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Duality Unresolved and Darwinian Dilemmas

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Abstract

By using Sharon Street's Darwinian Dilemma, Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer attempt to show that Sidgwick's duality of practical reason, whereby an agent has equal reason to act in their own interests or act impartially for the benefit of all, is not actually a duality, rather, reasons for action are solely impartial due to the unreliability of intuitions favoring self-interested behavior. My contention is that the authors fail to accomplish their goal. To show this, I argue that the authors are inconsistent, that Singer has previously provided an account of impartiality that makes it just as unreliable on the same grounds as self-interested tendencies. By showing that the authors fail to address the actual target of Street's dilemma, their argument and conclusion are overstated and that Sidgwick's duality remains unresolved.

I. Establishing the Foundation

Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer, in "The Objectivity of Ethics and the Unity of Practical Reason", set out to reanalyze Henry Sidgwick's duality of practical reason in favor of a unity by defending basic utilitarian principles, in the form of the principle of beneficence, from evolutionary debunking arguments. The authors convey the puzzling result of Sidgwick's dilemma by saying:

In searching for rational axioms that would give us guidance about what we ought to do, Sidgwick arrived at two that are, at least potentially, in conflict. The axiom of rational egoism says that each of us ought to aim at her or his own good on the whole, and the axiom of benevolence or utilitarianism tells us to aim at the good of all.¹

¹ de Lazari-Radek and Singer, "The Objectivity of Ethics", 10.

De Lazari-Radek and Singer go on to point out that in the years since Sidgwick's writing, the dilemma has not been resolved and quote Derek Parfit as saying:

...when one of our two possible acts would make things go in some way that would be impartially better, but the other act would make things go better either for ourselves or for those to whom we have close ties, we often have sufficient reasons to act in either of these ways...²

The suggestion from the authors is that there seem to be reasons either to act in our own interests or to act impartially. Although it is admitted that sometimes acting impartially entails acting in our own interests, there are inevitably circumstances whereby setting out to pursue our own ends and acting impartially, for the benefit of all, will result in conflict. By resolving Sidgwick's dilemma, it is hoped that the apparent inconsistency of our normative tendencies can also be resolved.

De Lazari-Radek and Singer attempt to resolve the duality by putting Sidgwick's principle of rational self-interest and principle of utilitarianism to Sharon Street's Darwinian Dilemma for Moral Realists.³ Street's dilemma is a version of the evolutionary debunking argument and is explicitly posed against the meta-ethical position of moral realism, specifically the sort characterized by the position of stance independence, "the defining claim of realism... that there are at least some evaluative facts or truths that hold independently of all our evaluative attitudes."⁴ Non-cognitivist and constructivist meta-ethical positions as well as some "realists" who do not adopt the rigorous position of stance-independence are expressly left out of the clutches of Street's dilemma. The important issue here is that Street's dilemma is directed at a very specific meta-ethical theory and, for various reasons not worth delving into here, many meta-ethicists that claim some degree of objectivity in their models or that claim to be "realists" in some respect but that reject stance independence will not feel the effect of Street's conclusions. This issue is ignored by de Lazari-Radek and Singer.

In general, debunking arguments set out to show that if some moral belief is held to be true because of an intuition that is formed by a non-truth tracking process, then the belief itself is unjustified. If the belief is formed and held due to cultural, historical, or evolutionary influences that themselves have nothing to do with recognizing actual truth, then we are unjustified in our belief. It is essential to notice that debunking arguments do not test for the truth of a belief; they only test the justifications for which we hold the belief. Furthermore, at most, debunking arguments can show some that belief is unjustifiably held. Should some

² de Lazari-Radek and Singer, "The Objectivity of Ethics", 10.

³ Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value", 109-166.

⁴ Street, 110-112. See also, Landau, *Moral Realism*, 13-18.

belief withstand debunking, this provides no positive justification or reason to think the belief corresponds with truth. The effects of debunking are only directly negative.^{5,6}

The evolutionary form of the debunking argument is a specific form of the more general debunking argument, and, rather than identify the more proximal causes of our beliefs as in historical or cultural debunking arguments, the evolutionary form probes the more distal origins of our moral intuitions and beliefs. Street's dilemma begins with the assumption, accepted by de Lazari-Radek and Singer, that "evolutionary forces have played a tremendous role in shaping the content of human evaluative attitudes."⁷ This, Street claims, creates a challenge for meta-ethical realists in explaining moral truths and the impact of evolutionary forces on the evaluative content we do have. According to the best theories accessible to us, evolution functions via natural selection, whereby reproductive success from one generation to the next determines the characteristics of eventual generations. Reproductive success depends largely on the circumstances of life for an individual, in other words the environment, broadly understood. Traits that provide a competitive edge in reproduction, generation after generation, become more widely distributed in the population as time goes on, and traits that inhibit reproductive success, one way or another, tend to get weeded out of the population. The tension of Street's dilemma resides in the space between moral truth and reproductive success. Unless it provided reproductive value to recognize moral truth generation after generation, irrespective of the variety of circumstances humans and proto-humans found themselves in, it would be highly unlikely that humans evolved a capacity or tendency to recognize a realist's stance-independent moral truth. Rather, it seems likely that at least many of our evaluative beliefs or intuitions were formed because they provided reproductive value in the circumstances early humans and their ancestors found themselves in.

Street puts forward that, considering the great influence evolutionary forces have had on shaping human values, realists can either assert or deny a significant relationship between the evaluative attitudes we do have and moral truth. If we take Street's first horn and claim

⁵ See Kahane, both sources.

⁶ The authors, whose research I have cited, variously use terms such as "evaluative attitudes", "beliefs", and "intuitions". Street and Kahane restrict their use of "evaluative" to the sphere of values which includes moral values but is not limited to it. However, the moral usage is what is relevant for analyzing de Lazari-Radek and Singer's paper. While "beliefs" and "intuitions" seem to range over different entities, Kahane, in "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments", provides an explanation of how beliefs about morality often rest on more basic intuitions and proceeds as if beliefs and intuitions are both viable candidates for debunking. Further ambiguities of terminology tend to be located around the terms "objective", "anti-objective", "real", and "anti-real". I have tried to faithfully represent the individual author's views even where their terminologies are not used homogeneously. It is my view that a great deal of philosophic ambiguity surrounds "The Objectivity of Ethics" precisely because some of these issues are not carefully dealt with and the underlying meta-ethical significance of their usage and its significance on Street's work are ignored.

⁷ Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma, 109.

that there is no relationship between moral truth and our evaluative attitudes—that reproductive pressures did not incline us to intuit stance-independent truth—we must conclude many or most of these attitudes are likely off-track, that we are unjustified in believing our evaluative attitudes to be reflective of truth. If we claim there is a relationship, Street argues we are making a substantive scientific claim that conflicts with modern scientific theories. As such, should one take the second horn, any theory of relationship would be subject to scientific scrutiny.⁸ In short, in taking the second horn, one moves from mere philosophy to speculative science.

De Lazari-Radek and Singer subject the principle of rational self-interest and the principle of utilitarianism to Street's Dilemma individually. In doing so, they argue that the principle of rational self-interest is a reasoned extension of egoism. Egoism, they claim, has an obvious evolutionary explanation—those that valued and worked towards their own ends survived and had successful offspring. Thus, the intuition survives in the current population. The authors take the first horn of Street's dilemma and claim that a tendency to value one's own wellbeing and ends has no relationship to moral truth.

For the principle of utilitarianism, which advocates promoting the good of all, the authors take the second of Street's horns. The authors argue that utilitarianism is not a reasoned extension of a more limited altruism but that it is known intuitively, even self-evidently, through reason. They argue that while rationality does have reproductive value, it may be a package deal whereby the overall package is reproductively advantageous with components that are neutrally or even negatively advantageous. One of these neutral or negative components is the ability to intuit actual moral truth. Thus, they apply the principle of utilitarianism to the second horn of Street's dilemma and claim that it is a reliable principle, unsullied by evolutionary influences.

I will argue that De Lazari-Radek and Singer's attempt to resolve Sidgwick's duality in favor of a unity ultimately fails. (1) Following previous philosophers, I will claim that the authors fail to acknowledge the limits of debunking argument and its meta-ethical assumptions, and, thus, overstate their conclusions, (2) that de Lazari-Radek and Singer contradict the account of the evolutionary origins of impartiality as set out by Peter Singer in *The Expanding Circle*, and (3) that they misuse Street's dilemma in subjecting particular beliefs to her dilemma. In the spirit of Street, I also intend to suggest that there is a third option to her dilemma, ignored by de Lazari-Radek and Singer—to reject moral realism as a meta-ethical position.

⁸ Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma", 109.

II. Expanding Circle, Expanded Doubt

Having attempted to defend the principle of utilitarianism from debunking, de Lazari-Radek and Singer conclude by proposing three criteria for determining the most reliable of intuitions.

1. Careful reflection leading to a conviction of self-evidence;
2. Independent agreement of other careful thinkers; and
3. The absence of a plausible explanation of the intuition as the outcome of an evolutionary or other non-truth-tracking process.⁹

They claim that the principle of rational self-interest fails to meet the third criterion, and is thus unreliable. They also argue that the principle of utilitarianism withstands debunking for no plausible explanation can show that acting impartially, for the benefit of all, would confer reproductive success over some degree of partiality. However, this is not all that at least one of the authors has had to say about the evolutionary origins of morality.

In *The Expanding Circle*, Peter Singer presents a biological history of morality. The account in EC traces our modern day morality to its initial foundations in evolutionary history. Through outlining the evolutionary advantages of kin and reciprocal altruism, he argues that genuine altruism, the actual emotive concern for another's wellbeing, had genuine benefits that a feigned altruism would not afford. He goes on to argue that groups of genuinely altruistic individuals would collectively have benefits not accessible to groups of solely self-interested individuals.¹⁰ This capacity for genuine concern for others, even if only because they are blood relatives, provides the emotive basis of our morality. However, in "The Objectivity of Ethics" de Lazari-Radek and Singer claim that the principle of utilitarianism is NOT a reasoned extension of a more limited altruism. They claim that it is a truth directly intuited via the capacity to reason.¹¹

Perhaps the authors are correct that reasoning from a limited altruism is not how to derive the principle of utilitarianism. Instead, they claim that the principle of utilitarianism is fundamentally about impartiality. While it is deceptively easy to claim that PU is directly intuited by reason, this claim is not enough to prevent debunking attempts, for one can imagine a proponent of rational self-interest making the similar claim that it too is intuited directly by reason despite its analogue in more fundamental intuitions. Still, if the principle of utilitarianism is a reasoned extension of a tendency towards some limited form of impartiality, one may fairly ask if our predisposition for reasoning impartially or trusting impartial modes of thinking has an evolutionary explanation.

⁹ de Lazari-Radek and Singer, "The Objectivity of Ethics", 26.

¹⁰ Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, 37 & 49.

¹¹ de Lazari-Radek and Singer, "The Objectivity of Ethics", 23-4.

Singer provides just such an account in EC. Pre-linguistic humans likely engaged in the proto-moral activities that we can observe in modern apes. Kindness towards others creates the expectation of reciprocation in the future. Those who do not reciprocate are deemed “cheaters” and are often scorned. Before language, our distant ancestors may have responded with “a friendly lick or an intimidating growl when another member of the group does or does not repay favors.”¹² As proto-humans became more rational and developed more sophisticated communication, rudimentary praise and blame developed into actual ethical judgments. According to Singer, ethical judgments require some standard or reason that is acceptable to the group as a whole. When proposing a moral standard to the group, the reason itself must be disinterested, as opposed to a blatant appeal to self-interest, in order to be accepted. Singer says:

If someone tells us that she may take the nuts another member of the tribe has gathered, but no one may take her nuts, she can be asked why the two cases are different. To answer, she must give a reason. Not just any reason either. In a dispute between members of a cohesive group of reasoning beings, the demand for a reason is a demand for a justification that can be accepted by the group as a whole. Thus the reason offered must be disinterested, at least to the extent of being equally acceptable to all...I may say for instance, that my prowess as a warrior entitles me to a bigger share of the nuts. This justification is impartial in the sense that it entails that anyone who equals my prowess as a warrior should get as many nuts.¹³

Here, Singer outlines how the ability to use impartial or disinterested reasons within a community is necessary for the development of moral rules and judgments. Throughout chapter nine of *The Expanding Circle*, Singer explains how the ability to reason enabled and requires humans to reason and make justifications from an impartial point of view. It is suggested that early humans appealed to impartial modes of thinking because to do so enabled successful living within a relatively small, stable social group of the kind our ancestors had. The appeal to impartiality, however, was not about an appeal to truth in the robust sense required by realists; rather it was an efficient and essential means of establishing long term admittance into a group of fellow rational beings.

The impartiality considered as a part of the Principle of Utilitarianism is not on the face of it the same as the sort of impartiality described in the beginning sections of chapter nine of EC, but Singer provides an explanation of how our reasoning capacities could have taken us from the simplistic impartiality of early human nut gatherers all the way to the complete impartiality required by utilitarianism.

What de Lazari-Radek and Singer fail to account for is that, while the principle of utilitarianism may not be a reasoned extension of a limited altruism, Singer has already

¹² Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, 92.

provided an evolutionary account of the need for impartial reasoning for early human morality. While neither Singer nor I suggest that early hominids roaming the savanna were in any sense utilitarian, there is a plausible evolutionary account for why humans would reason impartially at all without appealing to self-evident truths. This account does not place impartial modes of reasoning as a potentially disadvantageous sub-capacity of reason; rather it is an evolutionarily advantageous and perhaps essential part of social life for rational beings. Humans incapable of providing impartial justifications for their actions would likely have been pushed to the fringes of society or expelled entirely. Those unfortunate humans or proto-humans would have been likely candidates for the title “cheater” and scorned as such. Reciprocal interactions with them would have been rejected because their rules and modes of behavior would not have been acceptable to the community at large. It seems that an inability to reason impartially would have been highly disadvantageous in many circumstances.

III. Duality Unresolved

If Singer’s account in EC is acceptable, we must reconsider the conclusions De Lazari-Radek and Singer draw in “The Objectivity”. The authors reject the principle of rational self-interest because it fails to meet their three criteria for reliable moral intuitions. They conclude this because of the easily accessible evolutionary explanation for self-interested behavior. The authors go further to suggest the principle of utilitarianism lacks a plausible evolutionary explanation and is merely a product of rational inquiry, and thus is very likely to reflect moral truth. However, the conclusions derived by the authors fail on a number of points.

First, as Guy Kahane and others have noted, debunking arguments do not test for truth, they test for justification. Further, principles are not tested by debunking arguments; rather intuitions, beliefs, or attitudes are what are debunked. If someone wants to show that some principle can be debunked, in reality the closest such a person can do is show that the *belief* or *intuition* that the principle is true lacks justification because the belief or intuition’s source is in a non-truth tracking process.¹⁴ As such, neither the principle of rational self-interest nor the principle of utilitarianism can properly be debunked. In addition, neither can be shown to be false. At most we can show that our belief in either is lacks justification. If we accept de Lazari-Radek and Singer’s criteria for reliable intuitions, specifically the third requiring the absence of a plausible explanation of the intuition as an outcome of an evolutionary process, then neither self-interested nor impartial tendencies are prima facie justified. There seem to be evolutionary advantages to thinking or acting both partially and impartially. Should the authors again claim that the PU is immune to debunking as it is product of reason, despite the evolutionary account given in EC, parity requires that this option be open to the proponent of rational self-interest as well. It seems both are at least

¹⁴ Kahane, “Evolutionary Debunking Arguments” & “Evolution and Impartiality”, 330.

plausibly the rational extension of more basic evolved tendencies. In this case, belief in either principle is debunked or neither is and Sidgwick keeps his duality.

This raises a second point. Perhaps it is impermissible to subject particular intuitions to Sharon Street's dilemma. In her work, she suggests that "many" or "most" of our evaluative attitudes have been influenced by selective pressures. While she provides example of attitudes that are obviously reproductively advantageous and counter positions them with contrary views¹⁵ (which no one holds), she doesn't suggest that we put particular beliefs or intuitions to her dilemma individually. A point left unconsidered by the authors is that perhaps there is reproductive advantage in acting partially AND impartially. Perhaps there is reproductive advantage in having seemingly inconsistent evaluative tendencies because they allow flexibility in how humans can respond to changing circumstances. When resources are scarce, it may be advantageous to steal from others to feed oneself and one's offspring, and when resources are abundant, social harmony and the need to be impartial may have greater reproductive value than being generally selfish. In separating one intuition from another, it may be that we are missing the overall point that a broad spectrum of evaluative attitudes has greater value than a select few.

A third and tangential point of some significance follows from de Lazari-Radek and Singer's own suggestion. They claim that "If a starting point can be debunked, it cannot lend support to a more general or less arbitrary version of itself"¹⁶ This is a point well taken. In debunking reasoned principles such as the principle of utilitarianism, it is the belief in the principle that is debunked. If Sidgwick or Mill's arguments for utilitarianism are thought valid and sound, it may not be enough to check whether there is an evolutionary explanation for our belief that the utilitarianism conclusion is true, rather, it seems that we may need to consider whether any of the premises on which the conclusion depends have an evolutionary debunking explanation. Should we be able to show that our acceptance of any premise is due to a non-truth tracking influence, it must follow that the conclusion it at least partially unjustified as well, even if it seems unlikely that any evolutionary force, absent the use of reason, would compel us to believe in the derived conclusion, axiom, or principle.

If the previous arguments hold, it seems that Sidgwick's duality is left unresolved and attempts at debunking cannot lend favor to one principle or the other. Both have footing in non-truth tracking processes and, thus, our intuition that either is true lacks justification. However, this need not lead to an overall moral skepticism, for, as Street's paper points out, there is another option. Street's dilemma is posed against stance-independent meta-ethical realists. Her dilemma is positioned such that realists must either accept our intuitions as

¹⁵ Two examples are "The fact that something would promote one's survival is a reason in favor of it" as opposed to "The fact that something would promote one's survival is a reason against it" Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma", 115-6.

¹⁶ de Lazari-Radek and Singer, "The Objectivity of Ethics", 24.

being off track or provide a revolutionary scientific explanation about mind-independent moral truth and our evolutionary history. Implicit behind the whole dilemma is the third option—reject meta-ethical realism. Street’s argument exempts a whole variety of meta-ethical positions from the dilemma and a utilitarian may easily reject realism for another meta-ethical theory to preserve their utilitarian doctrine. De Lazari-Radek and Singer neglect the meta-ethical baggage of Street’s dilemma and even unchallenged, their conclusions seem to be hastily drawn. If a proponent of rational self-interest were not a realist and if Singer amends or rejects his account in *The Expanding Circle*, de Lazari-Radek and Singer’s conclusion would still have little significance for her.

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