Dissolving the Debunker's Puzzle

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There is a two-fold dynamic at work in chapter five of Thomas Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos*. The first dynamic consists in Nagel conceding that what evolutionary biology (as it's standardly understood) implies about the origin and nature of moral judgment is incompatible with his favored version of non-naturalistic moral realism. The second dynamic consists in Nagel's resisting the conclusion that moral non-naturalism is false. Rather than concede that moral non-naturalism is false, Nagel would conclude that what evolutionary biology (as it's standardly understood) implies about the origin and nature of moral judgment is incorrect.

I share Nagel's sympathies with moral nonnaturalism.² So, I applaud his resistance to concluding that this position is false on the basis of what evolutionary biology appears to imply about the origin and nature of moral judgment. I believe, however, that Nagel concedes far more than he should when he says that what evolutionary biology (as it's standardly understood) implies about the origin and nature of moral judgment is incompatible with non-naturalistic realism. The better response to so-called evolutionary challenges to non-naturalist realism, I believe, is to point out that, even if we concede the standard evolutionary picture, these challenges have little bite against these realist views. In this short essay, I sketch two reasons why.

The Debunker's Puzzle

Let me begin by stating the central puzzle with which Nagel is concerned, what I'll call the *Evolutionary Debunker's Puzzle*—or *the Debunker's Puzzle*, for short.³ The puzzle consists of these three claims:

- (1) **Moral non-naturalism**: there are non-natural moral facts, including reasons to act in certain ways.
- (2) **Moral knowledge**: we have some moral knowledge.
- (3) **Evolutionary influence**: evolutionary forces have not only determined which cognitive faculties we have but also considerably shaped their workings, including the workings of the moral faculty, which is simply that ability (or cluster of abilities) by which we form moral judgments.

A comment regarding each of these claims is in order, beginning with moral non-naturalism.

While non-naturalists hold that there are non-natural moral facts, there is little agreement about what a non-natural moral fact would be. In what follows, I'll assume only that, were such

facts to exist, they would have four distinguishing characteristics.⁴ First, many of these facts would be strongly mind-independent in the sense that they exist, but not in virtue of our valuing or desiring (or being such that we would value or desire) non-moral features of the world. In this regard, they differ from the fact *that Yo-Yo-Ma is an admired cellist*, which does depend on the attitudes of admiration that people take toward him. Second, these facts would not play (or be reducible to any facts that play) explanatory roles in the usual sciences, such as physics, biology, or chemistry. Third, and relatedly, these facts would be causally inert, not (in any direct sense) entering into the causal flow of nature, as they would be abstract entities. And, fourth, these moral facts would be (or would necessarily imply) reasons of various sorts. Some of these reasons would be categorical in the sense that they apply to agents regardless of what desires, goals, or social allegiances they may have. In his presentation of his view, Nagel affirms all four of these claims.⁵

As for moral knowledge, in what follows, we can remain relatively non-committal regarding what it is, assuming only the following. First, states of moral knowledge would be constituted by moral judgments or beliefs. And, second, moral judgments would be candidates for moral knowledge only if they have the proper sort of etiology: they could not be the product of luck, accident, or the like but must be "well-formed" in the sense of being reliably formed or the product of cognitive faculties that are working well in a congenial environment. Moral knowledge probably requires more than this, but I'll assume it would involve at least satisfying this "well-formedness" condition. While Nagel has little to say about the nature of moral knowledge, he also accepts both these claims.⁶

As for the evolutionary influence on our cognitive faculties, I will assume that, according to the picture that evolutionary biology bequeaths us, natural selection has rewarded whatever cognitive traits that caused our Pleistocene ancestors to maximize the relative representation of their genes in the gene pool over generations, often doing so by promoting their survival. In many cases, I'll also assume, we have excellent reason to believe that natural selection has given us cognitive capacities that track independent truths about the world with reasonable accuracy, such as truths about midsized material objects in our visual field. Nagel agrees with this last claim, but holds that it has no direct bearing on whether our moral judgments, which are practical, are also likely to be reasonably accurate.⁷

These introductory comments having been made, we can see that the three claims stated above yield a puzzle. According to this puzzle, moral knowledge requires that some of our moral judgments be well-formed, which is what claim (2) tells us. But it is difficult to see how these judgments could be well-formed if the forces of natural selection have deeply influenced the workings of our capacity for forming moral judgments, which is what claim (3) says. These forces, after all, are geared toward producing not true beliefs but maximizing the relative representation of the genes of ancestral humans in the gene pool over generations. In certain cases, as already noted, it is plausible to hold that this resulted in cognitive capacities that accurately track independent facts in our environment, such as ordinary midsized material objects in our visual field. But if there were non-natural moral facts, it is very difficult to see how

the forces of natural selection would have influenced the workings of our moral faculty in such a way that we reliably grasp them.

The difficulty that faces non-naturalists is described in different ways. Sharon Street, whose version of the Debunker's Puzzle Nagel accepts, holds that since, as a conceptual matter, there could be any number of moral systems, we have little reason to hold that evolution would have "pushed" us toward the correct one. Given that non-natural moral facts are not the sort of thing that could enter into causal relations and, hence, be tracked by our moral faculty, there seems to be little prospect of offering any kind of account according to which, surprisingly enough, our evolutionary heritage put us in a good position to track them. Something, it appears, has to give.

Responses to this puzzle fall into three broad categories. Some philosophers, such as Richard Joyce and Jonas Olson, propose that we reject claim (2), giving up the idea that there is any credible account of how we would gain moral knowledge if there were moral facts. These philosophers embrace moral skepticism.

Other philosophers, such as David Copp and Peter Railton, recommend that we reject claim (1), embracing metaethical naturalism according to which moral facts are ordinary natural facts that our moral judgments could track by bearing causal relations to them.¹⁰ These philosophers reject moral non-naturalism in favor of moral naturalism.

Finally, other philosophers, such as Nagel, propose to reject claim (3), at least when it is understood to incorporate the assumption that the forces of natural section select, in the first instance, not for true beliefs but traits that maximize the relative representation of genes in the gene pool. These philosophers, then, reject the deliverances of the standard evolutionary picture.¹¹

In Nagel's case, this rejection is accompanied by a positive explanatory hypothesis—what he calls "the teleological hypothesis"—that is supposed to explain how, given our evolutionary history, we might have arrived at moral knowledge. According to this hypothesis, "the natural world would have a propensity to give rise to beings of the kind that have a good—beings for which and of the things can be good or bad." These beings, Nagel says, "are all the actual and possible forms of life. They have appeared through the historical process of evolution, but part of the explanation for the existence of that process and of the possibilities on which natural selection operates would be that they bring value into the world, in a great variety of forms." Nagel continues:

This is a revision of the Darwinian picture rather than an outright denial of it. A teleological hypothesis will acknowledge that the details of that historical development are explained largely through natural selection among the available possibilities on the basis of reproductive fitness in changing environments [...] The teleological hypothesis is that these things may be determined not merely by value-free chemistry and physics but also by something else, namely a cosmic predisposition to the formation of life, consciousness, and the value that is inseparable from them.¹⁴

In sum, given the teleological hypothesis, it would be no surprise that, if there were conscious beings (as there are), then there would also be values realistically understood. And given that there are such values—including moral ones—it would be no surprise that we could, when all goes well, know them. That, too, would be a result of the "cosmic predisposition" that drives the evolutionary process.

I believe that we should reject each of these three ways of responding to the Debunker's Puzzle. Rather than surrender any of the claims that constitute the puzzle, the best strategy, in my view, is to dissolve it, contending that it fails to generate any reason to reject moral non-naturalism. If one is a non-naturalist, as Nagel is, the reasons for pursuing this strategy are at least these. For one thing, non-naturalists should find all three claims that compose the Debunker's Puzzle very plausible, albeit for different reasons. Any non-naturalist, after all, must assent to the first two claims, while our best science supports the third claim. Secondly, while I am not prepared simply to dismiss Nagel's teleological hypothesis, it would be unwise for non-naturalists to embrace it in order to solve the Debunker's Puzzle. To the contrary, sound philosophical methodology would counsel non-naturalists to take a more conservative approach, not taking on additional controversial commitments that they don't have to. In the next two sections, I contend that non-naturalists needn't take on such commitments.

Dissolution: The First Strategy

I have already noted that the version of the Debunker's Puzzle on which Nagel has his eye is that formulated by Sharon Street. In her formulation of the puzzle, Street claims that there are no conceptual constraints on what counts as a moral system, writing:

According to the normative realist, there are normative truths that hold independently of all of our evaluative attitudes. Moreover, as a purely conceptual matter, these independent normative truths might be anything. In other words, for all our bare normative concepts tell us, survival might be bad, our children's lives might be worthless, and the fact that someone has helped us might be a reason to hurt that person in return. Of course we think that these claims are false—perhaps even necessarily false—but the point is that if they are false, it is not our bare normative concepts that tell us so.¹⁵

This thesis, which I'll refer to as the *No Content Thesis*, plays an important role in Street's argument. Given that there are an untold number of incompatible moral systems, it would be a massive stroke of luck, according to Street, if evolutionary forces were to have directed us to the correct one.

In one place, Nagel concedes the No Content Thesis to Street.¹⁶ In my judgment, he ought not to, since any minimally eccentric moral system that concerns beings like us in a world such as ours must have moral content of a certain kind.

To see why, let me unpack the terminology introduced in the last sentence. The Suppose we say that a minimally eccentric moral system is a reasonably comprehensive and consistent body of moral propositions that apply to beings like us in a world such as ours. By a reasonably comprehensive body of moral propositions, I mean an array of propositions that concern nearly all situations that agents might find themselves in and imply, often in conjunction with empirical propositions, a range of moral assessments and recommendations for those situations. Beings like us are mortal, embodied, not subject to daily bouts of complete amnesia, susceptible to physical, emotional, and other psychological pleasures and pains, capable of introspection, of friendship, of self-esteem, possessed of some degree of empathy and sympathy, and able to reason deductively, inductively, and abductively in at least minimal ways. Finally, a world such as ours is one that can sustain life, one in which people do not pop in and out of existence willy-nilly, one in which the future is not known to be in all respects perfectly identical to the past, one in which material objects are observable—in short, one that is regulated by laws of nature and broad empirical statistical generalizations that are at least close to the ones that obtain here on earth.

Non-naturalists, I claim, should hold that any minimally eccentric moral system must include an array of propositions that Russ Shafer-Landau and I have elsewhere called the *moral fixed points*, propositions such as:

- It is *pro tanto* wrong to engage in the recreational slaughter of a fellow person.
- It is *pro tanto* wrong to break a promise on which another is relying simply for convenience's sake.
- It is *pro tanto* wrong to humiliate others simply for pleasure.
- It is *pro tanto* wrong to torture others just because they have inconvenienced you.
- It is *pro tanto* wrong to impose severe burdens on others simply because of their physical appearance.

These apparent moral truths, I suggest, are excellent candidates for being a species of conceptual truth in the sense that nothing could be a moral system that failed to include them (or something very much like them) and, were someone to deny a sufficient number of them, that would be strong prima facie reason to hold that that person suffers from a conceptual deficiency. Such a deficiency would, presumably, consist in an agent's: (i) lacking the relevant concepts, such as the concept 'being wrong'; (ii) having an inadequate grasp of them, failing to see that they apply to some paradigm cases; (iii) having a confused grasp of them, perhaps holding that the concept 'being wrong' fails to apply to acts taken toward those who belong to some "out group," such as

those of another ethnic group; or (iv) failing to appreciate or acknowledge the manifest implications of the concepts in question, owing to some aspect of his psychology or situation that inhibits him from acknowledging that actions such as recreational slaughter are wrong (even though they may *seem* to him to be wrong). These claims, it is worth emphasizing, do not imply that, when an agent suffers from a conceptual deficiency, she must be conceptually confused; there are a variety of ways to suffer from such a deficiency that do not consist in being confused. Moreover, the claim that any minimally eccentric moral system must incorporate the moral fixed points is compatible with there being many different *normative* systems, such as those embraced by hedonists, egoists, and Nietzscheans. Not every normative system, however, is a moral system.

If the claims articulated in the preceding paragraph are correct, it follows that the No Content Thesis is false. For, contrary to what Street claims in the passage quoted above, there are contentful conceptual constraints on what can count as a moral system (for beings like us in a world such as ours), and the moral fixed points provide them. Since any such system must of conceptual necessity incorporate the moral fixed points, they are guaranteed to be elements of the uniquely correct minimally eccentric moral system. Let me also note that appeal to the moral fixed points helps to neutralize a further argument that Street offers, wherein she claims that it is no use to appeal to rational reflection as a way to correct the distorting influence of evolution since "the fund of evaluative judgments with which human reflection began was thoroughly contaminated with illegitimate influence." ¹⁸ If this is supposed to be a claim about our moral thinking, then it is false. For, if the view I am sketching is true, to be a competent moral cognizer would require one to affirm the moral fixed points. By relying on the moral fixed points, however, one could correct for at least some malign evolutionary influences, subjecting the rest of one's moral beliefs to critical scrutiny, certifying some, and rejecting others. In this sort of scenario, the moral fixed points would function as epistemic anchors, providing the means not only to arrive at moral knowledge but to also to engage in processes of rational belief revision, such as reflective equilibrium.

There is much more to say about the role of the moral fixed points, and I do not want to give the impression that appeal to them settles all questions that the Debunker's Puzzle might raise. (Appeal to the moral fixed points, for example, doesn't settle any issues regarding whether moral reasons are authoritative. (Appeal to the Mo Content Thesis. My claims are more modest. I maintain only that the version of the Debunker's Puzzle that Nagel accepts appeals to the No Content Thesis, and that non-naturalists should reject this thesis. A satisfactory response to the Debunker's Puzzle, then, requires non-naturalists neither to reject its third claim nor to embrace something as controversial and speculative as Nagel's teleological hypothesis.

Dissolution: The Second Strategy

In the last section, I quoted a passage in which Street claims that "the fund of evaluative judgments with which human reflection began was thoroughly contaminated with illegitimate influence." In his discussions of the Debunker's Puzzle, William FitzPatrick has argued that this claim needs to be carefully evaluated. For while nearly everyone party to the discussion of whether our moral judgments are well-formed accepts that evolutionary forces have influenced the workings of our cognitive faculties, including the moral faculty, the crucial question is *to what extent* evolutionary forces have influenced the workings of the moral faculty and whether its influence has been counteracted by other influences, such as reliable moral reflection.

Here are two possibilities. On the one hand, the Debunker's Puzzle may rely on a very strong claim, such as the:

Extreme Explanatory Claim (EEC): the content of our moral beliefs *across the board*:

- (i) reflects deep shaping by evolutionary forces that operated on the moral belief-forming dispositions of ancestral humans, according to principles insensitive to the truth of the content of moral beliefs, and
- (ii) does *not* reflect any independent influence from developed forms of moral reflection *guided by independent moral facts as such*, through a grasp of their grounds as such.

On the other, the Debunker's Puzzle may rely on a significantly weaker claim, such as the:

Modest Explanatory Claim (MEC): some familiar but suspect moral beliefs, such as those that concern racial purity, rigid gender roles, and clan loyalty, plausibly reflect only evolutionary influences unguided by the moral facts (and conditioned by cultural influences operating equally independently of the moral facts), which are thus unlikely to be reliable and, hence (given our knowledge of this) are likely unjustified instead.²¹

In principle, when claim (3) of the Debunker's Puzzle tells us that evolutionary forces have "considerably shaped" the workings of the moral faculty, it could express either of these claims. The question that faces non-naturalists is whether they should interpret (3) to state (EEC) or (MEC).

Following Street, Nagel interprets claim (3) of the Debunker's Puzzle to express (EEC). This strikes me as a mistake for two reasons. First, although Street presents her argument as if it turns on widely accepted scientific claims, the relevant sciences, such as evolutionary biology, do not tell us or imply that (EEC) is more likely to be true than (MEC). These sciences, after all, have nothing to say about moral facts. How, then, would a discipline such as evolutionary biology give us good reason to believe that the workings of the moral faculty does *not* reflect any independent influence from developed forms of moral reflection guided by independent moral

facts, through a grasp of them or their grounds? Second, proponents of the Debunker's Puzzle such as Street cannot simply assume at the outset that (EEC) is true, for that would be to assume what needs to be established. What we need at this point in the dialectic is a compelling argument that non-naturalists should accept (EEC) rather than (MEC). While there might be such an argument, it is worth noting that, to this point in the discussion, advocates of the Debunker's Puzzle have not produced it—the main reason being that they have not distinguished (EEC) from (MEC), as FitzPatrick does.

Now consider (MEC), which is (in one respect) considerably more modest than (EEC), since it does not imply that our moral beliefs have been saturated by distorting evolutionary influences. While (MEC) implies that some of our moral beliefs are suspect, it is compatible with other of our moral beliefs being reflective and informed, the result of our having grasped the moral facts, such as the moral fixed points, and employed reliable strategies of refining our beliefs, such as reflective equilibrium. As FitzPatrick points out, (MEC) is modest in another important sense, since it requires rather little of evolution. For, while nonnaturalists must hold that the moral faculty yields a range of well-formed moral beliefs, they needn't defend the further thesis that evolution furnished this faculty. All that's needed is for evolution to have given us

[T]he basic raw materials—reflective, intellectual, and emotional potentialities—necessary for us to develop reliable moral belief-forming dispositions ourselves, by developing those potentialities through the right forms of experience, training and reflection in rich cultural contexts, in such a way as to come reliably to track moral truths through gaining understanding. This is directly analogous to our cultural development in other domains of reliable capacities to track truths about non-linear algebra or quantum non-locality or metaphysical modality, none of which played any more role in the evolution of Pleistocene human cognitive capacities than moral truths did.²²

In fact, if I am right to hold that the moral fixed points are a species of conceptual truth, then to acquire some moral knowledge, evolution need only have equipped us with the ability to grasp to a sufficient degree moral concepts such as 'being wrong.' With such abilities at our disposal, we could thereby come to know a variety of fundamental moral truths.

Conclusion

Let us return to the Debunker's Puzzle, which, you'll remember, includes the following three claims:

- (1) **Moral non-naturalism**: there are non-natural moral facts, including reasons to act in certain ways.
- (2) **Moral knowledge**: we have some moral knowledge.

(3) **Evolutionary influence**: evolutionary forces have not only determined which cognitive faculties we have but also considerably shaped their workings, including the workings of the moral faculty, which is simply that ability (or cluster of abilities) by which we form moral judgments.

Suppose you were to accept, as Nagel does, the No Content Thesis and the Extreme Explanatory Claim (EEC). If you wished to resist rejecting moral non-naturalism, that might require you to reject claim (3) of the puzzle, offering an alternative explanation of how, given our evolutionary history, we might have arrived at moral knowledge. In response, I've argued that we should prefer a more conservative approach. We should accept all three claims of the Debunker's Puzzle but reject both the No Content Thesis and the Extreme Explanatory Claim (EEC).

Notes

- 1. Nagel 2012.
- 2. I have reservations about some of the claims that Nagel attributes to non-naturalists, but these differences will not matter for present purposes.
- 3. Variations of the puzzle can be found in Greene 2008, Joyce 2006, Kitcher 2005, 2011, Locke 2014, Ruse 1998 (ch. 6), and Street 2006, 2008a, forthcoming.
- 4. Defenders of non-naturalism include Cuneo and Shafer-Landau 2014, Enoch 2011, FitzPatrick 2008, 2011, Parfit 2011, Scanlon 1998, Shafer-Landau 2003, 2006, and Wedgwood 2007.
- 5. Nagel 2012, 98–113.
- 6. Nagel 2012, 107–09.
- 7. Nagel 2012, 108.
- 8. Street 2006, 121.
- 9. See Joyce 2001, 2006 and Olson 2014.
- 10. See Copp 2008 and Railton 2010.
- 11. See Nagel 2012 and, somewhat differently, Plantinga 1993, 2002, and Plantinga and Tooley 2008.
- 12. Nagel 2012, 121.
- 13. Ibid.

- 14. Nagel 2012, 123.
- 15. Street 2008a, 208. This claim is assumed as well in Street 2006, passim.
- 16. Nagel 2012, 107.
- 17. In what follows, I sketch the approach developed and defended at greater length in Cuneo and Shafer-Landau 2014.
- 18. Street 2006, 124.
- 19. Although, I believe that appeal to them helps; see Cuneo 2014, ch. 7.
- 20. See FitzPatrick 2014a, 2014b.
- 21. Cf. FitzPatrick 2014a.
- 22. FitzPatrick 2014b, 245.
- 23. Although, see Enoch 2011, ch. 7 and Wielenberg 2010.

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