

The Evolutionary Debunking of Quasi-Realism

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1. Introduction

This paper is a contribution to the ongoing debate about whether quasi-realists need to, and can, answer the reliability challenge. This is the challenge, roughly, of explaining why our moral beliefs are generally true. Seminal waypoints in this debate are Street 2011, Gibbard 2011, and Dreier 2012. The most recent contribution (Golub 2017) argues that quasi-realism can provide some satisfying answers to the challenge, whilst recognizing that these answers are not precisely symmetric to the realist ‘truth-tracking’ style of answer that seems plausible for other domains. Whilst we agree with Golub that quasi-realism cannot and should not provide an answer to the reliability challenge that perfectly emulates realism, we argue that there is a previously overlooked answer to the reliability challenge that quasi-realism can provide. In the process, we hope to clarify the reliability challenge, its connection to evolutionary debunking arguments, and the way in which quasi-realism hopes to mimic realism.

2. Evolutionary(+) Explanations of Moral Beliefs

In all likelihood, evolutionary forces shaped both our capacity to form moral beliefs, and our tendencies to form particular types of moral beliefs. More precisely, it seems likely that thinking and speaking in moral terms provided a reproductive advantage to our ancestors in terms of generating, sustaining, and refining systems of co-operative behaviour and attitude (Joyce 2006: 107-42, Fraser 2014: 469-470). Likewise, tendencies to form particular types of moral beliefs – such as the belief that incest is wrong – likely provided a reproductive advantage to groups who possessed them (Ruse 1986: 235-51, Street 2006: 114-15). In both cases a particular type of evolutionary explanation seems plausible: these capacities or tendencies were selected for at least in part because they themselves provided evolutionary advantage; they are not evolutionary spandrels (Gould & Lewontin 1979).

Further, as is often remarked, these traits and tendencies seem to have been selected not because they allowed or constituted ‘upstream’ detection of facts corresponding to their content but, at least in part, because of their ‘downstream’ motivational effects (Sinclair 2018: 101). For example, it was because the belief in the wrongness of incest motivated our ancestors in its distinct ways that the tendency to form that belief propagated and persisted, not because it was an accurate depiction of the moral facts.

It is worth noting that although such evolutionary hypotheses are compelling, they do not provide complete explanations of any individual moral beliefs, still less of all individual moral beliefs (Kahane 2011: 118, Fraser 2014: 469). Evolutionary explanations pertain to facts about the capacities or tendencies generally possessed by members of a population, rather than providing a complete account of why a particular individual possesses a particular capacity or belief (Joyce 2006: 137, Graham et al. 2013). To generate particular explanations, evolutionary hypotheses need supplementation by additional claims about the proximal physiological, psychological, historical, cultural (etc.) circumstances an individual finds themselves in—generating what can be called ‘evolutionary+’ explanations of particular moral beliefs (Sinclair

2018: 102). Still, it seems plausible that, just as moral facts and their accurate detection played no role in the evolutionary hypotheses, they also play no role in these supplementing hypotheses (Kahane 2011: 106). In sum, evolutionary+ explanations of our moral beliefs are morally *truth-mooting*—they do not involve explicit reference to moral truth or any capacity to track such truth (Mason 2010: 773).

3. Debunking Arguments

As theorists of the nature of moral practice, and people with moral beliefs, how should we respond to such evolutionary(+) hypotheses? Such claims might be argumentatively relevant in at least two ways. First, they may be premises, or support for premises, in debunking arguments. Second, they may be evidence that a particular way of addressing a reliability challenge is unavailable. To assess these claims, we need to say something about debunking arguments, reliability challenges, and the connections between them.

In the most general terms, an epistemic debunking argument is one that “transition[s] from a premise about what does or does not explain why we have certain mental states to a negative assessment of their epistemic status,” for example, that they are not knowledge, not justified, not evidence, or cannot be rationally maintained (Korman 2019: 1). Such arguments are distinct from metaphysical debunking arguments (Joyce 2014) and are typically *targeted* on a proper subset of our mental states, for example, moral beliefs—it is generally considered a defect if they lead to a *general* skepticism.

Epistemic debunking arguments (‘debunking arguments’ from here on in) come in two main types (Korman 2019). Skeptical debunking arguments seek to establish the skeptical conclusion that the relevant mental states lack epistemic status (they are not knowledge, not justified, etc.). Their end point is skepticism (e.g. Joyce 2006, Fraser 2014). Conditional

debunking arguments, by contrast, view skepticism as an interim conclusion on the path to a *reductio* of some specified theory. Broadly speaking, they argue that if a particular theory is accepted, then skepticism follows, but since skepticism is unpalatable, we should reject the theory (e.g. Street 2006). Both types of argument begin with an explanatory premise: skeptical debunking arguments with the thought that some set of beliefs about domain D (the D-beliefs) are not explained in the relevant way by the facts they are purportedly about (the D-facts) and conditional debunking arguments with the thought that, given a theory (T) about the nature of the domain in question, the D-beliefs are not explained in the relevant way by the D-facts (Korman 2019: 3).

Why might one accept such explanatory premises? One might argue that the D-facts *could not possibly* explain our D-beliefs, because of their very nature, or because of their nature according to T. Perhaps, for example the D-facts are (according to T) causally inefficacious non-natural facts, incapable of explaining anything in the relevant way (e.g. Bedke 2014). Alternatively, one might argue that although the D-facts *could* explain our D-beliefs, we have good reason to think that they do not, primarily because we have *better* explanations of our D-beliefs that do not include or imply the D-facts. And it is here evolutionary(+) explanations of a set of beliefs might be relevant, because such explanations might be taken to *exclude* any relevant explanation of the D-beliefs in terms of the D-facts, that is, show that the D-beliefs are subject to “irrelevant influences” (Vavova 2018).

In addition to an explanatory premise, all debunking arguments accept an epistemic premise that links the lack of explanatory relation between the D-beliefs and the D-facts to the negative epistemic status of the D-beliefs. On some versions of debunking arguments, this connection is *direct* – the lack of explanatory connection (or awareness of it) itself entails negative epistemic status (Korman 2019: 7-8). On other versions, the lack of explanatory connection reveals another deficiency in the D-beliefs—for example they are not safe, not

sensitive, contingent, probably false, or at best accidentally true, and this deficiency, in turn, entails that the D-beliefs have a negative epistemic status (Korman 2019: 6). A recent trend in the literature is to connect the epistemic premise to the notion of higher-order evidence—that is, evidence regarding our evidence. For example, the lack of explanatory connection (or awareness of it) can be construed as higher-order evidence that the evidence on which we base our D-beliefs is unreliable or undercut (Bogardus 2016, Mogensen 2016).

Two features of debunking arguments will be relevant here. First, all such arguments involve an explanatory premise to the effect that the D-facts do not – in the relevant way – explain the D-beliefs. And second, *some* debunking arguments target particular meta-ethical theories, such as (non-naturalist) moral realism. This might cause us to wonder whether quasi-realism is similarly vulnerable.

4. Is Quasi-Realism Vulnerable to Debunking Arguments?

Quasi-realism might be *more* vulnerable than realism to debunking arguments if the kind of reasoning processes that lead people to endorse it are particularly susceptible to error. At least, this is the view of Kyriacou (2017: 1030), who argues that expressivists and therefore quasi-realists follow an argumentative strategy that involves a manoeuvre which—given certain facts about our evolutionary psychology—is likely corrupted by ‘dubious affect and availability heuristics.’ This conclusion is then employed within the explanatory premise of an evolutionary debunking argument, targeted at any theory which endorses significant aspects of meta-epistemological as well as meta-ethical expressivism (e.g. Carter and Chrisman 2012). Note that Kyriacou’s debunking argument *requires* evidence that the theory being targeted is likely based on defective reasoning. It focuses on expressivism (the family of theories of which quasi-realism is a member), since only expressivists typically perform the manoeuvre that, Kyriacou

believes, provides just this kind of evidence. To assess this argument we first need to consider the connections between expressivism and quasi-realism.

Quasi-realists are expressivists insofar as they claim that the distinctive meaning of moral judgments can only be explained in terms of their capacity to express attitudes. Yet not all expressivists are quasi-realists. A quasi-realist is someone who:

...starting from a recognizably anti-realist [expressivist] position finds himself progressively able to mimic the intellectual practices supposedly definitive of realism. (Blackburn 1993: 15)

What is mimicked here is not realism, but ‘the intellectual practices supposedly definitive of realism,’ sometimes also known as the realist ‘face-values’ of moral practice. Such realist-seeming practices include the subject-predicate form of assertoric moral sentences and the ability of those sentences to sensibly embed in logical constructions. But they also include a range of more or less explicit assumptions made by those who engage in moral practice, revealed by the moves they make within it. For example, most engaged moralizers assume that moral judgments express moral beliefs that can be true or false, that there are moral truths and facts, that such facts would persist even if we had different reactions, that our moral beliefs could be mistaken, that if things go well the moral facts explain our moral beliefs, and so on. The quasi-realist seeks to vindicate these assumptions on an expressivist basis. To vindicate them is to show how these assumptions make sense, and are true, granting the expressivist underpinnings.

One common two-part strategy for doing this is as follows. First, interpret these assumptions in meta-ethically neutral ways. For example, the assumption that moral judgments express moral beliefs *could* be understood in essentially cognitivist terms as the assumption that moral judgments express states with a mind-to-world direction of fit and a distinctive role

in our cognitive economy ('robust' beliefs). Alternatively, the assumption could be understood in a meta-ethically neutral way as the assumption that the moral judgments express stances that have logical upshots, can be disagreed with, argued over, supported, undermined, etc. ('minimal' beliefs—see Sinclair 2006). The quasi-realist argues that the latter is a more plausible way to interpret the assumptions of ordinary moralizers (it is less theoretically sophisticated, for example). The second stage of the strategy is to argue that, so understood, the assumption is consistent with the expressivist underpinnings. In the case of moral beliefs, for example, the expressivist can explain why moral commitments, understood expressively, have these features (Sinclair 2021: 183-186).

In some cases, the above strategy is achieved by arguing that the realist-seeming assumption in need of vindication is best interpreted as a substantive moral commitment, and therefore while accepting it is not strictly part of quasi-realism, doing so is consistent with quasi-realism, and may even be a nice thing to do. So, for example, the assumption that some moral beliefs are true is just the position that some moral stances are appropriate. Disapproval of murder is appropriate, for instance, and this is part of what we express in the substantive moral claim that murder is wrong. Likewise, the claim that there are moral truths is just the thought that some things are right, others wrong. Murder is wrong (so we say), so it is true that murder is wrong, so there are moral truths. The conclusion is contained in the premise and the premise is a substantive moral claim.

The quasi-realist thus endorses a 'minimalist' approach to truth, and cognate notions of 'fact', 'error', and so on. To judge that something is truly good, or that there is something in virtue of which it is good, is to express a moral belief (Blackburn 2009: 207). As a meta-ethicist, the quasi-realist aims to vindicate the roles of such judgments within our wider moral practice, by explaining how they make sense within it. However, she believes that such

judgments can only be assessed *as* true or false from within the practice itself. The question of what the good *is* can only be understood – if at all – as a substantive moral question.

With this context, we can return to Kyriacou's argument. This rests on the accurate claim that expressivists typically decline to provide any analysis of evaluative terms like 'good', or any metaphysical account of evaluative properties like *goodness*, and instead ask about the states of mind expressed by evaluative statements (Blackburn 1998: 50, Gibbard 2003: 6). Crucially, Kyriacou (2017: 1029) understands this manoeuvre as the *substitution* of a 'hard and intractable' question about the analysis or metaphysics of value for an easier and 'more tractable' question about the nature of evaluative judgments. However, we can disambiguate here. When it comes to the *analysis* of evaluative terms such as 'good', the quasi-realist—qua expressivist—*agrees* with Moore that they are irreducible (at least in their standard moral uses). Rather than substituting one question for the other, she swiftly *answers* the initial question, by agreeing with Moore about the impossibility of any reductive analysis, before switching to more illuminating questions about the mental states and practices involved in our talking and thinking in such terms. Next in our disambiguation, when it comes to the *metaphysics* of value, such as the debate about the nature of the supposed property of goodness (the property that moral realists believe in), the quasi-realist—qua expressivist—does not substitute the metaphysical question for the question about the nature of the relevant judgments, but rather answers the former (there is no such property, so it has no nature) before moving on to the latter. Finally, when it comes to the *substantive moral* question of the what the good *is* the quasi-realist again does not duck the question, but rather answers it by making substantive moral claims (it is keeping one's promises, for example). In none of the disambiguated cases, therefore, is there the substitution of one question for another.

Kyriacou's worry is that, if the expressivist's (and therefore quasi-realist's) reasoning were to involve the substitution of a hard question for an easy one, then it would likely be

corrupted by various intuitive biases that are associated with such substitutions, and more precisely with the affect and availability heuristics identified by Kahneman (Kyriacou 2017: 1027-1029). However, since expressivists and quasi-realists do not substitute one question for another in this way, such worries are irrelevant. So we see no reason why quasi-realism—qua expressivism—should be *more* vulnerable to evolutionary debunking arguments than realism. But is it *as* vulnerable? To answer this, we must consider the relation between evolutionary debunking arguments and reliability challenges.

5. Reliability Challenges

In broadest terms, a reliability challenge is the challenge of explaining why a set of beliefs are generally true (Field 1989, Schechter 2010, Enoch 2011). Our beliefs about the layout of objects in our immediate environment, for example, are generally true. The reliability challenge for such beliefs is explaining why this is so. This challenge seems to be met by pointing out that such beliefs are predominantly the result of our in-built perceptual mechanisms and that those mechanisms, in turn, are causally hooked-up with the physical features of our immediate environment. As this example shows, another way of expressing a reliability challenge is as the challenge of explaining why there is a general correlation between a set of beliefs and the facts they purportedly represent.

Although there is much to refine, we can already see why reliability challenges are distinct from debunking arguments. Debunking arguments seek to undermine either our D-beliefs or theory T of those beliefs: their conclusion is either that our D-beliefs have negative epistemic status or that T is false because, if true, it would lead to the D-beliefs having such status. Reliability challenges, by contrast, do not speak of negative epistemic status and do not

have conclusions as such. They are more perspicuously expressed in the interrogative mood: “Why is it that our D-beliefs are generally true?”.

Of course, reliability challenges and debunking arguments may be linked. The explanatory premise of debunking arguments may show certain responses to the corresponding reliability challenge to be unavailable (Setiya 2012: ch. 2). One might hold – as an epistemic premise in a debunking argument – that if we do not possess (conditional on T) an account of why our D-beliefs might be generally true, then those beliefs have negative epistemic status (conditional on T). Or one might hold that if we have reason to think that (conditional on T) there *cannot* be a plausible account of why our D-beliefs might be generally true, then those beliefs have negative epistemic status (conditional on T). On this view, the impossibility of a theory addressing a reliability challenge would engender a conditional debunking argument against that theory (Enoch 2011, Joyce 2016). The failure to address a reliability challenge may also be considered independent evidence against a theory of the beliefs in question— independent, that is, of whether that failure engenders negative epistemic status.

Despite these possible connections, debunking arguments and reliability challenges are distinct. A further particular way in which they are distinct will also be important here.

The distinction is as follows: What it is permissible to assume in answering reliability challenges is not necessarily the same as what it is permissible to assume in replying to debunking arguments. In order to answer a reliability challenge, one *must* assume that the set of beliefs identified is generally true.¹ After all, if this is not the case, there is no correlation between the beliefs and their subject matter that needs explaining. Since ‘obligatory’ entails ‘permissible’, in answering reliability challenges it is permissible to assume that the beliefs

¹ A further distinct challenge – the challenge of positive epistemology or explaining *how* a set of beliefs are justified – requires a further assumption, viz. that the relevant beliefs are generally justified, that does not obviously follow from the assumption that they are generally true. See Schechter 2010 and Berker 2014.

concerned are generally true. In order to reply to a debunking argument, on the other hand, it is not that case, or at least not obvious, that one *must* assume any D-truths. Whether it is in fact *permissible* to assume D-truths in answering debunking arguments is contentious, and probably depends on the precise type of debunking being offered. For example, if a debunking argument proceeds by arguing that the lack of explanatory relation between the beliefs and the relevant facts shows such beliefs to be *off track*, then arguably the debunker herself has employed assumptions about the D-truths (enough to know that the evolutionary influences appear to put us off the scent of moral truth) in the course of her argument. This, presumably, entails that it is permissible for her opponent to make such assumptions when responding (Lillehammer 2003, Vavova 2014, Sinclair 2018, Wittwer 2020). By contrast, if a debunking argument proceeds by arguing that the lack of explanatory relation between the beliefs and the relevant facts shows the evidential justification of the relevant beliefs to be *undercut*, it is less clear whether it is permissible to make substantive assumptions about the D-truths in response (Lutz 2018).

The general issue of the permissible assumptions when responding to debunking arguments remains controversial. Fortunately for our purposes, this is not a debate we need enter into, for our concern is with the reliability challenge to quasi-realism and therefore only with the particular types of debunking argument, mentioned above, that failure to address such a challenge might engender. For those types of debunking argument it clearly is permissible—because it is obligatory—to assume that the target beliefs are generally true.

There remains one final ambiguity in specifying reliability challenges that we need to untangle. A reliability challenge is a challenge of explaining why a set of beliefs are generally (mostly, by and large) true. An obvious question is: *which set of beliefs?* This seemingly innocuous question reveals a divide between different types of reliability challenge.

In the first case, a reliability challenge may focus on the *actual* beliefs of a certain group of people, where those beliefs are identified by their content. Call such challenges *content-focused*. So, for example, a content-focused reliability challenge may ask for an explanation of why our actual *moral* beliefs are generally true (e.g. Dreier 2012: 270, Golub 2017: 797). Second, a reliability challenge may focus on the actual and hypothetical beliefs of a group of people, where those beliefs are identified both by their content *and the mechanism through which they are formed*. Call such challenges *mechanism-focused*. So, for example, a mechanism-focused reliability challenge may ask for an explanation of why our moral beliefs, when formed through a process of well-informed impartial reflection, are generally true (we shall say that such beliefs are ‘carefully formed’).

Note the differences here, exemplified in the case of moral beliefs. First, a content-focused challenge requires the assumption that most of our actual moral beliefs are true. A mechanism-focused challenge, by contrast, requires only the assumption that most of our moral beliefs *formed through the specified mechanism* are true, and this is consistent with most of our actual moral beliefs being false. Where the specified mechanism is well-informed impartial reflection, the second assumption is more plausible than the first. Second, a content-focused challenge asks us to explain the general truth only of our actual beliefs. A mechanism-focused challenge, by contrast, asks us to explain the general truth of a set of actual and hypothetical beliefs. In other words, a mechanism-focused challenge – but not a content-focused challenge – can be understood as the demand of an explanation of why the following counterfactual ‘correspondence conditional’ holds (Blackburn 1984: 244):

CC: Generally, if we do our stuff and end up believing that p, then p.

Where ‘our stuff’ refers to following the method in question, for example, well-informed impartial reflection.

Partly for these reasons, mechanism-focused reliability challenges are more interesting than content-focused challenges. In what follows, we will consider the question of whether quasi-realism as a theory of moral belief faces a particular mechanism-focused reliability challenge.

6. Does Quasi-Realism Face a Reliability Challenge?

One potential reason to think that there might be a mechanism-focused reliability challenge for quasi-realism is as follows. Quasi-realism is sometimes presented as the view that starts from an expressivist account of moral judgment and adds to this the ambition of complete realist mimicry; that is, to give every claim made by realism an expressivist-friendly gloss or paraphrase (e.g. Street 2011). If quasi-realism mimics realism, and if there is a mechanism-focused reliability challenge for realism, then it seems likely that there is a mechanism-focused reliability challenge for quasi-realism.

However, as we saw in Section 4, quasi-realism mimics not realism itself but the parts of our moral practices that have tempted people to realism. Hence, it is not the case that quasi-realism automatically inherits all of the problems (or advantages) of realism. Rather, it will inherit only those problems (and advantages) that stem from a vindication of the ‘realist-seeming’ practices of morality (Sinclair 2021: 78-80).

Quasi-realism does face a reliability challenge, but not because of what it mimics, rather because of what it saves. The quasi-realist seeks to vindicate certain assumptions made by everyday moralizers in their course of engagement with moral practice, and, it turns out, such assumptions include all those required to make sense of a reliability challenge. The relevant assumptions are these (Dreier 2012: 286):

There are moral facts.

We have moral beliefs about moral facts.

Generally, carefully formed moral beliefs are true.

So, according to quasi-realism, we have moral beliefs about moral facts, and if we form those beliefs carefully, then those beliefs are generally true. But why does this latter counterfactual conditional – the correspondence conditional – hold? What, in particular, can the quasi-realist say to explain why it holds? This is a mechanism-focused reliability challenge for quasi-realism.

7. Why the Challenge is Challenging

It is one thing for a question to make sense, another for it to be challenging to answer. So far, we have seen how a mechanism-focused reliability challenge can arise for quasi-realism. But is the question thus posed easily answered?

It would be easily answered, for example, if we held that our moral beliefs were infallible, or if our moral beliefs somehow determined or constituted the facts.² But of course, quasi-realists will not hold these things, and for the very same reason why they will not hold that there are no moral facts or moral beliefs – for the negations of such claims are among the assumptions of everyday moral practice that quasi-realism hopes to vindicate. In other words, quasi-realists also vindicate the realist-seeming assumptions that:

Our moral beliefs—even carefully formed moral beliefs—are fallible, that is for each such belief, it could be false.

² This gives moral constructivists a good answer to some reliability challenges – see Street 2006.

It is not the case that if we believe that X is wrong then X is wrong (*mutatis mutandis* for other moral predicates).

It is not the case that if we carefully form the belief that X is wrong, then X is wrong (*mutatis mutandis* for other moral predicates).³

According to standard quasi-realist vindications of these assumptions, they are to be understood as follows. The first expresses the thought that moral attitudes, even those formed carefully, may not survive a process of improvement in our set of attitudes (Blackburn 1998: 318). It does not follow that, were any one of us to fully and coherently endorse any one moral belief, then that belief *must* be true, at least from a first-person perspective (Egan 2007). This would contradict the common assumption that we cannot fix the moral facts just by fixing our moral attitudes. The quasi-realist can easily avoid this problem since, given her minimalist treatment of notions like ‘truth’ and ‘error’, she need not provide any theoretical account of what moral error is, or when it obtains (Blackburn 2009).⁴ These are understood to be substantive moral questions, not meta-ethical ones. The quasi-realist aims to explain moral error, not by defining ‘moral error’ or by providing a reductive analysis of the concept of moral error, but by providing a theoretical account of the practices in which this concept is embedded.

The second and third assumptions express rejection of a certain moral standard or way of forming moral attitudes. The second expresses the thought that we ought not form moral disapproval of X just when we find ourselves morally disapproving of X (we ought not make the appropriateness of moral attitudes conditional only on themselves, so to speak – see Dreier 2012: 284). The third expresses the thought that we ought not form moral disapproval of X just when we found ourselves possessing that disapproval after careful deliberation. Both are

³ The conditionals here are strict, in contrast with the counterfactual conditional CC (see Sinclair 2008: 267 n.7).

⁴ Might such minimalist approaches to truth neutralize any reliability challenge concerning the truths in question? No, for the reasons set out by Golub (2017: 801).

therefore substantive moral claims, and ones that make sense given the co-ordinating role of moral practice (Sinclair 2008).

Accepting these assumptions rules out the quick-and-easy responses to the current reliability challenge mentioned at the start of this section.

A further solution is ruled out on both empirical and theoretical grounds. If it were the case that the best evolutionary(+) explanation of our (carefully formed) moral beliefs saw them as products of a mechanism selected so as to track moral truth, then the quasi-realist could argue that this evolutionary(+) hypothesis explains why our carefully formed moral beliefs are generally true. But, of course, this route is blocked. First because, as mentioned in Section 2, it is empirically unsupported. Second, because it is the essence of any expressivist position that the function of moral judgments is not to track moral or other facts (Golub 2017: 804).

At this point it will be informative to digress for a moment to consider how a parallel reliability challenge can be met in the case of beliefs about our immediate environment, and the role of evolutionary theorizing in meeting it. Why is it that our beliefs about our immediate environment (such as our belief that there is a computer screen in front of us) are generally true? Answer: because such beliefs are by and large the result of our perceptual mechanisms, such as the cones and rods in our eyes, and these perceptual mechanisms are generally causally hooked up with objects in our immediate environment (in fact, they were most likely evolutionary selected for this reason). Note the following about this answer. First, unlike the initial challenge, it is mechanism-focused. Second, evolution plays a helpful but non-essential role. What matters is the theory of causal hooking-up and, although evolution helps deepen this theory, it is not essential to it. Third, and most importantly, in order to answer this reliability challenge to a set of empirical beliefs we need to assume certain empirical claims (viz. that we have eyes with cones and rods, etc.). Suppose the reliability challenge were broadened to the

class of all empirical beliefs: why is it that our empirical beliefs are generally true? This challenge cannot be answered without assuming some substantive empirical claims (such as the claims that we have perceptual mechanisms that causally interact with the outside world). By parity of reasoning this suggests, again, that in answering reliability challenges concerning all moral beliefs, for example, it is permissible to rely on substantive moral claims.⁵ One point that can sometimes obscure this conclusion is that in answering the restricted empirical reliability challenge (concerning beliefs about our immediate environment), it is not necessary to make any substantive assumptions about the *particular* arrangements of physical objects in our environment (the explanation does not require any assumption about the particular location of the screen that we are looking at, for example, only that screens are the sort of thing that *would* causally interact with our perceptual mechanisms if they were present). Yet it is necessary to make substantive empirical assumptions about our perceptual mechanisms. We should not confuse the lack of empirical assumptions about the arrangement of objects in our immediate environment with a general lack of substantive empirical assumptions. The latter are necessary for answering a reliability challenge to any set of empirical beliefs, including the set of all empirical beliefs.

8. Strategies for Addressing the Challenge

This digression aside, we now have a mechanism-focused reliability challenge to quasi-realism that starts to bite. *Why is it that carefully formed moral beliefs are generally true?* Our moral beliefs are not infallible, being carefully formed does not make them true, and evolutionary(+) theorizing seems to rule out the existence of any moral truth-tracking mechanisms, on a par

⁵ Does this point overgeneralize, allowing domains in which skepticism is all-things-considered most plausible, to easily answer their reliability challenges? Not obviously, since there is a step from granting this assumption to providing a satisfying answer to a reliability challenge. Further, satisfactorily answering a domain-specific reliability challenge may not by itself be sufficient to inoculate against skepticism about that domain.

with empirical truth-tracking mechanisms. All this must be accepted by quasi-realists. Why then, think that our carefully formed moral beliefs are generally true?

a. Denial

One strategy the quasi-realist can deploy is denying that the question needs to be answered. One might even provide an argument for thinking *that* the question does not need to be answered. So denial need not be dogmatic. Dreier (2012) explores this suggestion (although ultimately, he is not entirely happy with it). He conceives the reliability challenge as the challenge of explaining the general *coincidence* between our moral beliefs (or our carefully formed moral beliefs) and the moral truth; the problem of unexplained coincidence is the problem of failing to answer this challenge, that is, of leaving this general correlation unexplained (2012: 270). Dreier develops an argument for thinking that there is no problem of unexplained coincidence for quasi-realism, i.e., no reliability challenge to answer, on the basis that there is no problem of unexplained coincidence for the basic attitudinal states that the quasi-realist puts at the heart of moral practice and that none of the linguistic complexities that the quasi-realist adds on top of this (the minimalist treatment of truth, for example) could import a problem what was not there to start with (2012: 278-285).

Golub has responded to this argument by denying that there is no problem of unexplained coincidence for the basic moral attitudes. He writes:

If we accept the very minimalism that the quasi-realist project relies on, these attitudes *are* beliefs, even before they are expressed publicly through declarative sentences, and adopting them amounts to thinking them true—and this is enough for the reliability challenge to arise...Quasi-realists still owe us

an explanation of why we would come to form [moral] beliefs that are by and large true. (Golub 2017: 803)

We are in broad agreement with Golub here, but want to provide a further argument to support his point. Golub writes that, for quasi-realism, ‘adopting [moral attitudes] amounts to thinking them true.’ There is a truth in this, we think, but it needs to be carefully distinguished from a closely related claim that quasi-realists should not accept. Distinguish the following two claims.

TRUE: Endorsing a moral attitude involves thinking it true.

FALSE: Holding (synonyms: possessing, instantiating) a moral attitude involves thinking it true.

As our labels suggest, we think quasi-realists should accept the first but not the second. Endorsing a moral attitude involves taking it to be appropriate for oneself and similarly situated others. Merely possessing a moral attitude need not involve this. Of course, in most cases when we endorse the having of a moral attitude, we possess that attitude, but the connection is not necessary. There may be cases where someone’s brain chemistry, for instance, leads to her possessing an attitude she does not endorse, and conversely cases where some aberrant psychological process prevents someone possessing an attitude that she wholeheartedly endorses (perhaps because she is aware of utterly convincing arguments in its favor). This distinction allows the quasi-realist to say: thinking a moral attitude true is endorsing it, but since merely possessing an attitude (or possessing it after some specified process) is not the same as endorsing it, there is a possibility that the attitudes we actually have (or the attitudes we would have after some process) are not the attitudes we endorse. Hence, there is a potential for the attitudes we possess (or would possess after some specified process) to come apart from the attitudes that we think are true. Our reliability challenge is a genuine challenge because this

is a genuine possibility. This is our additional argument in support of Golub's claim that the quasi-realists' moral attitudes face a reliability challenge.

There is an important further detail embedded in the foregoing that will matter in setting out a quasi-realist response to our reliability challenge. We said that thinking a moral attitude true is endorsing it, and that endorsing it is 'taking it to be appropriate for oneself and similarly situated others.' But what is that? Here, briefly, is the quasi-realist account (Sinclair 2021: 194-95). Begin with so-called higher-order attitudes towards ways of forming attitudes. For instance, we think that people ought to form their moral attitudes towards types of acts on the basis of the genuine features of those acts, rather than (say) what others say about those acts. This higher-order attitude is itself a moral attitude, but higher-order insofar as it is directed at ways of forming attitudes. Once we have higher-order attitudes in place, a type of *improvement* in a set of attitudes becomes possible: a later set of attitudes represents an improvement on an earlier set just in case it involves increased coherence between the first- and higher-order attitudes. For example, if someone disapproves of attitudes based on hearsay and yet has an attitude towards murder that is purely based on hearsay, their set can be improved by abandoning the latter and improved further still by adopting an attitude to murder that is in response to the actual features of murder. Finally, this notion of improvement for a set of attitudes can help us understand what it is to think that an attitude is appropriate for oneself and similarly situated others: to consider a first-order moral attitude appropriate is to consider it to be mandated by the ideal set of attitudes, that is, the set that results from taking all possible opportunities for improvement.⁶

⁶ Although quasi-realism does not require that there be only one ideal set of attitudes—i.e., a single moral truth—quasi-realists have typically argued for this claim, and we endorse it here. For an early example of such an argument, see Blackburn 1984: 197-202)

Still, as we saw in Section 7, the quasi-realist does not say that an attitude is true just in case it is part of the best set of attitudes, or that being part of such a set is part of the truth-conditions for moral attitudes. That would be the case if moral attitudes were robust beliefs about the content of such a set, but they are not, they are attitudes. They are, however, attitudes whose formation is regulated by standards, and the regulatory ideal provided by those standards is one of a single maximally improved set of attitudes (Blackburn 1980). Moral truth, conceived as the ideal set of attitudes, is the *internal* aim of moral judgment, rather than an external accuracy condition. The *practice* of asking whether a moral belief is true is that of assessing whether it is mandated by just those attitudes that we ought to have.

This helps further support the claim that there is a reliability challenge for quasi-realism, and that it is a difficult one. The moral truth, from the perspective of an engaged moral agent, is the set of attitudes that result from all possible opportunities for improvement. Do our current attitudes meet this condition? Would the attitudes we formed after well-informed impartial reflection meet this condition? Those are both substantial open questions. Hence, again, there is a reliability challenge for quasi-realism.

b. Answers

If denial is off the table, how might quasi-realists answer? There are a number of *bad* answers to the challenge, whose failure is illuminating.

Our question, recall, is this: *why is it that carefully formed moral beliefs are generally true?* Here is one answer:

‘My belief that murder is wrong is carefully formed. And this belief is true because murder ends lives. My belief that random acts of violence are wrong is

carefully formed. And this belief is true because random acts of violence cause pain and suffering.’

And so on. Dreier sums this up: ‘Each thought is true for its own reason, and together these reasons, plus the fact that these are our beliefs, explain why most of our beliefs are true’ (2012: 270).

This is clearly not a satisfactory answer to the challenge. This is at least in part because the answer is content- rather than mechanism-focused. We want to know why it is that a particular way of forming beliefs (e.g. well-informed impartial reflection) makes it likely that most of those beliefs thus formed are true. We do not want to know why it is that our actual beliefs are by and large true.⁷

Another unsatisfactory answer is similarly illuminated by drawing the content/mechanism distinction (Dreier 2012: 270). We might address the content-focused reliability challenge by specifying a mechanism and noting, quite generally, that the results of that mechanism tend to align with moral truth. Golub provides some tentative examples of this type of response:

For instance, [quasi-realists] may hold that we are likely to form true [moral] beliefs when we pay attention to the relevant non-[moral] facts, deliberate carefully and our reasoning is not obstructed by pernicious biases. They may point to the kind of upbringing that fosters good judgment on [moral] matters. Or they may appeal to the evaluative tendencies that are part of our evolutionary heritage, such as the tendency to disvalue pain or to value reciprocity: it is no surprise that we ended up largely reliable in our [moral] judgments, they might

⁷ Perhaps Blackburn’s (ms) and Gibbard’s (2011) responses to Street’s (2011) evolutionary challenge to quasi-realism fall into this unsatisfactory category. Certainly, both Dreier (2012: 276-78) and Golub (2017: 799) argue so, and we do not wish to quibble with these arguments.

say, given that these tendencies bring us closer to the truth, as a matter of [moral] fact. (Golub 2017: 806)

This type of response differs from the first insofar as it involves general claims about the alignment of belief-forming methods with moral truth. Moreover, these explanations will not be empty so long as the methods involved are specified independently of their ability to lead to generally true moral beliefs. Nevertheless, as Golub notes, there is something unsatisfactory in these explanations. He continues:

Quasi-realists, the objection goes, still leave unexplained certain connections between our psychology and the [moral] facts: we have yet to be told *why certain features of our belief-forming processes are truth-conducive*, for instance why our inherited evaluative tendencies bring us in line with basic [moral] truths. In contrast, in other areas of thought, we can provide a more robust explanation of our reliability, which *does not treat any such connection between our beliefs and their subject matter as a brute fact*. (Golub 2017: 806,our emphases.)

We agree with Golub. There is an ‘explanation of our reliability’—and in particular, an explanation of the reliability of some of our moral belief-forming methods—that has still not been provided. Golub goes on to argue that it is unreasonable to demand any further explanation from the quasi-realist. The only further explanation that *could* be offered, Golub suggests, is an explanation of the reliability of our moral belief-forming mechanisms in terms of those mechanisms having a robust truth-tracking function, analogous to the function of our perceptual mechanisms (2017: 806-807). But such an explanation is inconsistent with a quasi-realist account of moral beliefs, and to demand it in the moral case results from an unwarranted overgeneralisation from other domains (2017: 808). This last point can be further supported in

light of the earlier discussion of the aims of quasi-realism. For quasi-realism, recall, hopes not to mimic all the claims of realism, but only to save all and only the forms and assumption of ordinary moral practice. It is unlikely that people ordinarily assume that the reliability of our moral belief-forming capacities requires explanation in terms of robust truth-tracking.⁸

Nevertheless, we disagree with Golub that the quasi-realist has, to this point, offered all the explanations she can offer of the reliability of any particular moral belief-forming mechanisms. So consider, for the final time, our question: why are our carefully formed moral beliefs generally true?

Here is our quasi-realist friendly answer, that we hope goes a little further than Golub's. (i) Generally, and most probably, the moral features of objects of evaluation are determined by particular non-moral features of those objects, such as their capacity to cause pleasure and pain, to promote and frustrate survival, and so on; call these features 'XYZ'. (ii) Well-informed impartial reflection generally—as a contingent matter of fact—makes us aware of features XYZ. (iii) When we are aware of features XYZ in well-informed impartial reflection, we generally form appropriate moral beliefs on the basis of them. Hence, most likely, when we form our moral beliefs through well-informed impartial reflection, we will be forming those beliefs, about rightness, wrongness, and so on, in response to the non-moral features of things that make them right, wrong, etc. Hence, most likely, when we form moral beliefs through the process of well-informed impartial reflection, we will be forming true beliefs. In other words, our carefully formed moral beliefs are, most likely, generally true.

The thought here is simple. There are a set of non-moral features on which the moral features of things depend – the *grounds* of moral truths (XYZ). When we deploy the

⁸ The quasi-realist will hold, then, that the 'ultimate' explanation of the reliability of our moral belief-forming mechanisms cannot reside in appeal to a moral truth-tracking function. The account we give below is, we suggest, the last word that quasi-realists can offer as such an explanation. Like Golub, we think that demands for a further, more 'ultimate' explanation, are the result of illegitimate overgeneralization.

method of well-informed impartial reflection, we generally become aware of those grounds, and generally form appropriate attitudes in response to them. So the reliability of this moral belief-forming method is explained not in terms of a brute connection between its deliverances and the moral truth, but in terms of a connection between the deliverances of that method and the *grounds* of moral truths.⁹ So in response to Golub's question of why a certain belief-forming process—such as well-informed impartial reflection—is truth-conducive, we can say: because it makes us responsive to the grounds of moral truth. The connection between our carefully formed moral beliefs and their subject matter is not brute but travels via grounds. And the same may apply to other moral belief-forming processes. For example, suppose, as Golub suggests, that our inherited evaluative tendencies are reliable ways of forming moral beliefs. Why? Because they make us sensitive to the very non-moral properties on which (we currently think) the moral features of things depend.

Note several features of this explanation of the reliability of our carefully formed moral beliefs. First, it relies on a substantive moral claim—namely the claim (i) that the moral features of things depend on non-moral grounds XYZ. This is a substantive moral claim because it is (according to quasi-realism) equivalent to a claim about how one ought to form attitudes in response to things. One ought to form one's moral attitudes to things based upon features XYZ (and not, for example, based on hearsay). This claim is what we earlier referred to as an expression of a moral standard—a standard for forming first-order moral attitudes. Relying on moral claims, though, is unproblematic when answering this reliability challenge, both because the challenge itself assumes that some moral claims are true, and because we do a precisely analogous thing when we, for example, rely on empirical claims about the nature

⁹ This approach therefore resembles realist 'third factor' responses to reliability challenges to realism (Enoch 2011, Schechter 2018: 456).

of our perceptual apparatus to explain the reliability of our perceptual belief-forming mechanisms (see Section 7).

Second, the remaining two parts of this quasi-realist explanation of reliability—claims (ii) and (iii)—are partly contingent empirical claims and may be falsified as such. Should it turn out, for example, that well-informed impartial reflection does not reveal what we currently take to be the grounds of moral truth (perhaps it obscures lived experience) or that although it does reveal such grounds, the beliefs that we form via such reflection do not respond appropriately to those grounds, then the explanation of the reliability of carefully formed moral beliefs would be undermined. The explanation therefore generates a plausible level of *precarity*: the reliability of any moral belief-forming processes—for example, the process of well-informed impartial reflection—is a contingent affair. No independently-specified moral belief-forming process is guaranteed to be reliable.

Third, this explanation of the reliability of carefully formed moral beliefs is precarious in another way: the moral claim on which it rests—claim (i)—might turn out to be false. Currently we think that the moral features of things are determined by grounds XYZ. But an improvement in our moral sensibilities might cause us to think that in fact they are determined by features ABC. If that happens, then even if parts (ii) and (iii) of the explanation still hold, the reliability challenge will not have been met. In fact, in this case, it will no longer be true that carefully formed moral beliefs are generally true (or at best it would be a startling coincidence if they were true). Again, this is an advantage of the account, insofar as it is another way in which the reliability of this particular method of forming beliefs is not guaranteed. A particular belief-forming method will only be reliable, in the final analysis, if the grounds of moral truths that it makes us sensitive to are the true grounds.

With respect to the last two points, it is worthwhile to contrast to a constructivist account of moral truth, according to which the reliability of one particular method of forming moral beliefs is guaranteed, because the deliverances of that method *constitute* moral truth. The quasi-realist seems to have the upper hand here insofar as her theory reflects the thought that no particular method of forming moral beliefs is guaranteed to be reliable. On the quasi-realist view, if it turns out that the grounds of moral truth are not as we currently suppose or if the method does not reveal or lead to attitudes formed in response to those grounds, then the explanation of its reliability will fail.

Finally, it is worth noting that where the above type of explanation of the reliability of a moral belief-forming mechanisms is confirmed, and where one forms a belief—about goodness, say—according to this method, a moral explanation of roughly the following form will be true:

I believe that X is good because X is good.

How should we understand such explanations? The common quasi-realist approach is to say that a given speaker's use of a moral predicate in an explaining phrase points down to or picks out the non-moral property on which that agent takes the correct application of the moral predicate to depend (Sinclair 2012). For example, suppose a speaker thinks that objects are good in virtue of possessing non-moral property G. Then her use of the term 'good' in an explaining phrase picks out this property, so that the explanation offered is equivalent, in her mouth, to:

I believe that X is good because X is G.

This is a non-moral explanation that can be assessed empirically. Where the explanation of the reliability of the relevant belief-forming mechanisms holds, such claims will be true. The speaker will be running 'true-to-form', that is, forming her moral beliefs in response to the

features that she herself takes to ground the correct moral verdicts: her belief-forming mechanisms will be synchronised with her moral standards (Blackburn 1985: 162). By contrast, when the quasi-realist explanation of the reliability of a belief forming mechanism does not hold, such explanations will not obtain. An agent may, for example, take goodness to be grounded in G while her belief about X's goodness is a response to X's being F. Thus the truth of the proposed quasi-realist explanation of the reliability of a belief-forming mechanism will support a range of further, more specific, explanations of our moral beliefs, consistent with those beliefs being true-to-form.

9. Conclusion

We have argued that there is a mechanism-focused reliability challenge for quasi-realism that needs to be answered. Golub's proposed answer to it, however, is incomplete insofar as it can be supplemented by a further answer that does not rely on brute correlations between our belief-forming mechanisms and moral truth. Rather, the quasi-realist can explain the reliability of some moral belief-forming mechanisms in terms of the way those mechanisms afford us sensitivity to (what we take to be) the non-moral grounds of moral truths. The resulting explanations of reliability are precarious insofar as they can be overturned by progress in both our moral and empirical theorising. But this is how it should be, if the quasi-realist is to avoid the unpalatable constructivist claim that some methods of forming moral beliefs are guaranteed to be reliable. In other words, quasi-realism can strike the right balance between the unassailability, and the inexplicability, of our moral reliability.

Having addressed the reliability challenge to quasi-realism, have we successfully responded to the relevant evolutionary debunking arguments (from Section 5)? One such

argument attempts to deploy the claim that quasi-realism *cannot* answer its reliability challenge, but the foregoing shows this premise to be false. Another debunking argument deploys the claim that we *do* not—conditional on quasi-realism—possess an account of why carefully formed moral beliefs are generally true, and perhaps adds that the availability of evolutionary(+) explanations of such beliefs supports this latter claim. But, again, the foregoing account shows that it is not true that quasi-realists cannot offer an account of why carefully formed moral beliefs are generally true. Moreover, this account is perfectly compatible with evolutionary(+) explanations of such beliefs. For example, evolutionary(+) accounts of our moral beliefs are perfectly compatible with the claim that carefully formed moral beliefs are responses to features XYZ, on many plausible ways of specifying both the evolutionary(+) explanation and features XYZ. The quasi-realist explanation of reliability does not, as it should not, guarantee that all agents will (generally) run true-to-form in forming their moral beliefs, but it does show that, in favourable conditions, it is not mysterious why carefully formed moral beliefs are generally true. Hence it rules out a *universal* undermining of the epistemic status of all moral beliefs, of the sort required for this type of conditional debunking argument against quasi-realism.¹⁰

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