

Debunking Debunking's Debunkers:

A Response to Street's Critics

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Introduction

In her 2006 paper, *A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value*, Sharon Street argues that evolutionary psychology, if roughly true, undermines evaluative realism as a metaethical theory. Evolutionary psychology suggests that our moral beliefs track evolutionary pressures, and not realist evaluative truths. Therefore, Street concludes, evaluative realism entails moral skepticism.

The most compelling arguments against Street's evolutionary debunking of evaluative realism suggest that its implications are unacceptable. Vavova (2014, 2021) argues that, in order to work, evolutionary debunking entails global skepticism. Parfit (2017), on the other hand, argues that constructivism — Street's alternative to realism — entails nihilism. Both Vavova and Parfit argue that that in order to avoid these unacceptable implications — one epistemic, and the other ethical — evolutionary debunking must either contradict itself or fail to undermine realism. This paper will argue that evolutionary debunking can successfully respond to both of these challenges.

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The epistemic challenge

In her 2021 article, “The limits of rational belief revision: A dilemma for the Darwinian debunker,” Vavova argues that the disagreement between Street and realist ‘third-factor’ responders is over whether it’s legitimate to appeal to ‘obvious’ evaluative truths in order to correct evolution’s influence on our evaluative beliefs. Those who think such an appeal is legitimate can

grant that the moral beliefs and the adaptive beliefs come apart—they must, or else morality would be only about what is adaptive. But, they argue, what’s good and what’s adaptive does overlap, and, crucially, we know where that overlap is. (Vavova 2021 722)

Realist third-factor responders — insofar as they hold that evolution has given rise to *some* true evaluative beliefs — can use those beliefs to correct for evolution’s corrupting influence. In contrast, Street argues it isn’t legitimate to appeal to the truth of the very evaluative beliefs that are in question, and therefore third-factor responders are merely begging the question.

Though Vavova seems to share Street’s worry about question-begging, she doesn’t try to resolve the disagreement between Street and third-factor responders. Instead, she argues that the disagreement itself highlights a dilemma for Street. On the first horn, we *can* appeal to ‘obvious’ evaluative truths to respond to evolutionary debunking, in which case third-factor responders can salvage realism.

On the second horn, it isn't legitimate to appeal to such evaluative truths, in which case Street can't show we have reason to believe that evolution is a corrupting influence in the first place.

To argue for the second horn, Vavova claims that evolutionary debunking relies on the following premise:

Gap. The true moral beliefs and the adaptive moral beliefs come apart.

(Vavova 2021 721)

Gap is, of course, eminently plausible. No one – except, perhaps, a Social Darwinist – believes that what is good and right is determined by what is most evolutionarily advantageous. However, Vavova points out that *Gap* is an evaluative truth of the same kind that Street claims is illegitimate to use to defend realism. Therefore, if we can't appeal to evaluative truths while evolutionary debunking is in question, then we can't appeal to *Gap*. If we can't appeal to *Gap*, then we have no reason to believe that our evolutionarily-influenced evaluative beliefs are mistaken.

However, while we may not have any reason to believe that our evolutionarily-influenced evaluative beliefs are *mistaken* if we can't appeal to any evaluative truths, neither do we have any reason to believe they're *right*. This fact might be enough for the evolutionary debunker to condemn realism. However, Vavova argues that this line of reasoning leads the debunker into global skepticism.

She distinguishes between two epistemological principles the evolutionary debunker might appeal to:

Good. If you have good reason to think that your belief is mistaken, then you cannot rationally maintain it. (Vavova 2014 85)

No good. If you have no good reason to think that your belief is true, then you cannot rationally maintain it. (Vavova 2014 80)

According to both of these principles, a *good reason* is a reason independent of the truth of the belief in question. Vavova argues that if Street opts for *Good*, then the evolutionary debunking argument isn't successful, because we only have reasons to believe that our beliefs are mistaken in the context of our other beliefs. Therefore, if all of our evaluative beliefs are in question, then we can't appeal to any of them to give us reason to believe that *Gap* is true.

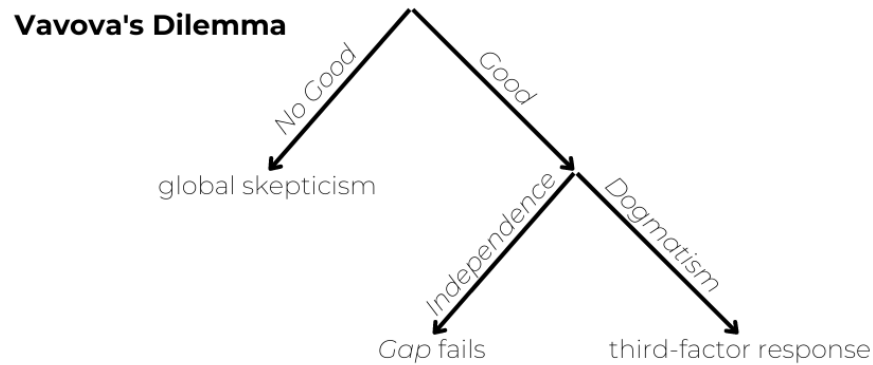
On the other hand, Vavova argues that while *No good* gets the conclusion Street wants, it also entails global skepticism. As a *reductio* of *No good*, she considers how it would evaluate the belief that sense perception is reliable.

“Do we have good reason to think that perception would lead us to true beliefs about our surroundings? Not if “good” reason is understood as an appropriately independent reason: for if we set aside all that is in question, we must set aside all beliefs gained by perception.” (Vavova 2014 83-84)

But, of course, we want to say that sense perception is reliable. Therefore, according to Vavova, we should reject the claim that not having an independent reason to think a belief is true is a reason against that belief. Parfit (2017) makes a similar argument:

Some whimsical despot might require us to show that some clock is telling the correct time, without making any assumptions about the correct time. Though we couldn't meet this requirement, that wouldn't show that this clock is not telling the correct time. In the same way, we couldn't possibly show that natural selection had led us to form some true normative beliefs without making any assumptions about which normative beliefs are true. This fact does not count against the view that these normative beliefs are true. (Parfit vol. 2 533)

Vavova concludes that, in order to avoid global skepticism, we should accept *Good over No good*. Given *Good*, Street must either accept that it's legitimate to appeal to 'obvious' evaluative truths when considering evolutionary debunking, in which case realists can correct for the influence of evolution, or that it isn't legitimate, in which case Street can't maintain *Gap*, which is necessary to her argument.



I think that the best way for Street to respond to this dilemma is to accept *Good* and *Independence*, and suspend judgment over whether *Gap* is true. Critically, I argue that Street doesn't need to appeal to the truth of *Gap*, rather, she only needs to show that *Gap* is *true for the moral realist*. Taking this approach, the evolutionary debunking argument can show that realism undermines itself without appealing to the truth of any of the evaluative beliefs in question.

We can motivate this approach by noticing the tension apparent in the fact a realist may believe wholeheartedly in *Gap*, but reject Street's argument for relying on *Gap*. This is an unstable position. If debunking works, then the realist rejects *Gap*; but without *Gap*, debunking doesn't work, so they again accept *Gap*, and debunking works again. And so on. Street's argument doesn't need *Gap* to be true — she only needs to show that realism undermines itself if it accepts *Gap*. The realist faces a choice between rejecting *Gap* — and entertaining Social Darwinism — and abandoning realism.

An alternative approach for Street is to maintain the truth of *Gap*, but only in a metaethically neutral sense. What is in question in evolutionary debunking is

not the specific evaluative belief that moral truth diverges from what is evolutionary advantageous, but rather the metaethical status of that truth. Taking this approach, Street could note that the only beliefs in question are whether our evaluative judgements are true in a realist sense, and that *Gap* could be true in an antirealist sense. Her argument can therefore rely on an antirealist *Gap*.

Vavova might respond to this second approach by arguing that evolutionary debunking undermines all conceptions of moral truth – not only a realist conception of moral truth. This would mean that Street couldn't accept an antirealist version of *Gap*. Indeed, Vavova seems to change her mind about the scope of evolutionary debunking in her 2021 paper, departing from her previous papers. She writes that

The problematic commitment—the one that makes us vulnerable to attack— isn't a metaethical commitment to realism. Rather, it is the commonsense thought that morality is about more than spreading our seed. So long as we are committed to the existence of some true moral beliefs that are not adaptive, the debunker has us in her sights. (Vavova 2021 721)

I think Vavova's new interpretation of the scope of evolutionary debunking is wrong. Her interpretation relies another premise of her reconstruction of the evolutionary debunker's argument:

Bad Influence. Our moral beliefs reflect the influence of an epistemically bad process. (Vavova 2021 721)

Critically, I don't think that Street, as an antirealist constructivist, needs to accept *Bad Influence*. According to constructivism, the evolutionary causes of our first-order moral beliefs don't have any epistemic significance. Moral truth is a function of our first-order moral beliefs, rather than the other way around. Street explains the difference in her 2006 paper:

Where the realist's tracking account and the antirealist's account divide, then, is over the direction of dependence that they take to be involved in the relation between evaluative truths and the evolutionary causes which influenced the content of our evaluative judgements. The realist understands the evaluative truths to be prior, in the sense that evolutionary causes are understood to have selected us to track those independent truths. The antirealist, on the other hand, understands the evolutionary causes to be prior, in the sense that these causes (along with many others) gave us our starting fund of evaluative attitudes, and evaluative truth is understood to be a function of those attitudes. (Street 2006 154)

In light of this distinction, I think that *Bad Influence* merely obscures a realist assumption. Realism is therefore necessary to get the argument to work.

Therefore, evolutionary debunking debunks realism alone, since constructivism doesn't entail *Bad Influence*.

The ethical challenge

Instead of challenging its epistemic implications, Parfit argues that we ought not accept evolutionary debunking because its *ethical* implications are unacceptable. He argues that the metaethical implication of evolutionary debunking – Street's antirealist constructivism – entails nihilism. (Parfit 2017 264)

Parfit gives the following statement of Street's view:

SV: Each of us has most reason to do whatever our own coherent present normative attitudes, in combination with the non-normative facts, imply that we have most reason to do. (Parfit 2016 266-267)

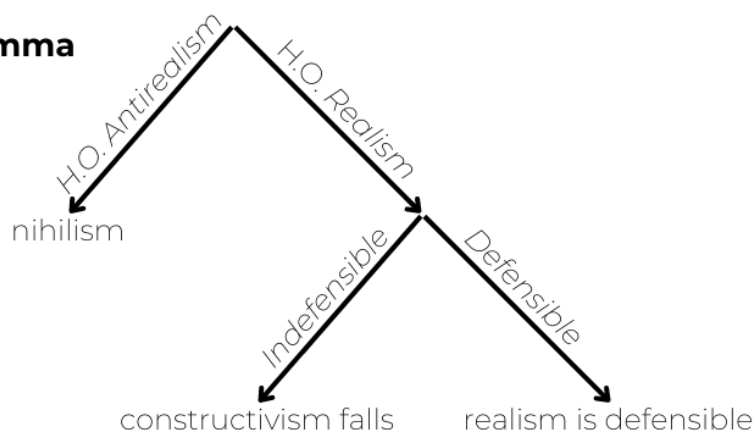
He argues that SV is itself an evaluative belief, though of a higher-order. It's unclear, however, whether SV applies to itself. If SV doesn't apply to itself, then it's an evaluative belief in a realist sense. If it is an evaluative belief in a realist sense, then it's a potential target of evolutionary debunking. Street would then have to decide whether to defend SV from evolutionary debunking: if she does, then it seems likely that realists could do the same for their views; if she doesn't, then she loses her alternative metaethical position to realism.

Street doesn't think the higher-order realist option is tenable. Parfit quotes her as replying to this dilemma that

Whatever worries inspired one to go relativist about normativity in the first place—and in my case, they're epistemological . . . are going to reassert themselves . . . if you are a normative absolutist at *any* level. So, if you're going to be a normative relativist, you'd better be one 'all the way down', otherwise there's really no point—in terms of increased naturalistic comprehensibility—in being one at all. (Street, in Parfit 2016 271)

Therefore, according to Street, SV *should* apply to itself: constructivism is antirealist all the way down. Therefore, SV is only true for someone if their set of evaluative beliefs implies it.

Parfit's Dilemma



This view of constructivism avoids contradicting itself — but it implies there are some irreconcilable disagreements that we'd *really* like to be able to reconcile. Street considers two hypothetical people — *Abe*, and *Caligula*. *Abe* is an evaluative

realist, and his beliefs imply evaluative realism. According to antirealist SV, evaluative realism is *true* for him. Street observes that, while the constructivist's evaluation of *Abe's* view "isn't exactly a *contradiction*, it's clearly an unwelcome, unstable result." (Street, in Parfit 2017 271)

Street's best response is to claim that evaluative realism is never ultimately implied by anyone's beliefs, since evolutionary debunking shows that it contradicts itself. I think this is a good response in practice – but, interestingly, may not apply to some hypothetical edge cases. Consider, for example, *Gabe*, who's a metaethical realist and normative Social Darwinist. *Gabe* would have no reason to think that evolutionary advantage and moral truth came apart because he believes that moral truth is defined by what's most evolutionarily advantageous. *Gabe* would therefore be able to avoid evolutionary debunking of moral realism, and, perhaps, constructivism would say that realism is true for him.

Street's other unpleasant disagreement is with *Caligula*. *Caligula* likes torturing other people for fun; in fact, he believes that, all things considered, he has more reason to torture people than not to torture people. Assuming that *Caligula's* evaluative beliefs are internally consistent, SV says that it is true for *Caligula* that he has, all things considered, reason to torture people. This is not a comfortable claim for Street to make.

Street decides to bite the bullet. She responds that the fact that some "conceivable agents have reason to exterminate an ethnic group or enslave a race or torture a young child for fun in front of its captive mother," is not a decisive reason

against constructivism, since “most real life human beings have no such reasons” – and the rest of us presumably have reason to stop them. (Street, in Parfit 2016 283) The realist alternative might not be any better. If realism implies moral skepticism as Street suggests, then constructivism seems like the more palatable option even in light of *Caligula*.

A constructivist could attempt to show that there is only one set of internally consistent evaluative beliefs for, say, all moral agents, or all practical agents. Darwall (2006) has suggested the former, and Korsgaard (1996) the latter. However, Parfit isn't convinced that constructivist unanimity should appease us. He writes that

we can turn to the belief that God exists. If we claimed that this belief was *true for theists*, but *false for atheists*, we wouldn't be claiming that this belief is both true and false, so our claim wouldn't imply the contradictory conclusion that God both exists and doesn't exist. But since being *true for theists* isn't a way of being true, it would make no relevant difference if, because there were no atheists, the belief that God exists was *true for everyone*. (Parfit 2016 273-274)

However, the *contingent* claim that belief in God is true because it happens that no atheists are around anymore is not the same as the *necessary* claim that evaluative belief X is true because it follows from the evaluative commitments of every

practical (or moral) agent. *True for all practical agents* could be a way of being true in virtue of the fact that it doesn't make sense to ask whether a practical evaluation is true for something that isn't a practical agent.

Nonetheless, Parfit concludes that higher-order antirealist constructivism entails nihilism. However, I argue that Parfit's conclusion rests on a misunderstanding of constructivism.

Parfit writes that "in having these coherent attitudes, Caligula would not be making any mistake, or missing any relevant normative truth." (Parfit 2016 280) *Caligula's* belief that hedonistic torture is permissible isn't mistaken in the context of his set of evaluative attitudes. Parfit argues that the implication of this fact is nihilism: "If we accepted Street's view that our evaluative convictions could not possibly be either correct or mistaken, our deepest values would cease to be *convictions*." (Parfit 2016 281) However, he moves too quickly here – according to constructivism, evaluative convictions *can* be correct or mistaken, based on whether or not they would exist in our set of ideally consistent beliefs. Parfit is right that no evaluative conviction is correct or mistaken *in itself*, but that's different from not being correct or mistaken *at all*.

In order to illustrate how beliefs can be correct or mistaken *in terms of each other*, Street tells a story about three hypothetical creatures who lived long ago. The first two creatures only cared about one thing each: survival, and death, respectively. Parfit is right – and Street agrees – that neither of these evaluative

convictions were correct or mistaken according to constructivism. However, the third creature

valued *two* things non-instrumentally: its own survival and the survival of its offspring. [...] If, for example, the third creature's offspring depends on it for sustenance, then its survival is necessary for theirs, and in this sense the third creature is *correct* (as judged from the standpoint of its judgment that its offspring's survival is valuable) to judge that its own survival is valuable. (Street, in Parfit 2016 282)

Parfit correctly points out that Street's example doesn't show what she wants it to. He writes that the third creature "would correctly judge its own survival to be valuable, not intrinsically, but only instrumentally as a means to the survival of its offspring. (Parfit 2016 282) However, Parfit makes a mistake of his own when he generalizes from Street's poor example to the general claim that according to constructivism, "we can make mistakes about *instrumental* value. But we cannot make mistakes about intrinsic value." (Parfit 2016 282) He forgets that evaluative commitments may be consistent or not with each other not only *instrumentally* level, but also *conceptually*. For example, the creature could not consistently value both *their own demise* and *the survival of all creatures*. This is the kind of consistency Street should have invoked in her story.

Conclusion

I have argued that Street's evolutionary debunking of realism can successfully respond to charges of skepticism and nihilism. It meets the first charge by accepting Vavova's *Good* epistemic principle, *and* maintaining that reasons should be independent of what's in question, by either 1) recasting evolutionary debunking as an internal contradiction in realism, or 2) accepting *Gap* on constructivist grounds. It meets the second charge by applying constructivism to itself, and maintaining that constructivist moral beliefs can, in a meaningful sense, be either correct or mistaken.

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