

Applications in Metaethics: Is Normativity Mind-Dependent? (Pt. 2)

I. Street's Darwinian Dilemma for Normative Realists

Recall Street's way of drawing the realism vs. antirealism distinction in metaethics:

normative realism = there are *at least some* normative facts or truths that hold independently of all our evaluative attitudes;

normative antirealism = there are *no* normative facts or truths that hold independently of all our evaluative attitudes.

Street's evolutionary argument against normative realism starts from the following premise:

the Darwinian hypothesis: Natural selection and other evolutionary factors have had a tremendous influence on the content of our evaluative attitudes.

Given this hypothesis, Street holds that realists must take a stand on the relation between *the evolutionary forces that have influenced the content of our evaluative attitudes* and *the attitude-independent normative truths posited by the realist*.

This leads to a dilemma for the realist:

- *horn #1 ("assert a relation")*: Hold that evolutionary forces have tended to push our normative judgments (and other evaluative attitudes) *toward* the attitude-independent normative truth.
- *horn #2 ("deny a relation")*: Hold that evolutionary forces have tended to push our normative judgments (and other evaluative attitudes) either *away from* or *neither away from nor toward* the attitude-independent normative truth.

The (supposed) problem with horn #1 is empirical:

Street claims that realists who embrace this horn are forced to endorse the following explanation:

the tracking account: Evolutionary forces have tended to make our normative judgments track the attitude-independent normative truth *because* it promoted our ancestors' reproductive success to make true normative (proto) judgments.

But Street thinks the tracking account is bad science; she insists that a far more scientifically respectable account (in terms of *parsimony*, *clarity*, and *degree of illumination*) is the following:

the adaptive-link account: Evolutionary forces have pushed us toward making certain normative judgments *because* (i) making (proto versions of) those judgments made our ancestors more likely to act in accordance with them, and (ii) it promoted reproductive success to act in those ways.

The (supposed) problem with horn #2 is epistemological:

"...as a purely conceptual matter, the independent normative truth could be *anything*. ... But if there are innumerable things such that it's conceptually possible they're ultimately worth pursuing, and yet our [normative judgments] have been shaped from the outset by forces that are as good as random with respect to the normative truth, then what are the odds that our [normative judgments] will have hit, as a matter of sheer coincidence, on those things which are independently really worth pursuing?" (Street 2011: 14).

Thus on horn #2 the realist is forced to embrace the "skeptical conclusion" that "our normative judgments are in all likelihood hopelessly off track" (Street 2008b: 208).

Street presents her argument as if it is an argument for normative antirealism. But really it is an argument for a disjunctive conclusion: *either normative antirealism is true, or normative skepticism is true*.

II. Horn #1: Complications

There are two problems with the first horn of Street's dilemma, as developed so far:

- a. *The adaptive-link account is inadequate as it stands.*

As applied to the judgment <I have conclusive reason to ϕ >, the adaptive-link account starts by assuming a version of *motivational internalism* (Street 2006: 157n13; 2008a: 230; 2010: 376):

- (MI) Necessarily, if an agent makes the judgment <I have conclusive reason to ϕ >, then she is at least somewhat motivated to ϕ .

Then the thought is that if ϕ -ing promoted reproductive success in our ancestors' environment, those of our ancestors who judged <I have conclusive reason to ϕ > did better at propagating their genes.

There are several problems with the adaptive-link account:

- It requires a stronger version of motivational internalism than (MI), since (MI) is compatible with the accompanying motivation being vanishingly small.
- To apply this account across the board, we need a version of motivational internalism to hold with regard to *every* normative proposition. But it is far from clear that all normative claims have a *distinct* necessarily-accompanying motivational shadow. For example, consider:
 - <I have a reason to ϕ , but it is heavily outweighed by other considerations>;
 - <I'm permitted but not required to ϕ >;
 - <In virtue of non-normative fact F, I have conclusive reason to ϕ >.
- The adaptive-link account leaves it mysterious why we didn't evolve *merely to have the relevant motivations on their own*, without any accompanying normative judgments.

This is not to deny that there is an acceptable evolutionary explanation of our tendency to make certain normative judgments, or even to deny that the adaptive-link account could play an important role in this more complete explanation.

My point, rather, is that the more complete evolutionary explanation is going to lack the beguiling simplicity of the adaptive-link account.

- b. *Street's argument that realists who embrace horn #1 must accept the tracking account rests on an equivocation.*

"...the only way for real[ists] *both* to accept that [our evaluative] attitudes have been deeply influenced by evolutionary causes *and* to avoid seeing these causes as distorting is for [them] to claim that these causes actually in some way *tracked* the alleged independent truths. There is no other way to go. To abandon the tracking account ... is just to adopt the view that selective pressures either pushed us *away from* or pushed us in ways that *bear no relation to* these [normative] truths" (Street 2006: 134-135).

But this passage uses the label "tracking account" in a broader way than Street uses it elsewhere:

tracking account (in the broad sense): Evolutionary forces have tended to make our normative judgments track the attitude-independent normative truth.

tracking account (in the narrow sense): Evolutionary forces have tended to make our normative judgments track the attitude-independent normative truth *because* it promoted our ancestors' reproductive success to make true normative (proto) judgments.

Street has not shown why horn #1 forces realists to accept a tracking account in the narrow sense.

III. Third-Factor Accounts

One popular way of resisting Street's argument is to exploit the opening left by (b) above. The typical way of doing this is to offer, instead of a (narrow) tracking account, an explanation of the following form:

a third-factor account: Evolutionary forces have tended to make our normative judgments track the attitude-independent normative truth *because*, for each normative judgment influenced by evolution in this way, there is some third factor, F, such that (i) F tends to *causally (help) make it the case* that (proto) judging in that way promoted our ancestors' reproductive success, and (ii) F tends to *metaphysically (help) make it the case* that the content of that judgment is true.

The first person to offer a third-factor account in response to Street's argument was Robert Nozick:

"The ethical behavior will serve inclusive fitness through serving or not harming others, through helping one's children and relatives, through acts that aid them in escaping predators, and so forth; that this behavior is helpful and not harmful is not unconnected to why (on most theorist[s'] views) it is ethical. The ethical behavior will increase inclusive fitness through the very aspects that make it ethical, not as a side effect through features that only accidentally are connected with ethicality" (Nozick 1981: 346).

Street has two powerful objections to third-factor accounts:

1. *Street argues that she can re-run her argument "one level up"* (2006: 135-141).

The third-factor theorist relies on a claim of the following form:

(G) Non-normative fact F (at least partially) grounds normative fact N.

But what is the relation between *the evolutionary forces that have influenced the content of our normative judgments* and *the attitude-independent fact that (G) is true*?

If evolutionary forces have tended to push us *toward* making a correct verdict as to whether (G) is true, then (Street insists) the only explanation open to the realist of why this is so is a *tracking account*, which loses out to the more scientifically acceptable *adaptive-link account*.

If evolutionary forces have tended to push us *in ways that are at best random* with respect to the truth of (G), then (Street insists) we are in all likelihood wrong in judging (G) to be true.

2. *Street argues that third-factor accounts are "trivially question-begging"* (2008, §6; 2011, §6; *forthcoming*, §§9-10).

"It is no answer to [the Darwinian] challenge simply to assume a large swath of substantive views on how we have reason to live ... and then note that these are the very views evolutionary forces pushed us toward. Such an account merely trivially reasserts the coincidence between the independent normative truth and what the evolutionary causes pushed us to think; it does nothing to explain that coincidence" (Street 2008b: 214).

Does Street's objection here mean that, when it comes to truths of other sorts, we are also prohibited from appealing to substantive truths of that sort when explaining how we were selected to track those truths? And wouldn't such a ban lead to universal skepticism?

Not so, says Street. She distinguishes two sorts of explanations we might give as to why evolutionary forces have made us track *truths about the presence of midsized objects in our immediate environment*:

Account A: There are six chairs, a laptop, and a table in my immediate environment. But evolutionary forces gave rise to the capacity I used to make this very judgment. This gives me reason to think my capacity about midsized objects in my immediate environment is reliable.

Account B: Midsized objects in our immediate environment are the kinds of things one can run into, be injured by, eat, and be eaten by. Other things being equal, then, creatures with an ability accurately to detect midsized objects in their immediate environment tended to survive and reproduce in greater numbers than creatures who lacked this ability. I am a product of this evolutionary process. This gives me reason to think my capacity to make judgments about midsized objects in my immediate environment is reliable" (Street 2008b: 216-217).

According to Street, Account B is *ultimately question-begging* but still *gives us internal reason* to think we're reliable on these matters, whereas Account A is *trivially question-begging* and *gives us no reason* to think we're reliable. Moreover, Street insists that third-factor accounts are of the same form as Account A.

IV. Street's Solution to the Darwinian Dilemma

According to *Humean constructivism*, Street's preferred variety of antirealism,

- (G') The non-normative fact [A judges <I have conclusive reason to ϕ >, and her ϕ -ing does not conflict with anything else she more deeply judges that she has reason to do] grounds the normative fact [A has conclusive reason to ϕ].

Assuming that A's judgments about her own reasons don't conflict too greatly with one another, it follows that A is not "hopelessly off track" in making such judgments. And this is so regardless of the evolutionary story we tell about A's tendency to make these judgments.

- *major problem*: A's judgments about her own reasons are just a tiny subset of her judgments about reasons: presumably she also makes a vast number of judgments about other people's reasons. But the same story cannot be told about why these other judgments tend to track the truth, since the truth of A's judgments of these sorts depends, according to Street, on other people's normative judgments.

This problem was obscured by Street's talk of "our" evaluative attitudes in her formulation of antirealism. Once we see that this pronoun must be used in a distributive (rather than collective) sense for Street's reply to the Darwinian dilemma to work in the case of one's judgments about one's own reasons, we can see that this problem is perfectly general, applying to all antirealist theories.

There are two replies to this problem that suggest themselves:

- *reply #1*: The evolutionary factors in virtue of which I tend to make the judgments I do about your reasons will also make it the case that you tend to make similar judgments about your reasons.

worry #1: This response involves positing a level of convergence in our judgments about reasons that seems incompatible with the existence of persistent normative disagreement.

worry #2: This response does not help explain why our judgments about the reasons of *people who do not share our evolutionary history* are generally reliable.

- *reply #2*: I can make reliable judgments about what reasons you have through a piece of theoretical reasoning: (i) I figure out what judgments you make about what reasons you have, and then (ii) I use my knowledge of the truth of Humean constructivism to deduce the truth about your reasons.

(Street occasionally slides into such an explanation of how antirealists avoid the Darwinian dilemma [*forthcoming*: 12, 30], but it is important to note that this is a *different* explanation from the official one.)

I consider the second of these replies more promising, so let us pursue it for a bit. The central problem with this reply is that it looks as if it is susceptible to *both of Street's objections to third-factor accounts*.

In order to use theoretical reasoning to reach correct conclusions about other people's reasons, the Humean constructivist must rely on her knowledge of grounding claim (G').

But in ascertaining that (G') is true, the Humean constructivist appears to rely on normative judgments and intuitions, so *Street's first objection to third-factor accounts* kicks in here as well.

Moreover, relying on (G') to show how our judgments about other people's reasons can be generally reliable is just as "trivially question-begging" as third-factor accounts are, so *Street's second objection* also applies.

- *Street's reply*: Street anticipates versions of these worries and replies to both of them in the same way. She insists that all agents are committed to the truth of constructivism: "no matter what one's starting set of normative judgments [is], constructivism follows from within the standpoint constituted by those judgments" (*forthcoming*: 37). An alien investigator who *possesses normative concepts* but *accepts normative judgments with entirely different substantive contents from our own* could read Street's articles and come to realize the truth of antirealism in general and of constructivism in particular (2006: 163n57).

I am deeply suspicious of this reply. Three objections:

- a. *This reply doesn't adequately address the "trivially question-begging" issue.*

Suppose that—given Street's understanding of what these expressions come to—it does "follow" from "within" everyone's "practical standpoint" that Humean constructivism is true. This fact is only relevant if we already assume the truth of Humean constructivism.

- b. *Street's argument for antirealism in general relies on substantive normative judgments and intuitions.*

Street's Darwinian dilemma argument relies on *intuitions about the epistemic relevance of tracking the truth, intuitions in support of motivational internalism, intuitions about the nature of the grounding relation when it takes normative relations, intuitions about when pain provides reasons, and intuitions about the possibility of genuine disagreement about substantive normative matters*, among other normative (and meta-normative) intuitions.

Moreover, Street recognizes that the Darwinian dilemma on its own is not enough to conclusively support antirealism; one also has to make a case that the force of the Darwinian dilemma in favor of antirealism is not outweighed by the *counterintuitiveness* of antirealism's apparent consequence that (for example) an ideally coherent Caligula has conclusive reason to torture others for fun.

Street devotes an entire article to arguing that this consequence is not as counterintuitive as it might seem (Street 2009).

This, in effect, is to concede that an alien investigator who accepts <An ideally coherent Caligula does *not* have conclusive reason to torture others for fun> more deeply than any other normative proposition is not committed to the truth of antirealism.

- c. *Street's argument for Humean constructivism in particular relies on substantive normative judgments and intuitions.*

I argued for this claim last week.

V. Our Epistemic Predicament

I have just argued that Street's own metaethical view is just as vulnerable to her argument as realist views are. Does this mean that Street's argument is in fact an argument *for normative skepticism*? Not necessarily.

Three features of Street's reply to her own two objections to third-factor accounts are particularly revealing:

- *Her appeal to an alien investigator shows that evolutionary theory is really beside the point in generating her challenge.*

After all, our alien investigator *might not be the outcome of evolutionary forces*. Yet our alien investigator is supposed to be able to use a version of the Darwinian dilemma to realize the truth of antirealism.

How could this be? Answer: a version of the Darwinian dilemma arises even if the alien investigator was the outcome of non-evolutionary causal forces, or even if the alien investigator popped into existence five minutes ago.

- *Once Street moves to a theoretical-reasoning model of how Humean constructivists are able to track the normative truth, her claim that facts about evaluative attitudes are what grounds normative facts is doing no work in her proposal.*

Swap a different non-normative fact into (G'), and this model will work just as well, provided that the new version of (G') can be defended without relying on substantive normative judgments/intuitions.

- *Once Street moves to a theoretical-reasoning model of how Humean constructivists are able to track the normative truth, what is doing all the work in her proposal is her claim that (G') holds as a matter of conceptual necessity.*

It is because Street (mistakenly) thinks that (G') and the other grounding claims posited by the Humean constructivist are conceptual truths that she thinks they can be argued for without appeal to substantive normative judgments/intuitions. (She says things like "It is constitutive of normative judgment that *p*," but this is just a fancy way of saying "It is a conceptual truth that *p*.")

But *no* claims about which non-normative facts ground normative facts are conceptual truths: Moore's open-question argument blocks all roads here. So what Street is hankering after is impossible.

Thus we should be suspicious of Street's demand that we show, of all the *conceptually possible* normative truths, that evolution has allowed us to land on the correct one. This removes one important obstacle to be overcome in answering her challenge.

What about the remaining obstacles? Here it will help to distinguish between *Street's original Darwinian dilemma* (as presented in Street 2006) and *her amped-up Darwinian dilemma* (once consideration about whether an explanation is question-begging are on the table).

In response to *the original Darwinian dilemma*, I think that the following "divide and conquer" strategy is a perfectly adequate response on the part of the realist:

- Argue that our tendency to make some normative judgments (such as our tendency to judge *that incest is inherently wrong*) are the outcome of evolutionary forces pushing us away from the truth.
- Argue that our tendency to make other normative judgments (such as our tendency to judge *that pain is, other things being equal, to-be-avoided*) are the outcome of evolutionary forces pushing us toward the truth, by giving a third-factor account of how this is possible.
- Argue that our tendency to make yet other normative judgments (such as our tendency to make *grounding claims with normative relata*) are a by-product of our having a selected-for general faculty that allows us to make judgments of a given sort, both normative and non-normative (such as a general faculty for reasoning our way to grounding claims).

This doesn't yet address *the amped-up Darwinian dilemma*, since we might worry that in making these claims, we are relying on normative judgments and intuitions that might themselves be "tainted" by evolutionary forces.

But now the thing to do is to note that this skeptical worry is perfectly general: it is just an instance of the general epistemological problem of how we can show that our most fundamental cognitive faculties (perception, introspection, induction, deduction, intuition—what have you) are reliable without relying on those very faculties when attempting to show this.

This is a formidable problem, and it may well have no satisfactory solution.

However, I don't believe that this is a special problem for our normative cognitive faculties.

Moreover, Street's argument (via Accounts A and B) that we are better off here with regard to *perception of midsized objects* than we are with regard to *normative intuition/judgment* is not convincing:

- *Third-factor accounts are actually more like Account B than they are like Account A.*

Account B features a variety of *specific causal claims* which are put together to give us a *more complicated causal claim* that underwrites the reliability of *the very perceptual faculties used to support those original causal claims*. Third-factor accounts often feature a variety of *specific claims about reasons* which are put together to give us a *more complicated normative claim* that underwrites the reliability of *the very normative faculties used to support those original claims about reasons*.

- *Account B is, to my mind, just as epistemically problematic as Account A is.*

Suppose we discover a book of unknown origin that makes various claims about an hitherto undocumented era of the historical past. We begin to wonder whether this book's claims track the truth. Then we find, halfway through the book, an elaborate story about how books of this sort were carefully screened for their accuracy, the unreliable ones being destroyed.

Does this story give us any reason to think our book tracks the truth? I say: no, it does not.