

Epistemic Companions-in-Guilt and Street's Darwinian Dilemma

I. Introduction

In "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," Street argues that, because *our evaluative attitudes* (including *our judgments about reasons*) have been shaped by evolutionary influences, *realism about practical reasons* faces insuperable epistemological problems.

A common response: "If this argument shows *realism about practical reasons* to be false, it also shows *realism about epistemic reasons* to be false. But *anti-realism about epistemic reasons* is crazy talk: it's one thing to say that *what we have reason to do* depends on us and our attitudes, but quite another thing to say that *what we have reason to believe* depends on us and our attitudes."

In "Evolution and the Normativity of Epistemic Reasons," Street takes up this challenge and argues, rather heroically, that anti-realism about epistemic reasons is not just crazy, but in fact the preferred view.

II. Street on Realism about Epistemic Reasons

Street's way of understanding the realism vs. anti-realism distinction:

normative realism = "the view that there are at least some normative facts or truths that hold independently of all our evaluative attitudes, such that there can be normative reason for an agent to X even though the conclusion that he has this reason in no way follows, as a logical or instrumental matter, from the agent's own set of values in combination with non-normative facts" (pp. 1-2).

normative anti-realism = "the view that there are no such normative facts or truths" (p. 2).

This is a very puzzling way of drawing this distinction. Some issues:

- What does it mean for something to follow from a value? (Category mistake?) What does it mean for something to follow "as an instrumental matter"? Why is such following not a normative matter? Etc.
- It seems that *preference utilitarianism* and *ethical egoism* + *a desire-based theory of well-being* both count as anti-realist by this definition. But shouldn't these views be compatible with realism?

reply: Even if, according to these views, *the fact that I ought to ϕ* is grounded in *facts about attitudes*, this grounding fact is itself normative, so whether such views count as realist or anti-realist depends on whether that grounding fact is itself grounded in facts about our attitudes.

counter-reply #1: It's not clear that grounding facts are themselves normative.

counter-reply #2: Then anti-realists are committed to every grounding fact itself being grounded in something else. But it is commonly assumed that there must exist a fundamental layer of facts that ground all other facts (i.e. of ungrounded grounders).

counter-reply #3: In order to avoid Street's Darwinian dilemma, it seems all we need is *facts about reasons* to be grounded in *facts about attitudes*, without an infinite hierarchy of groundings "all the way down."

In the end, this terminological issue probably doesn't matter too much, as long as we keep in mind that by "realist theory of reasons" Street really means "attitude-independent theory of reasons," and by "anti-realist theory of reasons" she really means "attitude-dependent theory of reasons."

Street chooses to restrict her discussion in this article to *inductive reasons for belief*.

On the one hand, this is disappointing, since her opponent's strongest case is presented by *deductive* and *non-inferential reasons for belief*. On the other hand, it would be extremely odd if it turned out that *inductive reasons for belief* are attitude-dependent, but *deductive* and *non-inferential reasons for belief* are not.

According to Street, if I claim, “Fact F is a reason to believe that P,” there are two claims I could be making:

- *Claim 1:* Fact F makes it more likely that P.
- *Claim 2:* In virtue of fact F’s making it more likely that P, F is a reason to believe that P.

Thus, according to Street, there are two forms of realism about epistemic reasons:

1. *realism about Cliffordian normativity:* Claim 2 is a substantive normative truth that holds independently of any agent’s evaluative attitudes and what follows, logically or instrumentally, from them [except insofar as such attitudes are required for the truth of F].
2. *normative realism about likelihoods:* Claim 1 is a substantive normative truth that holds independently of any agent’s evaluative attitudes and what follows, logically or instrumentally, from them [except...], and this normative truth is identical to the normative truth <F is a reason to believe that P>.

(These clearly don’t exhaust the options; for example, one could hold that *the makes-more-likely relation* in Claim 1 is an attitude-independent normative relation, without holding that it is identical to *the is-a-reason-to-believe relation*.)

On either of these accounts, it follows that “Fact F makes it more likely that P” entails “F is a reason to believe that P.” But this is a substantive first-order claim that one may well doubt. Some worries:

- We need to distinguish “F is a reason to believe that P” from “F is a reason for S to believe that P.” Street often writes as if “F makes it more likely that P” is sufficient for the latter as well as the former. But this is highly implausible.

for ex.: Suppose *the fact that my fingerprints are all over the murder weapon* [= F] makes it more likely that *I’m the murderer* [= that P]. It doesn’t follow that F is a reason for Vladimir Putin (who has never heard of me or the victim) to believe that P.

- If “Fact F makes it more likely that P” entails “F is a reason to believe that P”, then the fact that P is always a reason to believe that P; indeed, it would seem to be a decisive reason to believe that P (what could make it *more* likely that P?). But then there is always decisive reason to believe every truth. Yet presumably we can sometimes have decisive reason to believe a falsehood.
- More generally, the claim that “F makes it more likely that P” entails “F is a reason to believe that P” and vice versa is a species of truth-conducivism, i.e. of a teleological view of reasons for belief.

So a realist about epistemic reasons might complain that he/she need not hold the first-order account of reasons for belief that Street is pinning on him/her.

Still, Street could reply that whatever first-order account of reasons for belief is correct, exactly parallel issues arise. [Is this true?]

III. The Structure of Street’s Argument

Street considers a variant of Shah’s account of the nature of belief when formulating her argument against realism about epistemic reasons:

the constitutive takings account: It is constitutive of an attitude’s being a genuine *belief that P* that the creature holding it take considerations she regards as bearing on the truth of <P> to be reasons for and against that attitude.

(How this differs from Shah’s account: (i) it is formulated in terms of *pro tanto* reasons, rather than in terms of correctness; (ii) for Shah *the attributor* of a belief needs to make a certain normative judgment, whereas for Street *the believer* needs to make a certain normative judgment.)

Street assumes that “considerations bearing on the truth of <P>” = “considerations that make it more or less likely that P.” But, again, this is controversial. (Truth-bearing need not be construed probabilistically.)

Street loves to argue by dilemma. Her argument against realism about epistemic reasons takes the form of a dilemma nested in a dilemma nested in a dilemma:

Street's argument against realism about epistemic reasons:

The realist about epistemic reasons must either (i) *be a realist about Cliffordian normativity* or (ii) *be a normative realist about likelihoods*.

If (i), then the realist must either (a) *accept the constitutive takings account* or (b) *deny the constitutive takings account*.

If (a), then Claim 2 is attitude-dependent, so the realist isn't really a realist.

If (b), then the realist faces Street's Darwinian dilemma, and thus cannot explain how we can have knowledge of epistemic reasons.

If (ii), then the realist faces Street's Darwinian dilemma, and thus cannot explain how we can have knowledge of epistemic reasons.

IV. Assessing Street's Argument

The most interesting part of Street's argument occurs during the first sub-horn of its first horn. (The other horns/sub-horns are exactly analogous to Street's argument against realism about practical reasons.)

The following passage encapsulates Street's central argument in this sub-horn:

"This is not a realist view about Cliffordian normativity. One way of putting the point is to say that if the constitutive takings account is right, then it is conceptually impossible to go badly wrong with respect to the alleged independent normative truth in question, according to which considerations bearing on the truth of P are reasons for and against belief that P. If one goes too far 'wrong' about the matter—perhaps by explicitly denying it in full consciousness, or simply ignoring it entirely, systematically taking considerations *other* than those bearing on the truth of P as reasons for and against "belief" that P—then one isn't making a substantive mistake about one's reasons for belief that P, but rather is no longer recognizably someone who believes that P at all" (p. 10).

Street's argument here seems to be:

- P1. If the constitutive takings account is correct, then it is impossible to be mistaken about Claim 2 (i.e. impossible to believe that Claim 2 is false).
- P2. If it is impossible to be mistaken about Claim 2, then Claim 2 is attitude-dependent.
- P3. If Claim 2 is attitude-dependent, then realism about Cliffordian normativity is false.
- C. So, if the constitutive takings account is correct, then realism about Cliffordian normativity is false

P2 is potentially problematic, but I propose we grant it to Street; the argument's main problem lies elsewhere.

In support of P1, Street offers the story of Ben:

F = the fact that the moon does not now possess the conditions for intelligent life as we know it (water, a habitable environment, etc.), nor does it appear to have ever possessed those conditions

that P = the proposition that there is no intelligent life on the moon

Ben = someone who grants Claim 1 [= *F makes it more likely that P*] but denies Claim 2 [= *in virtue of F's making it more likely that P, F is a reason to believe that P*], because he regards all and only considerations about what's amusing to be reasons for and against belief that P.

Given the constitutive takings account, Ben doesn't count as someone who genuinely believes that $\neg P$ (despite his saying things like, "There is intelligent life on the moon"). Street takes this to show that Ben isn't in "the belief business" at all with regard to $\langle P \rangle$, thus lending support to P1 of her argument.

However, this is a clear mistake.

What is relevant to the truth of premise P1 is *whether Ben is in "the belief business" with regard to Claim 1, not whether Ben is in "the belief business" with regard to $\langle P \rangle$.*

Consider two different ways of filling in the details of the Ben story:

T = the fact that a very impressive and well respected philosopher has said that Claim 2 is true

Ben-1 = a version of Ben who grants *that T makes it more likely that Claim 2 is true* [= Meta-Claim 1] but denies *that in virtue of T's making it more likely that Claim 2 is true, F is a reason to believe Claim 2* [= Meta-Claim 2], because he regards all and only considerations about what's amusing to be reasons for and against believing Claim 2

Ben-2 = a version of Ben who grants *that T makes it more likely that Claim 2 is true* [= Meta-Claim 1] and grants *that in virtue of T's making it more likely that Claim 2 is true, F is a reason to believe Claim 2* [= Meta-Claim 2]

It is perfectly compatible with the constitutive takings account that Ben-2 believes that Claim 2 is false. Thus P1 of Street's argument is mistaken.

What about Street's invocation of her Darwinian dilemma against either *the normative realist about likelihoods* or *the realist about Cliffordian normativity who doesn't accept the constitutive takings account*?

Here the usual sorts of complaints about Street's Darwinian argument apply:

- In taking it for granted that we can only have knowledge of epistemic reasons if our beliefs about epistemic reasons track the truth, Street is making some contentious epistemological assumptions.
- Street assumes that the only way to explain how our beliefs about epistemic reasons track the truth is to provide a "causal explanation" (p. 12). But there are other dependency relations we can appeal to in addition to *the causation relation* (in particular, there is *the in-virtue-of relation*).
- The tracking account and the mere coincidence account don't appear to exhaust the options.

And so on: for further discussion, take Phil. 173 – Metaethics in the fall.

V. Street on How to Be a Constructivist about Epistemic Reasons

Street ends her article by quickly sketching two ways to be *a constructivist about epistemic reasons*:

way #1: Accept the constitutive takings account, and argue that engagement in the belief business is a necessary part of agency. Here *the evaluative attitudes on which our epistemic reasons depend = our judgments in the truth of instances of Claim 2*.

problem: In light of the criticism of the first sub-horn of the first horn of Street's argument, we can see that the necessity of *engaging in the belief business at all* doesn't entail the necessity of *engaging in the belief business with regard to an individual proposition*.

way #2: Accept the constitutive takings account, hold that one's practical reasons determine whether one should engage in the belief business, and embrace a constructivist account of practical reasons. Here *the evaluative attitudes on which epistemic reasons depend = the evaluative attitudes on which practical reasons depend*.

problem: The same problems that arose for Kornblith's proposal are likely to arise for this account as well.