



# Ethics // Spring 2026

## Handout 15

### Evolutionary debunking: Street

Remark 1. In what follows we use ‘evaluative’ and ‘moral’ as synonyms.

**THE DARWINIAN DILEMMA.** Let’s begin with the following: 109

(15-1) **Big Premiss:** Moral theories (or ‘theories of value’) have to be consistent with natural science—in particular, with the Darwinian theory of evolution.

To spell this out a bit: man is fully part of the natural world. He is a biological organism. His abilities, his behavioural dispositions, his typical responses, all have developed in the course of evolution.

If this is so, trouble looms for moral realism. Here is how the argument will go:

(15-2) **Moral realism:** Moral facts are part of the objective reality, exist independently of human judgements, attitudes, activities. 111

**Challenge for realism:** Explain the relation between our Darwin-shaped ‘evaluative attitudes’ and moral facts. This yields a dilemma. 109

**First horn of the dilemma:** There is no relation between attitudes and facts. Then moral realism loses by a knockout (the threat of distortion).

**Second horn of the dilemma:** There is a relation between attitudes and facts. Then moral realism loses by points (an alternative theory is preferable).

**WHAT IS MORAL REALISM?** Key to the argument is the distinction between facts and attitudes. 110

(15-3) **Moral facts:** Facts, truths, propositions of the form ‘ $A$  should  $\phi$ ’, ‘ $X$  is wrong’ etc.

**Moral attitudes:** unreflective responses of approval and disapproval, pro-attitudes and con-attitudes etc.

So according to moral realism, moral facts hold independently of moral attitudes. But there is an important caveat: this independence must be *global*. For according to *moral anti-realism*, moral facts hold independently of attitudes if the latter are not properly adjusted, do not meet certain epistemic criteria, are not in a reflective equilibrium. Thus, according to moral realism (but not to moral anti-realism), moral facts hold even if *all* attitudes are at variance with them. 111

*Example 2.* Suppose you say, ‘Incest is wrong.’ According to moral realism, there is a fact about incest that you may or may not appreciate. By the same token, even if every rational person in the course of history said that incest was wrong, it may still be that, *really*, incest is fine. But according to moral anti-realism, this can’t be so: the fact about incest is constituted (at the very least) by the consensus of all rational people.

**DARWINIAN INFLUENCES.** The Big Premiss yields a plausible speculation: moral attitudes have been shaped by evolution. This speculation can be substantiated with the examples (1)-(6) that point at the following pattern: our attitudes are conducive to survival and reproduction. This can be cashed out further in terms of kin selection or reciprocal altruism. 114  
115  
116

Let’s get clearer about the issue here. The claim is not that (1)-(6) represent truth, are morally justified. The issue is rather that we *do* have these attitudes. Now the question: what could explain us having them? Street says, ‘Darwinian influences explain them, what else.’

But isn’t this cherry-picking? Many people are racist, sexist, xenophobic, homophobic, transphobic, Francophobic. They have the relevant attitudes. Are we now saying that those were also shaped by evolution? This misses the point. Street is interested in the ‘widely held evaluative judgements’ and the very basic evaluative tendencies. Racism may be traced to reciprocal altruism. Homophobia may be traced to disgust (as we saw earlier). Again, we are not saying that these attitudes are ‘correct’. 133

We are rather saying that, if people do have them, at the fundamental level, this may only be explained by Darwinian influences.

Perhaps the following should help. In Germany there are Francophobes. In France there are Germanophobes. And in Canada there aren't any racists or xenophobes. But there is no land, not even in Canada, where people don't form different attitudes toward 'us' and 'not-us'. It's just that 'us' is understood differently. In Germany 'us' are Germans, and in Canada 'us' are all the humanity. So not-us will comprise non-humans, such as animals. Perhaps in Sweden 'us' will comprise animals too, but then there are aliens... We are, therefore, looking for *cultural universals* that are interpreted differently in different cultures and different periods.

This reference to cultural universals is suggested by the discussion of primitive attitudes on which moral judgements were 'superimposed'. That is why Street also says that Darwinian influences are 'indirect'.

118-119

**THE NO-CONNECTION REALISM.** Suppose realism denies the connection between facts and attitudes. Then there is a good chance that attitudes *mislead* us about facts. For then we say, on one hand, that attitudes are driven by survival and reproduction, and on the other hand, that this has no relation to moral facts. Then attitudes will create a 'distortion': they push us to form certain judgements, and those may correlate with how moral things *really* are merely by accident.

122

Note the point Street makes that is especially important for us (our course). An objection may be that reason guides us toward facts. Answer: no, reason follows some unreflective attitude. The same point may be made by using Greene's arguments against deontology.

124

Another alternative is that facts and judgements are correlated thanks to some moral 'intuition' of a non-causal nature. This can't be allowed, as it would contradict the Big Premiss.

**THE TRACKING REALISM.** Realism's best shot may be to insist on some correlation that is itself intelligible within the Darwinian theory. So then: our judgements track moral facts, since having these judgements was advantageous to us in terms of survival and reproduction. That is: making *true* moral judgements was advantageous to us in evolutionary terms (survival and reproduction).

126

There is nothing incoherent about this, but there is a theoretically better account.

**THE ADAPTIVE LINK ACCOUNT.** The task is, again, to explain how we got the attitudes that we actually have. And again, we say that these attitudes are advantageous to us in evolutionary terms. However: what makes them so is not the access to objective moral truths, but merely that having these attitudes is *itself* advantageous for survival and reproduction. These attitudes make us 'respond' to given situations in the ways that are advantageous.

127

*Example 3.* Suppose you are averse to incest. That is your moral (evaluative) attitude. The tracking account says: you have this attitude, because you've managed to grasp the proposition, 'Incest is wrong.' And the reason why you do grasp it is because doing that proved to be evolutionarily good in the course of evolution (a kin-selection-style explanation).

The adaptive link account says: you have this attitude, because doing that proved to be evolutionarily good in the course of evolution (a kin-selection-style explanation).

**ADVANTAGES OF THE ADAPTIVE LINK.** How does the tracking realism lose on points?

(15-4) Parsimony: Obvious, see Example 3.

129

Clarity: Less obvious. Can't we say that grasping how the world is *is* advantageous to us?

130

Street replies: moral truths aren't analogous to empirical truths.

*Remark 4.* Compare to Lorenz's refutation of idealism...

Explanatory power: The case for the adaptive link account is straightforward. The main idea here is that the tracking realism is too obscure, while the adaptive link account provides the welcome unifying explanations.

To elaborate on the question of explanatory power, we can give three reasons. (1) Coincidence: how to explain our moral *success*? Isn't it just too good for its own sake? On the other hand, (2) what to say

132

133


about the failure? Why do some of us tend to be Francophobes? Surely not because this is true! Thus we fall back on the reciprocal-altruism-style explanations, which are exactly the explanations of the adaptive link account. Finally, (3) moral indifference. There are phenomena that we don't 'moralise' and toward which we form no moral attitudes—e.g., kissing trees. To pass a moral judgement on tree kissers was evolutionarily idle, hence the adaptive link account is strong here. But the tracking account has nothing informative to say. 133

Is there any other possible view that the realist could adopt? Street argues that there isn't. If the realist endorses the Darwinian picture, then he *must* hold that the attitudes track normative facts. Otherwise, either he should think that there is a supernatural, non-Darwinian way to account for the match between attitudes and facts, or else, he must be a moral sceptic entertaining a possibility that the attitudes distort normative facts. 134 135

**THE VALUE NATURALIST OBJECTION.** The value naturalist defends the identity between normative facts and natural facts. Ostensibly, he can argue that, just as we were selected to track natural facts, so were we selected to track normative ones—for a simple reason that these sets of facts are the same. 136

But we have to distinguish two versions of v-naturalism. On one of them, had we had different evaluative attitudes, then normative facts would have been different—namely, they would have been identical with a different set of natural facts. Such a view, Street claims, is not a realist view. 136

A realist view must entail that normative facts are independent of evaluative attitudes. A sophisticated way to achieve that is to invoke *rigidification*. We fix the identity of natural facts and evaluative facts by stipulating that our actual attitudes tell us which facts are identical with which. 137 138

So suppose that our actual attitudes tell us that evaluative facts are identical with natural facts N (in other words, they track the class N). Then in a counterfactual situation where our attitudes track the class M it would still be the case that evaluative facts are identical with N, since, by assumption, the identity is fixed by our *actual* attitudes. Street argues that this is not a genuinely realist view. A counterfactual population could do the same with their attitudes—i.e. regarding their attitudes as actual. Thus, when we say that 'The good is N' and they say 'The good is M', we simply talk in different languages, using 'good' differently by stipulation. The upshot is some form of relativism, rather than realism. 

A value realist is a genuine realist when he takes normative facts to be independent of our evaluative attitudes. Then he must deal with the Darwinian dilemma. Just like before, he must explain why evaluative attitudes can reliably tell us the identity of normative and natural facts, if those attitudes are products of evolution. 139 140