the commandment is categorical, i.e. it doesn’t say “don’t kill – unless it is to your advantage”. In this way, some moral judgements seem to hamper us in terms of survival and reproductive success, rather than help us. Here, Street makes a substantial claim about the evolution of moral psychology that is not obviously true.

In refining her first premise, however, Street seems to develop a possible response to this kind of objection. She concedes that the capacity for “full-fledged evaluative judgements” was a relatively late evolutionary add-on, superimposed on top of more basic behavioral and

motivational tendencies. She then questions whether these full-fledged evaluative judgements are truly genetically heritable – because in order for evolution by natural selection to take place with respect to a given trait, the trait in question must be genetically heritable. Street would be unlikely to say that the acceptance of the judgment that “thou shalt not kill” is a genetically heritable trait. So, when individuals in a given population vary with respect to whether or not they make this particular evaluative judgment, the variation is likely *not* due to genetic differences, but other social factors such as culture or upbringing. Instead, she suggests a model where heritable traits that lead to moral judgements can be more accurately described as “basic evaluative tendencies”, understood roughly as “unreflective, non-linguistic, motivational tendency(ies) to experience something as “called for” or “demanded” in itself, or to experience one thing as “called for” or “counting in favor of” something else”.² In other words, it is social factors that *act upon* our particular genetic predispositions for certain evaluative judgements and are, ultimately, what determine the outcome of a full-fledged evaluative judgment. In this way, the content of human evaluative judgements has been *indirectly* influenced by the forces of natural selection, and there are moral precepts that some would consider prime examples of moral judgements (like “thou shalt not kill”) that, actually, have a lot more to do with social influences rather than evolution.

Street’s premise (2) responds to the view of the non-naturalist that considers evolution as a purely distorting influence on our evaluative judgements (pushing us away from evaluative truth). According to Street, this kind of value realist would argue that “rational reflection can correct for the influence of selective pressures on our values”.³ In other words, we are reflective, self-conscious creatures who do not just “mindlessly endorse” whatever evaluative tendencies

² Street, Sharon. *The Design Argument*. 119.

³ Ibid, 123.

were implanted in us by evolutionary forces. This declaration by the realist sounds very similar to the preceding discussion, where Street argued that full-fledged evaluative judgements likely have a certain separation from evolutionary influences, drawing heavily from social influences. Although she was not saying that these kinds of judgements stand *completely* separate from our more basic evaluative tendencies, she *was* suggesting a model where other, non-heritable social factors that affect these higher-order judgements do come into play.

In countering the non-naturalist, however, Street denies the notion that there is any form of rational reflection that can function to correct for the influence of selective pressures on our moral values. She says, “Rational reflection must always proceed from some evaluative standpoint... in rational reflection, one does not stand completely apart from one’s starting fund of evaluative judgements: rather, one *uses* them, reasons in terms of them, holds some of them up for examination in light of others”.⁴ Like “sorting through contaminated materials with contaminated tools”, full-fledged evaluative judgements cannot stand on their own, independent of the evolutionary history of human evaluative judgements. Her conclusion is: “So long as we assume that there is no relation between evolutionary influences and evaluative truth⁵, the appeal to rational reflection offers no escape from the conclusion that, in the absence of an incredible coincidence, most of our evaluative judgements are likely to be false”.⁶ (This is in essence Street’s premise (2)). In light of Street’s previous argument that non-heritable social factors can be the source of higher-order moral judgements, it is hard to see how her conclusion here is very robust, because it so firmly denies that any such judgements are possible without at least some evolutionary influence.

⁴ Street, Sharon. *The Design Argument*. 124.

⁵ The assumption made in non-naturalist versions of value realism

⁶ Street, Sharon. *The Design Argument*. 125.

So, it seems that Street's "contamination" argument is inconsistent with her initial clarification of premise (1), that there is a certain separation between "basic evaluative tendencies" and "full-fledged evaluative judgements". Street would likely say in response to objection 1 (moral evaluative judgements don't always necessarily promote survival) that "basic evaluative tendencies" do, in fact, promote survival – and the full-fledged post-reasoning evaluative judgements (independent of evolution) are really what seem to count against our survival and undermine our basic evaluative tendencies. However, for this response to hold, she needs to maintain the notion that there do exist some human evaluative capacities that are somehow independent of the basic set of human evaluative attitudes. In light of her position about humans not being able to "sort through contaminated materials with contaminated tools", however, it seems that she *does* concede that we cannot separate any of our moral reasoning from the relentless selective pressures that acted upon them.

Therefore, Street cannot respond to objection 1 without detracting from her subsequent response to the moral realist. She cannot suggest that there are elements of human moral reasoning independent of evolution and our "basic evaluative tendencies" and then rely on the fact that no evaluative judgment stands alone from evolutionary "contamination" to respond to non-naturalist versions of moral realism. So, we are left with the preservation of objection 1, that some moral precepts (which *must* be influenced by evolution) actually hinder our chances of survival. If this objection stands, Street's premise (1) would not hold, because it relies on this assumption that our evaluative judgements must have been beneficial to survival.

An interesting note about Street's "contamination" argument – if Street is right about evolutionary influences acting on every aspect of our moral beliefs (including higher-order rational reflection), her argument must apply to *all* human thought. In *The Cardinal Difficulty of*

Naturalism, C.S. Lewis claims that if we apply a move like Street's to all of our thinking, then we undercut the very possibility of using any thinking at all (even thinking about naturalism in the first place). According to Lewis, the naturalist would say: "Well, perhaps we cannot exactly see – not yet – how natural selection would turn sub-rational mental behavior into inferences that reach truth. But we are certain that this is in fact what has happened".⁷ If we liken Lewis's "inferences" with Street's "full-fledged evaluative judgements", this is in fact the stance that Street takes when she asserts that full-fledged evaluative judgements cannot stand on their own, independent of the evolutionary history of human evaluative judgements. According to Lewis, however, a naturalist like Street would also say "it is incontestable that we do in fact reach truths by inference".⁸ His response: "Once we accept this evolutionary picture... if the value of our reasoning is in doubt, you cannot try to establish it by reasoning".⁹ In an ironic sort of way, it seems that Lewis has shown that in using an argument such as Street's to counter the moral realist and claim that human thought cannot function independent of our evolutionary history, the argument itself (or any argument, for that matter) cannot stand because under this view, *no* reasoning, thinking, etc. can be either true or false.

Although Street's clarification of premise (1) prevents her from being able to respond to objection 1, the notion that evolution has *indirectly* shaped human evaluative decisions seems a more accessible model of moral thought because, as Lewis shows, the argument that rational reflection, inference, and other kinds of thought must always proceed from some evaluative standpoint prohibits us from asserting the truth in anything. This is not to say that natural selection does not pose a challenge to moral realism – Street's "contamination" argument would be relevant if non-naturalist accounts of moral realism failed to show that there are at least some

⁷ Lewis, C.S. *The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism*. 5.

⁸ Ibid, 5.

⁹ Ibid, 5.

evaluative judgements that are not simply the result of more basic evaluative tendencies that have been shaped by selective evolutionary pressures. For this to be true, it could not be the case that our system of values are as thoroughly “saturated” with the influence of natural selection as Street claims. While it is unclear whether the moral realist can show this, it does not seem that Street obviously has shown they cannot and that moral realism is inconsistent with natural selection.

References

- Lewis, C. S. *The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism*. (from Chapter Three of *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*). New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947.
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