

Naturalizing Normativity

Exploring the Relationship between Evolutionary Naturalism and Moral Realism

Shaun Stanley

2/16/2015

Student Number: 445691

Supervisor: Dr. Robert Kowalenko

MA Research Report

What is the relationship between evolutionary naturalism and moral realism? More specifically, is moral realism compatible with evolutionary naturalism? Moral realism depends on the view that our 'moral intuitions' are epistemically reliable. Considerations from evolutionary science allegedly suggest otherwise. Certain evolutionary naturalists employ these considerations in so-called 'Evolutionary Debunking' arguments which show, if sound, that moral realism is unjustified or implausible. Evolutionary naturalism, therefore, appears to be incompatible with moral realism. I consider this to be a forceful challenge for moral realism. In this dissertation I investigate whether or not, or in which sense, the challenge is successful. I argue that (what I call) 'moral realism (traditionally construed)', a version of moral realism which depends on the epistemic reliability of our 'moral intuitions', is, given evolutionary naturalism and evolutionary science, probably implausible. I outline a version of moral realism ('moral realism' (non-traditionally construed)) which does not depend on the epistemic reliability of our 'moral intuitions'. I argue that given evolutionary naturalism, evolutionary science, and nativist evolutionary psychology, 'moral realism' (non-traditionally construed) is a naturalized version of moral realism, and is probably compatible with evolutionary naturalism. If the outline of 'moral realism' (non-traditionally construed) is plausible, then there is a form of moral realism which is compatible with evolutionary naturalism. If it is not then 'moral realism' (traditionally construed) is probably implausible given evolutionary naturalism.

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Introduction

What is the relationship between evolutionary naturalism and moral realism? More specifically, is moral realism compatible with evolutionary naturalism? My overall position is two-fold. I argue that what I call ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is probably not compatible with evolutionary naturalism. However, what I call ‘moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed) probably is.

Chapters 1-5 are dedicated to establishing the first position, that ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is incompatible with evolutionary naturalism. It is only in the final chapter that I present considerations in favour of ‘moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed). Due to limitations in scope, all I can present is an outline, or a sketch, of ‘moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed).

‘Moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed) is, I argue, plausible (given evolutionary naturalism and evolutionary science) on the assumption that some form of moral nativist hypothesis is correct. That assumption, however, is not without its controversies, and I do not adequately defend it against those controversies. ‘Moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is, I argue, implausible given my take on the nature of the traditional moral method, evolutionary science, and evolutionary naturalism.

‘Moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is probably not compatible with evolutionary naturalism. Given evolutionary naturalism and evolutionary science, there are good reasons to regard that thesis as implausible. ‘Moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed) is probably compatible with evolutionary science and evolutionary naturalism given the moral nativist hypothesis. If moral nativism is correct, then there is a naturalized version of moral realism which, of course, is likely compatible with evolutionary naturalism. If moral nativism is not correct, then the naturalized version of moral realism I propose is not plausible. In this case, given evolutionary naturalism and evolutionary science, we must regard ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) as probably implausible, and must likely adopt some kind of moral anti-realism.

Two notes are important to make explicit. Firstly, at the end of each chapter I provide a section for my ‘closing remarks’. These concluding sections summarize the most important details covered in the chapter. Secondly, I have opted for a consecutive numbering system for the premises and conclusions I discuss in this dissertation. That is, for every new premise I introduce (P_n) *n* is numbered sequentially beginning from 1. The same applies for every new conclusion I introduce (C_n)

The structure of this dissertation is as follows.

Chapter 1 established two premises.

P1. ‘Moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is epistemological and ontological moral realism

P2. The ‘moral method’ depends crucially on the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are, in some cases and to some degree, ‘epistemically reliable’

In establishing these two premises the various technical terms, ‘moral realism’, ‘ontological and ‘epistemological moral realism’, ‘moral method’, ‘moral intuition’, ‘epistemic reliability’ are defined through an analysis of the relevant literature. The point of this chapter is to clarify what is meant by the term ‘moral realism’, and to clarify what claims that position relies on.

Moreover, Chapter 1 provides a more elaborately detailed introduction than can be given here. There I explain what is meant by the various technical terms I employ, and how this relates to my overall position. Most of the chapter is dedicated to establishing P2, as such, most of the chapter is dedicated to discussing the methodologies employed to justify moral realist claims.

Chapter 2 establishes four claims. The first two claims are about what to make of the notion of ‘naturalism’ and ‘evolutionary naturalism’. By surveying the literature I show that there is no robust definition of these terms on offer.

I then, thirdly, clarify how I will be using the terms. Particularly a ‘naturalist’ will allow scientific data to underwrite his/her philosophical views where possible. Where this is not possible, a naturalist will seek to render his/her philosophical views compatible with that data. Further, a naturalist will reject perspectives which cannot reasonably fit into a broadly scientific worldview. I argue that ‘evolutionary naturalism’ is a particular kind of naturalism. As such an ‘evolutionary naturalist’ will act similarly with regards to the data of evolutionary science regarding matters about human beings or human affairs.

Respectively, those three claims are P3, P4 and P5. The significant claim which I defend is:

P6. Evolutionary science has relevance for our understanding of the nature of our moral capacities (read: ‘moral intuitions’).

By implication, I argue, evolutionary science has relevance for our ethical and metaethical views.

I do not satisfactorily establish P6 here. I leave that task to Chapter 3. What I succeed in establishing is a conditional claim:

P6*. If evolutionary theory can be applied to matters of psychology then evolutionary science has relevance for our understanding of the nature of our moral capacities (read: ‘moral intuitions’).

The point of this chapter is to clarify how I use the terms ‘naturalism’ and ‘evolutionary naturalism’. It is also to motivate the relevance of evolutionary science for our ethical and metaethical views.

Conditional on P6*, I show that, even if one does not endorse ‘evolutionary naturalism’ one still should take seriously the relevant data from evolutionary science.

Chapter 3 takes up three tasks. Firstly, I justify P6 from Chapter 2. I do this first by justifying the proposition that evolutionary theory can be applied to the matter of our psychology. I continue, then, to motivate what I discussed in Chapter 1, regarding the nature of our ‘moral intuitions’. This is that our ‘moral intuitions’ are essentially psychological. Our moral capacities (including our capacity for ‘moral intuition’) form a part of our psychology, itself a feature of our social capacities. This is sufficient to justify P6.

Secondly, I briefly assess two problems with the nativist hypothesis endorsed by the evolutionary psychology I have reviewed. I argue that despite these problems we are still justified in endorsing the nativist hypothesis.

Thirdly, I end off by spelling out the implications many have believed evolutionary science in fact has for moral realism. This is that evolutionary science shows us that our ‘moral intuitions’ are not, in any cases, to any degree, ‘epistemically reliable’. In conjunction with P2 (Chapter 1) this suggests that evolutionary science provides us with reasons to reject moral realism. I only sketch this problem; I deal with it in more detail in Chapter 4 by assessing various ‘evolutionary debunking’ arguments.

Chapter 4 details and critiques the ‘evolutionary debunking’ arguments. I assess 4 different arguments, 3 of which I judge to be unsuccessful. After discussing the fourth, successful, argument, I conclude that evolutionary science, in conjunction with evolutionary naturalism, renders ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) implausible. As such, I think that we have some plausible reasons in favour of moral anti-realism.

The first three arguments under review are not altogether well-formed in the literature. Scholars are sometimes unclear whether they intend one or another, or a combination, of the arguments I discuss. As such, the arguments I present are somewhat idealized forms of arguments presented in the literature.

Chapter 5 critically assess various objections to the allegedly successful anti-realist argument (Argument 4) presented in Chapter 4. I Begin by considering what I believe to be an implausible objection which rejects evolutionary naturalism. I argue that it is not successful.

I continue then to assess three apparently distinct objections, which might seem on the surface to be more promising. I argue that they are not really distinct, and each is unsuccessful because, in their own ways, they beg the question against the anti-realist.

This, I argue, is the result of a more general problem. The anti-realist argument I have endorsed is, in a general sense, an attack against the very methodology (the ‘moral method’) employed by moral realists. Because it is the methodology of moral realists which is in question, it is inappropriate to argue in support of that methodology by presupposing its correctness. However this is what each argument does, in its own way. As such, I find them also to be unsuccessful. I conclude that endorsing evolutionary naturalism in conjunction with evolutionary science does provide one with good reasons to reject moral realism in favour of moral anti-realism.

Chapter 6 tries to defend moral realism against the anti-realist arguments presented in *Chapter 4*. The considerations there assume that some kind of ‘moral nativist’ hypothesis is correct. I try to defend moral realism by doing two things. Firstly I present an argument against P16 (*probably our ‘moral intuitions’ are not, to any degree, in any cases, epistemically reliable*) (established in *Chapter 4*). I suggest that we do not have warrant to accept that our ‘moral intuitions’ are not epistemically reliable (i.e. that they are non-truth-tracking). I intend this to be a skeptical challenge to P16. I suggest that since there is no independently acceptable account of ‘moral truth’ there is no sense in suggesting either that our ‘moral intuitions’ do or do not track ‘moral truth’.

Secondly, to solve this skeptical problem I offer a distinct kind of moral methodology. I argue that with this distinct methodology we may conclude that our ‘moral intuitions’ do track moral truths of a special kind. This is sufficient for the ‘moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed) I noted in *Chapter 1*. ‘Moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed) will not rely on the ‘moral method’. I suspect most traditional moral realists would not readily endorse this view. So I thereafter sketch what I think is at issue, and how the issue could be decided. Because scope does not allow me to go into much detail, I leave the proposal of this new method as an important theoretical consideration which only further research could confirm or disconfirm.

I close off by noting that if this proposed methodology is workable, then ‘moral realism’ (*sans* the ‘moral method’) is compatible with and underwritten by evolutionary science. If the proposed methodology is not workable it is because one or another anti-realist position on ‘moral truth’ is correct, or because moral nativism is unacceptable. In either case evolutionary science may render anti-realism (as argued for in *Chapter 4*) plausible.

The *Conclusion* spells out formally what the implications of my investigations are. I assess what to make of my two-fold position on the relationship between evolutionary naturalism and moral realism. I do this by assessing Argument 4 and my arguments against two of its central premises (P16 and P18) from which I make my proposals about ‘moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed). I spell out the logical implications of the various positions I’ve assessed highlighting the necessary conditions for my two-fold position. I thereafter say a few more words in defence of ‘moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed) in order to make the view more acceptable, given moral nativism.

Chapter 1

Moral Realism and Moral Methodology

Section 1: Introduction

This chapter is about understanding what ‘moral realism’ is. I am not speaking about *all* forms of ‘moral realism’. My focus pertains to ‘moral realism’ as it has been understood since Moore and Ross. It is that broad view which I call ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed). As such, although my arguments may have implications for, say, Platonic moral realism, or a Platonic moral realist may have Platonic objections to my position, it is not my intention to focus on those issues.

My overall position can be summed up as follows. I think that ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is rendered implausible by the conjunction of evolutionary naturalism and evolutionary science. I will argue that ‘moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed) avoids such problems and could be plausible even in conjunction with evolutionary naturalism and evolutionary science.

Certain notions stand in need of definition if one is to make sense of the position I take. This chapter concerns itself with understanding the notion of ‘moral realism’ as it features in the overall argument. There are three questions which will be answered in this chapter. Firstly, which features comprise ‘moral realism’? Secondly, how is ‘moral realism’ traditionally justified? Answering these questions is important for two reasons. One is that it allows us to make sense of the anti-realist view that ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is implausible. We can say with precision that some claims which comprise moral realism are made implausible by considerations of evolutionary naturalism and evolutionary science. Or, otherwise, that ‘moral realism’ cannot be traditionally justified. The other is that it allows us to make sense of the view that some non-traditional form of moral realism (including some non-traditional justification for it) is compatible with evolutionary science and evolutionary naturalism.

Now, there are two central premises which this chapter wishes to defend. One premise, less controversial, is this. There are four main features of ‘moral realism’ which can be categorized under two subheadings which denote different moral realist theses.

The four main claims of moral realism are:

1. There are moral facts
2. These facts are objective.
3. We have epistemic access to these facts.

4. Access is gained through the use of the ‘moral method’

These features can be categorized under two subheadings: ‘epistemological moral realism’ and ‘ontological moral realism’. The ontological thesis comprises of claims 1 and 2. The epistemological thesis comprises of claims 3 and 4.

Moral realism (traditionally construed) is the conjunction of ‘epistemological’ and ‘ontological’ moral realism. Moral realism (non-traditionally construed) is the same except that it will not include feature 4, since ‘the moral method’ (a central feature of traditional moral realism) will be abandoned.

There is some sense in which ontological and epistemological moral realism are logically distinct. Suggesting, then, that ‘moral realism’ is the thesis which expresses their conjunction requires some defence. My defence, on which I will elaborate in this chapter (and then again in Chapter 4) is that ontological moral realism is motivated principally by the more detailed features of epistemological moral realism. Without epistemological moral realism, it is not simply that ontological moral realism stands unjustified (since we have, then, no reason to believe that there are moral facts). Rather it is that the entire motivation for ontological moral realism is undermined.

An analogy for now will suffice to make the point. Suppose that there was some religion, Religion X the truth of which entailed some proposition P. Suppose that it was justified by the belief that Book Y was divinely inspired. Since Book Y is the work of some divine force, and Book Y tells us that Religion X is correct, then P.

Finding out, then, that Book Y was written by a fraud, that none of it is true but just the fantasy of this fraud, not only takes away justification for believing in Religion X. It takes away all ground for supposing that Religion X is likely to be true at all. Most probably, Religion X is false, and probably P (principally motivated by Religion X, on the view that Book Y was divinely inspired) is false too.

That is not a logical entailment of the falsity of Book Y, but given the relationship between belief in Book Y and the proposition that P, discovery that Book Y was false motivates (even if it doesn’t entail) the rejection of proposition P. This is the relationship, I argue, which exists between ontological and epistemological moral realism. There is no entailment from the falsity of epistemological moral realism to the falsity of ontological moral realism. But finding the former to be false strongly suggests, because of their relationship, that the latter is false as well. At most one can hold out for ontological moral realism, but in doing so hold out for it for no available reason at all.

The first premise which I defend in this chapter, then, is this: *‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is epistemological and ontological moral realism*. This allows us to make sense of arguments, dealt with in later chapters, which conclude that ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is false, and it

helps us to assess those arguments. It also provides us with conditions for my further contention that ‘moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed) can be defended.

The second premise I defend in this chapter is that the method used by traditional moral realists to gain moral knowledge is one which relies on the truth of the proposition that our ‘moral intuitions’ are, in some cases, and to some degree, ‘epistemically reliable’. That is, *the ‘moral method’ depends crucially on the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are, in some cases, and to some degree, ‘epistemically reliable’.*

By ‘epistemically reliable’ I mean that they are in some sense, to some degree, in some cases, ‘evidence’ of ‘moral truth’. I intend this to parallel the way we view our empirical observations as they relate to claims about the external world. How, or in which ways, this is evidence is an epistemological concern I do not take up. My focus is simply on the view that ‘moral intuitions’ provide some kind of evidentiary support for our moral claims.

This is controversial for the following reason. Within the literature under review, moral philosophers are not explicit about the nature of their methodology. Some are called “Intuitionists”, others “Reflective Equilibrium Theorists”, others “Cornell Moral Realists”. Each group believes themselves to have a fundamentally different moral methodology to the other. Perhaps, in certain senses they do. It is not, however, my aim to argue that they employ different methodologies. Nor is it my claim to argue that the different methodologies are reducible to essentially the same methodology. My claim, for which I argue, is that each methodology, whatever other differences there may be, relies on the view that our ‘moral intuitions’, to some or other degree, in some cases, are ‘epistemically reliable’.

This formulation might seem vague, but it is, I think, all that is necessary for the contentions of this dissertation. As an analogy, take the basic empiricist credo that whatever knowledge there is derives from sense experience. That can be reformulated to the claim that our sense experience, to some degree and in some cases, is epistemically reliable. Empiricists might qualify this claim differently. Some will take up the view that observations are theory-laden, others will insist that there can be pure observations from which we can develop a purely phenomenalist language of ‘sense-data’. Others, causal realists, say, will suggest that our sense experiences alone cannot justify all there is to the world. Others, regularity theorists, say, will deny that.

This variety is the analogue of the variety found among moral realists. It is a variety which is irrelevant for my purposes. I wish to focus on the central claim that our sense experience is epistemically reliable. Analogously, that is, regarding moral realism, I wish to focus on the central claim that our ‘moral intuitions’ are, to some degree, in some cases, epistemically reliable.

It is important to get clear on what a ‘moral intuition’ is. However, the literature under review is not clear on that matter. I believe that there is no precise formulation of it. I will do two things. I will first demonstrate, with the use of examples, that the literature under review in fact does not provide any precise definition of ‘moral intuition’. I will then spell out how I am using the notion. I believe that the manner in which I use the notion captures the important features from the variety of uses it enjoys in the literature.

Tännsjö calls them “basic” or “foundational” moral judgments *and* intuitions (Tännsjö 1989, 10). Moore referred to them simply as “intuitions” which he took to be ‘self-evident’ moral truths (Moore 2004, 85). Ross says that ‘intuitions’ allow us to formulate moral judgment which, by ‘reflection’ (Ross 2004, 91), are apprehended as self-evidently true (Ross 2004, 89). He later refers to our “moral convictions” (presumably our moral judgments) as “The verdicts of the moral consciousness [...] (Ross 2004, 96)”

Horgan et al suggest more vaguely that our metaethical theorizing involves the consideration of the “deeply embedded aspects of moral thought and moral discourse [...] (Horgan et al 2006, 223).” Kerstein suggests that our ethical and metaethical theories may be decided on the basis of our “ordinary moral thinking” and “widespread [moral] judgment” (Kerstein 2006, 129). FitzPatrick suggests, rather, that our ethical and metaethical theories may be decided by our “First order ethical experience and understanding (FitzPatrick 2013, 4).”

Richards thinks that the justification for moral values involves appeal to, and ultimately reliance upon, “common sense moral judgments (Richards 1986, 284)”. Daniels believes that intuitionists (like Ross and Moore) take our moral judgments and intuitions to be “basic” or “self-warranting” (Daniels 1979, 264). Boyd thinks that our moral intuitions and judgments play an epistemic role in our moral theories, and are precisely analogous to the role played by empirical observations in scientific theories (Boyd 1988, 184).

Evolutionary psychologists, who seek to explain our moral capacities, describe our capacities for moral thought in various ways. It may be described as a ‘moral sense’ or a ‘moral instinct’ (Ruse 2010, 307). It may be referred to as ‘conscience’ or ‘social instinct’ (Thompson 1999, 475). Other times this is referred to as ‘intuitions’ (described by Greene as ‘gut feelings’ – emotive responses, rather than *bona fide* propositional attitudes) (Greene 2003, 847). These are even sometimes described as ‘evolved moral intuitions’ (Ruse 2010, 310)

There is clearly an immense variety of labels used throughout the literature. Unfortunately what the labels are supposed to denote is never spelled out. One can gather, to some degree, what is intended by analyzing the context in which these labels feature. Familiarity with the literature may act as a

bulwark against bafflement. But that won't do for my purposes here. Let me then say how I will be using the term. My own definition is also vague, but it is workable.

I take 'moral intuitions' to be akin to 'empirical observations'. In that, I am following Boyd. As such, I think that 'moral intuitions' play some evidentiary role in our moral theorizing. I believe them to be the result of our psychological and cognitive capacities.

'Moral intuitions' help us to form 'moral judgments' and so to make 'moral claims'. A judgment, or a claim, is propositional – it may be true or false. Our 'moral intuitions' count as evidence, of some kind, to some degree, in some cases, for our 'moral judgments' and 'moral claims'. Insofar as moral theories help us to generate moral judgments and claims, 'moral intuitions' may play an evidentiary role for moral theories as well.

'Moral intuitions' might or might not be propositional themselves. Greene refers to them as 'gut-feelings', Richards refers to them as 'common sense'. Both renditions are metaphorical. Both renditions serve to indicate the immediacy of the recognition of the truth of some proposition. Our 'gut-feelings' (that 'pang of guilt' one feels after doing someone wrong, say) can, at least, be rationalized cognitively so that they come to represent, or bear some relation to, some moral propositional attitude. 'Gut feelings' are more emotionally based responses, our 'common sense' is more cognitive. Both nevertheless play a similar role in the formation of our moral judgments. Emotive responses, and cognitive rationalizations, as I see it here, are two extremes on a continuum. Both nodes on that continuum, and what lies in between, can be considered 'moral intuitions'.

What is important here is the following. What I refer to as 'moral intuitions' is an idealization of the various uses to which the notion is put throughout the literature. My formulation captures, I think, the most important features of 'moral intuitions', features with which all moral realists could agree. Further, it leaves space for debate about more particular questions, such as their fallibility, or the nature of the support they provide for our moral judgments.

The important features of 'moral intuitions' are the following. They are part of our psychological capacities – they are mental capacities which we have in virtue of our brains. They are propositional ('common sense'), or quasi-propositional ('gut-feelings'). They play an evidentiary role, to some degree, in some cases, for our moral judgments and our moral theories. Moral realists believe that they are, to some degree in some cases epistemically reliable, and moral anti-realists do not. That is: moral realists believe that they are, to some degree, in some cases, evidence of an objective moral reality; and anti-realists do not¹.

¹ Anti-realists, nevertheless, may admit that our 'moral intuitions' play an evidentiary role for our moral judgments, and moral theories (*non-realistically* construed). They just contend that neither our 'moral intuitions' nor our moral judgments are not about any *objective* moral reality.

I think that moral realists believe our ‘moral intuitions’ to be, to some degree, in some cases, epistemically reliable. I say, “to some degree” because different moral theorists have imbued our ‘moral intuitions’ with different degrees of epistemic reliability. Earlier moral realists believed our ‘moral intuitions’ to be infallible guides to moral truth. More contemporary moral realists are fallibilists about our ‘moral intuitions’ I wish to defend neither view, and I only wish to focus on what is common between them. They both regard our ‘moral intuitions’ as epistemically reliable.

I say, “in some cases” because, obviously, no moral realist believes our ‘moral intuitions’ to be epistemically reliable in all cases. Even the early infallibilist moral realists realized that we may sometimes be in error about (in their view) the ‘real’ content of our ‘moral intuitions’. The fact is that moral disagreements occur very frequently where both disputants believe themselves to be intuitively justified. Regarding such cases a moral realist believes that one of them is correct. Clearly, therefore, the moral realist cannot believe that our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable in all cases since one of the disputants who has some ‘moral intuitions’ is wrong.

The formulation “to some degree, in some cases” leaves open the further controversy of whether or not there is anything more to moral theorizing than clarifying our ‘moral intuitions’. Most moral realists believe that we must theorize about morality while keeping in mind our other theoretical commitments. Surely, in some sense, this is unavoidable. Theorizing about whether or not it is right to apply cyanide to some persons drink, say, depends on having in mind some further information about what exactly cyanide is. Again, I am not concerned to support a position on the precise nature of moral theorizing. My concern relates to the view that our ‘moral intuitions’, to some degree, in some cases, are epistemically reliable.

Thus, the two premises which this chapter defends are as follows.

P1. ‘Moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is epistemological and ontological moral realism

P2. The ‘moral method’ depends crucially on the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are, in some cases, and to some degree, ‘epistemically reliable’

Section 2: Ontological Moral Realism

Ontological moral realism is the thesis that (1) there are moral facts and (2) these facts are objective. (1) is related to a particular view about the function of moral language. Moral realism involves two noteworthy semantic features of moral language. Moral language is *propositional* and *normative*. To say that moral language is propositional is to say that upon uttering some moral sentence we are uttering a sentence which could be true or false (Tännsjö 1989, 1).

Moral language is normative in the sense that it is evaluative and action-guiding. It is evaluative in that it makes claims about what things, actions or events are *better* or *worse* than others. It is action-guiding in that moral language indicates how one *ought* to act, or behave, or which actions or events ought to occur (Railton 2006, 201).

Now, two conditions need to be met in order for there to be moral facts; as such, the moral realist is committed to the view that the following two conditions obtain (Rea 2006, 1). Firstly, there are moral properties (such as ‘goodness’, ‘badness’, ‘being a good action’, etc.) which are instantiated at least by some actual objects, actions or events. Secondly, that these properties are be mind-independent and theory-independent.

It is the second of these two conditions which implies the moral realist commitment to the objectivity of moral facts. Moral facts are objective *because* the actuality of the instantiation of particular moral properties *is* theory and mind independent (Jacobs 2002, 1), (Horgan et al 2006, 224). Put differently, the truth of a moral sentence does not depend on anyone’s acceptance of its truth. Moral sentences are rendered true or false, respectively, by their correspondence to or failure of correspondence with the moral facts.

Moral realism, then, is committed to the view that our moral language is propositional, and that our moral sentences are for that reason capable of being true or false. It holds that the truth or falsity of a moral sentence is determined by its concord or discord with moral facts. That there are such moral facts implies that there are actually instantiated moral properties resident in at least some objects, events or actions. That such instantiation occurs is not a matter which depends on our beliefs, desires, intentions or theories – it is not subjective, in that sense. Rather, the instantiation of such properties is a mind and theory independent matter. As such, the moral realist is committed to the existence of objective moral facts. A moral claim is made objectively true or false by corresponding to, or failing to correspond with, the objective moral facts.

Section 3: Epistemic Access to Moral Facts and The Moral Method – A Brief History

It is a well subscribed to feature of moral realism that we are capable of obtaining moral knowledge – and so that we have some epistemic access to moral facts (see (Moore 2004, 84), (Ross 2004, 89) and (Tännsjö 1989, 9)). I consider that claim (feature 3 of ‘moral realism’) to be uncontroversial for moral realists. What is more interesting is the method by which such moral knowledge is obtained. Moral knowledge is generated by the ‘moral method’ – the analogue, for ethics, of the ‘scientific method’. Essentially the moral method employs our ‘moral intuitions’ as data, from which it generates more elaborate (moral) ‘theories’ and general (moral) ‘principles’ (Tännsjö 1989, 10).

As I indicated earlier, the precise nature of this data is not my concern. Some early moral realists took this data to be certain guides to moral truth, later moral realists are less confident about them. What is important for my position is just that the moral method depends on the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are, to some degree, and in some sense, epistemically reliable.

The idea can be traced back to the writings of G. E. Moore (Moore 2004, 85) and W. D. Ross (Ross 2004, 89). Moore believed that moral questions (for example, ‘what sort of thing is good?’) are answered with reference to what he called our ‘intuitions’ (Moore 2004, 85). He believed that these intuitions represent self-evident moral truth. That is, whatever, upon reflection, we come to regard as self-evidently, or obviously, good is the deliverance of a moral intuition and is, as such, good (Moore 2004, 84). Ross affirms a similar view which he called ‘ethical intuitionism’. It denotes at least the following three claims. (1) Moral truths are (at least in part) epistemically accessible. (2) Our mode of access to these moral truths is through our ‘intuitions’. And (3) the deliverance of our intuitions are appreciable as ‘self-evident’ truths; alternatively, our set of moral intuitions are identical with the set of self-evident moral truths (Ross 2004, 89).

Ross and Moore can be seen as setting out the foundations of a particular research program within moral philosophy. It is a program in which moral theories are confirmable on the basis of whether or not they capture our ‘moral intuitions’. Put simply, a good theory will be a theory which does sufficient justice to our ‘moral intuitions’ (Ross 2004, 89).

More contemporary moral theorists no longer seem to believe that our ‘moral intuitions’ are certain guides to moral truths. ‘Moral intuitions’ are more like pieces of evidence. They are data which may produce (fallible) support for certain moral beliefs and moral theories. Theorists nevertheless ordinarily recognize the centrality of ‘moral intuitions’ to our theories. This can be brought out by briefly considering the following cases.

Among other criteria for a successful metaethical theory, for example, is the criterion that our metaethical theories must account for as many of our “deeply embedded aspects of moral thought and moral discourse ... as possible” (Horgan et al 2006, 223). The notion of ‘embedded aspects of moral thought’ plays precisely the same role, even if it is slightly vaguer, as Ross’s ‘intuitions’. The measure of a metaethical theory, just as a normative ethical theory, will depend on how well it coheres with our ‘moral intuitions’.

As another example consider the chapter in Dreier’s book (Kerstein 2006) which details Kerstein’s argument against what is called a ‘sentimentalist’ moral theory in favour of a broadly Kantian moral theory. The details are unimportant here. Kerstein’s method is to show that a sentimentalist moral theory has implications which, “clashes with *ordinary moral thinking* in ways that a Kantian account does not (emphasis added) (Kerstein 2006, 129)”.

The notion of our ‘ordinary moral thinking’ takes the place of Ross and Moore’s intuitions, but they play roughly the same role. This is a case in which one moral theory is selected in favour of a distinct moral theory *because* the former coheres better with some set of ‘moral intuitions’.

I want to draw out the following implications. Historically and contemporarily our ‘moral intuitions’ are used as crucial pieces of evidence in favour of our ethical and metaethical perspectives. The significance of ‘moral intuitions’ has changed through history. Ross and Moore believed them to be certain guides to moral truth, contemporary figures no longer do. That change is unimportant. What is important is that for moral realists ‘moral intuitions’ to some degree, in some cases, are epistemically reliable. They play the role of data, evidence which can be marshalled in favour of some ethical or metaethical perspective.

I may drive the point home with the following elaborate quotation from Ross.

“The moral convictions of thoughtful and well-educated people are *the data of ethics just as sense-perceptions are the data of natural science*. Just as some of the latter have to be rejected as illusory, so have some of the former; but as the latter are rejected only when they conflict with other more accurate sense perceptions, the former are rejected only when they conflict with other convictions which stand better *the test of reflection*. The moral convictions of the best people is the cumulative product of the moral reflections of many generations; and this the theory should treat with the greatest respect. The verdicts of the moral consciousness of the best people are the *foundations* on which he must build; though he must first compare them with one another and eliminate any contradictions they may contain (emphasis added) (Ross 2004, 96).”

While there are certain superficial differences between Ross’ conception and those of contemporary theorists, there are broad and important similarities. The passage states that moral theory is akin to scientific theory. While the data of science are empirical observations, the data of moral theory are ‘moral intuitions’. The test of a moral theory is whether or not – or to which degree – it comports with our ‘moral intuitions’. The test of our ‘moral intuitions’ is whether or not they can withstand rational scrutiny and further ‘reflection’. Implicit in all this must be the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable to some degree and in some cases.

The above is an elaboration of the third and fourth features of ‘moral realism’ I had earlier mentioned. Not only are there objective moral facts, but we do have some access to them, and our access to them is best achieved through the moral method. I have provided some history to the program of moral realists. I have also provided some motivation to think that contemporary moral theorists are still committed to this program if only because they continue to view our ‘moral intuitions’, to some degree, in some cases, as epistemically reliable.

Section 4: Intuitionism and Wide Reflective Equilibrium

The view which I have described above is normally referred to as 'Intuitionism'. Some moral philosophers would disagree that the moral method is nothing more than 'intuitionism'. They suggest, instead, that the method of 'wide reflective equilibrium' is employed, and that this is distinct from Intuitionism. Let me turn now to assess this issue.

What I will argue is not that 'wide reflective equilibrium' is reducible to 'intuitionism'. I am willing to concede that there are some significant differences between the two models. What I will argue is that intuitionism and wide reflective equilibrium, insofar as they are utilized by moral realists, both regard our 'moral intuitions' as epistemically reliable in some cases and to some degree. Whatever other distinctions there are between the two views at least they have this in common, and this is all I wish to defend.

Daniels suggests that 'intuitionism' is a 'two-tiered view' of moral theory choice and justification (Daniels 1979, 256). One critic suggests that unless adherents of the two-tiered view grant 'epistemological privilege' to our 'moral intuitions', then this view cannot secure the implications that our moral theories reflect moral truths (Daniels 1979, 256).

For 'moral intuitions' to have 'epistemological privilege' is for them not merely to be *guides*, or *indications*, to moral truth, however *fallible*. Rather it is for them, in some sense, to be 'basic' or 'self-warranting' (Daniels 1979, 264). That is, adherents of the two-tiered view must, according to this critic, regard the deliverance of our 'moral intuitions' as being identical with or *entailing* certain moral truths.

This, it turns out, is the focus of the distinction between intuitionism and the method of 'wide reflective equilibrium'. The former, but not the latter, it is claimed, grants this particular 'epistemological privilege' (read: epistemological certainty) to our 'moral intuitions' (Daniels 1979, 264).

The method of 'wide reflective equilibrium' is taken as a more favourable and fundamentally distinct methodology for moral theorizing (Daniels 1979, 257). The 'two-tiered method' can be seen as an attempt to glean general moral principles from particular 'moral intuitions', the accuracy of the former being transitive from the latter. Wide reflective equilibrium, on the other hand, attempts to create coherence between three distinct things. Firstly, a set of considered moral judgments, secondly, a set of moral principles and thirdly a set of relevant background theories (Daniels 1979, 258).

There are 4 distinct stages of the process of reflective equilibrium (Daniels 1979, 258f). If we compare this to the program outlined by Ross, we will find that Ross's method is rather simplistic in comparison. So, regarding wide reflective equilibrium, firstly a person begins by collecting a set of

moral judgments. Those judgments which are not held *confidently*, or which were generated under conditions prone to *error* are filtered out. Second: different moral *principles*, with varying ‘degrees of ‘fit’ to the moral judgments are proposed and considered.

Third: arguments are marshalled for and against the various moral principles; these arguments are inferences from some set of *relevant background theories*. The goal of these arguments is to determine not only which moral principles have the best ‘fit’ with our moral judgments, but also which moral principles have the best fit with our overall picture (delineated by our background theories) of the world. Fourth: the moral agent works through each stage over again, making appropriate alterations to his set of moral judgments, or moral principles, or background theories, until the total set reaches a justified coherence. At that point the agent has reached the equilibrium point between his moral judgments, principles, and his background theories.

More detail can be given regarding the workings of the method of wide reflective equilibrium (see (Daniels 1979, 259-264)). Details aside, let me highlight some important features. On this model the justification of a moral claim is not *solely* the degree to which it coheres with our ‘moral intuitions’. Further considerations are necessary in order to consider the plausibility of a moral principle.

Now, the same sort of revision to moral principles is also possible regarding our background theories and our considered moral judgments. Nothing, on this view, is necessarily ‘fixed’. The goal, in reflective equilibrium, is not to construct principles which cohere with (fixed) ‘moral intuitions’ and background theories. The goal rather is to dynamically assess each our intuitions, principles, and background considerations. In pitting one against the other by employing different arguments, to different effects, one can, in the end, draw conclusions which reflect a coherent set of the three. An important feature of this model is that our ‘moral intuitions’ themselves, even those in which we are confident, can be revised.

As I have said, my main concern here is whether or not this model still requires that our ‘moral intuitions’ (if we wish to maintain some kind of moral realism) be epistemically reliable, to some degree, in some cases? If this model still requires that feature then, for my concerns, wide reflective equilibrium is not importantly different from intuitionism.

Now, Daniels maintains that reflective equilibrium is not a disguised or complex intuitionism. His main reason for this view is the following. ‘Intuitionism’ involves a kind of foundationalism in which ‘moral intuitions’ are given ‘epistemological privilege’. Wide reflective equilibrium does not regard our ‘moral intuitions’ in this manner. Every moral judgment, every ‘moral intuition’, including our considered ones, which we hold with confidence, generated from conditions which are not error prone, is revisable. Intuitionism, but not wide reflective equilibrium, is foundationalist, and it is in this sense that the author believes them to be distinct (Daniels 1979, 266).

This is not disagreeable. Moore and Ross, for instance, can be construed as intuitionists in this strong sense. This is not what is at issue. ‘Moral intuitions’, on both accounts, are epistemically *relevant*. That is, on both accounts our ‘moral intuitions’ serve as pieces of evidence, or data, with which to generate our moral theories. Some strong intuitionists, like Moore, might think that our intuitions are the *only* relevant data, and that the set of ‘moral intuitions’ logically entails some or other moral theory. Others might think that ‘moral intuitions’ in conjunction with other considerations (those held important by wide reflective equilibrium theorists) provide fallible support for some or other moral theory. Both grant our ‘moral intuitions’ epistemic relevance. That is, both view our ‘moral intuitions’ as epistemically reliable, to some degree, in some cases. Further, probably, neither could recognize as plausible any moral theory which was *entirely* unintuitive.

Now, in the strictest sense, wide reflective equilibrium does not represent a foundationalist view of moral theorizing. In this sense it is distinct from intuitionism, as construed by Daniels. It is possible, however, to view wide reflective equilibrium and intuitionism as on a *continuum*, divided in gradients by the degree of ‘epistemic privilege’ granted to ‘moral intuitions’. Both models reside on this continuum. Perhaps they can be further distinguished by which other features or methods they consider to be relevant. For my purposes, then, they are not importantly distinct because both rely on the view that our ‘moral intuitions’, to some degree, in some cases, are epistemically reliable.

Section 5: Contemporary Justifications of Moral Realism

I believe that I have so far shown the plausibility of P1. I do not feel, however, that I have sufficiently motivated P2. I have given a broad look at some of the history of moral realist thought. I think, from that, it is clear that our ‘moral intuitions’ play the crucial role I say they do. I will now try to make the case for P2 stronger. I will do this by assessing two methods by which moral realism can be justified. The point of this is to further motivate the view that one of the central features of the moral method is that our ‘moral intuitions’ are, to some degree, in some cases, epistemically reliable.

There appears to be two broad methods by which moral realists justify their realism (Tropman 2008, 167). One method involves the attempt to find coherence between ‘moral intuitions’ about morality and our philosophical metaethical accounts. Another attempt is to justify moral realism along analogous lines of reasoning to those which attempt to justify scientific realism.

The first method is something which has already been mentioned: the “phenomenological criterion” for guiding metaethical theorizing (Horgan et al 2006, 223). The criterion is that “a metaethical theory ought, if possible, to account for and vindicate as much of the deeply embedded aspects of moral thought and moral discourse [the ‘phenomenological experience of morality’] as possible (Horgan et al 2006, 223).” As I see it the notion of ‘embedded moral thought and moral discourse’ plays the same

role as that of the notion of ‘moral intuitions’. The essential idea is that the correctness of a metaethical theory is a function of its coherence with our ‘moral intuitions’.

The second method, referred to as ‘Cornell moral realism’, involves justifying moral realism along analogous lines to the justification of scientific realism. Moral properties are viewed as “ontologically and epistemologically akin to the properties of natural science” (Tropman 2008, 167). That is, the theoretical posits employed by moral theories (moral values which tell us what things, events or actions are good or bad) refer to real, mind and theory-independent entities (Boyd 1988, 181).

There is some disagreement between disputants in the debate between scientific realism and anti-realism regarding which position bears the argumentative burden of proof. “Does [the burden] fall upon the antirealist because realism’s endorsement of science gives it an initial plausibility? Does it fall upon the realist because realism makes the stronger epistemic commitment (Leplin 2006, 689)?” I will call the general view that the argumentative burden falls on the antirealist ‘the presumption of realism’. I will call the view that the argumentative burden falls on the realist ‘the disputation of realism’.

I suggest that the division between adherents of the phenomenological criterion fall into the former camp, and adherents to some form of Cornell realism fall into the latter camp. As such, the distinction in methods of justification for moral realism is the distinction between the presumption and the disputation of moral realism. I will turn now to explore the presumption of moral realism.

FitzPatrick provides a clear summation of what is involved in the presumption of realism (for a detailed example see (FitzPatrick 2013, 4f)). He suggests the correctness of a metaethical position is its coherence with our “first order ethical experience and understanding of things, including the kind of normative significance it has (FitzPatrick 2013, 4).” FitzPatrick’s “first order ethical experiences and understanding” plays the same role as the phrase “embedded moral thought and moral discourse” used by Horgan et al. Both play the role of ‘moral intuitions’. So, the metaethical position we should endorse is the one which best fits with our ‘moral intuitions’ about the nature of the moral order. Moral realism, and not moral anti-realism, he believes, best captures our ‘moral intuitions’ about morality and is thereby justified.

There are two noteworthy features here. The first is the evidentiary role played by our ‘moral intuitions’. Our ‘moral intuitions’ are the data against which metaethical theories are judged. If some metaethical theory contradicts this data, then that metaethical theory is flawed and worthy of rejection. Here, again, our ‘moral intuitions’ are understood as being epistemically reliable, to some degree, in some cases.

The second noteworthy feature is this. If FitzPatrick is correct then moral realism enjoys coherence with the available data and, it is thought, is thereby justified. I see this as another way of stating the view that in light of moral realism's intuitive plausibility it is deviation from moral realism (and not endorsement of it) which requires justification. That is, FitzPatrick, seeking to fulfil the 'phenomenological criterion', endorses the 'presumption of moral realism'. On this view the justification for moral realism requires little more than highlighting its (intuitive) plausibility. It is the anti-realist, on this view, who must marshal (unintuitive, but independently supported) arguments against moral realism. On this view (*given that our 'moral intuitions' are epistemically reliable, to some degree, in some cases*) if the anti-realist's arguments are found wanting, moral realism remains a warranted position.

Cornell moral realism is a more elaborately conceived position than this. It falls under the 'disputation of moral realism' because it takes up the argumentative burden of proof. Boyd announces that 'moral realism' is a doctrine best understood as strictly analogous to 'scientific realism' (Boyd 1988, 181). This strikes me as a continuation of the spirit with which Ross viewed the enterprise of moral philosophy generally. In order to assess this perspective I will briefly note down some key feature of scientific realism and how it is justified. I'll then move on to highlight the analogy between scientific realism and moral realism. My purpose, however, is only to show that moral realism relies on the view that our 'moral intuitions' are, to some degree, in some cases, epistemically reliable. I cannot then provide all of the details of the analogy, only those relevant to my case. As such, there are important issues that I won't be discussing. Before closing the issue, I will, however, mention them.

Simply put, scientific realism is the view that unobservable entities posited by empirically successful scientific theories exist. This ontological commitment is warranted, it is argued, because of explanatory and predictive success (Leplin 2006, 686). 'Success' here is understood as "explanatory and predictive utility (Leplin 2006, 688)." That is, a theory is successful if it can be employed to meaningfully explain its target phenomena and make confirmable predictions.

Scientific realism, generally, is justified abductively. There are, however, two distinct kinds of abductive argument in its favour. One focuses on explanatory success, the other focuses on predictive novelty (Leplin 2006, 689). For details regarding the problems with the notion of 'explanatory success', and why 'predictive novelty' have come to be seen as more important see (Leplin 2006, 689f).

The scientific realist argument can be summarized as follows. If a theory makes successful novel predications they are achieved as a result of the theoretical entities and properties employed by that theory. The only explanation for the theory's capacity to achieve such success is that the theoretical entities and properties it employs are real (or approximately true). Apart from this view, one is committed to the unattractive view that a theory's capacity for such success is inexplicable. Given the

unsavoury nature of this latter view, a theory's successful novel predictions provide warrant for endorsing its theoretical entities and properties as real (or approximately true) (Leplin 2006, 691).

That is the basic strategy for justifying scientific realism. I need do no more than to sketch an outline of the strategies involved. Needless to say, there are a number of arguments against scientific realism (Leplin 2006, 691ff). However, it is not relevant for our current purposes to review those arguments. I will now highlight the most important analogy between the scientific and moral realist views.

The most important analogy is, as I have noted previously, 'moral intuitions' play in moral theories the role played by empirical observation in scientific theories (Boyd 1988, 184). Now, Boyd, is committed to the conjunction of scientific realism and the theory-ladenness of observation. The question for him is how a methodology so saturated by theory-dependence can provide reliable and novel results. His answer is that the reliable theories in question, along with their theory-dependent methodology, are approximately true: that is, scientific realism is, he argues, the best explanation for the success of such a theory-dependent methodology (Boyd 1988, 189).

This is relevant because this is why, in part, Boyd considers 'reflective equilibrium' (generally conceived) as the methodology for scientific discovery *and* the appropriate methodology for moral discovery (Boyd 1988, 200). 'Reflective equilibrium', for Boyd, is "the dialectical interplay of observations, theory and methodology (Boyd 1988, 200)". He views 'moral intuitions' as the analogue of observations (Boyd 1988, 184), and by 'methodology' he must be making reference to the need to weigh up the coherence between 'observations', 'theory' and our other theoretical commitments.

Again, the details about how Boyd, and others, utilizes 'reflective equilibrium' are not important. It is, however, important to note what Boyd says about reflective equilibrium in conjunction with his scientific realism. Reflective equilibrium is "reliable only on the assumption that the theoretical tradition which governs those methodological practices contains theories which are relevantly approximately true (Boyd 1988, 201)." Further, he remarks, "Were the realist unable to treat observation and measurement as providing "epistemic access" to reality in this way, a constructivist [non-realist] treatment of scientific knowledge would be almost unavoidable (Boyd 1988, 201)".

This, I take it, is a complex way of expressing a very simple truth. Unless our observations, and/or the theoretical framework with which our observations are made, have some contact with the world, it would be implausible to think that the theories built up from them would have some contact with the world. Unless our observations are in some predictable way epistemically reliable, that our theoretical predictions are on occasion vindicated by observations cannot provide us with epistemic warrant to believe our theories, or, even, the veracity of our observations.

My point is that the *analogues* of our observations, and their theoretical frameworks, must be thought of as providing us with epistemic access of some kind to reality. The implication of Boyd's position is that unless our 'moral intuitions' are thought of as being epistemically reliable, to some degree, in some cases, a non-realist treatment of moral knowledge is 'almost unavoidable'.

It is the proviso that our observations are epistemically reliable which operates in the *subtext* of justifications for scientific realism. This is also required by moral realism if it is to justify itself along similar lines or even if it is to be presumed as correct on account of its intuitive plausibility. The moral realist requires that our 'moral intuitions', somehow or other, be epistemically reliable. That result holds whether we follow Ross's early intuitionism, or Boyd's more sophisticated scientifically inspired reflective equilibrium. Both methods have a central place for our 'moral intuitions' as kinds of data.

Before drawing these issues to a close let me mention some important questions I have not been able to cover. One is with regards to the nature of a moral 'theory', and the strength of the analogy between that and a scientific theory (for further information see (Lloyd 2006), (Churchland 1989, 1), (Churchland 1981, 69), (Craver 2002, 55), (Richards 1986, 283)).

Another is what to make of the analogy regarding 'unobservable entities' (or 'theoretical posits') (for further information see (Leplin 2006, 686), (Boyd 1988, 181)). A more difficult issue is what to make, regarding moral theories, of the notions of 'explanatory success' (see (Leplin 2006, 687)) and 'predictive novelty' (see ((Leplin 2006, 689), (Boyd 1988, 200)).

These are interesting questions, but scope does not permit me to deal with them. In any case I do not believe they are germane to my current concerns. I will assume, then, that moral realists who argue along scientific realist lines have an adequate solution to these problems. Let me round off the point of this discussion.

As I see it there have been three general methods, by which moral realism is justified, under discussion. Earlier I spoke about the intuitionism of Moore and Ross. Here I have spoken about the 'presumption of moral realism', and the 'disputation of moral realism'. Each of these methods is distinct in certain senses. What I have wanted to show, however, is that each of them relies on the view that our 'moral intuitions', to some degree, in some cases, are epistemically reliable. That, as I see it, is the commonality which they all share and is the central feature of what I am calling the 'moral method'.

Although there are many varieties of moral realism – as we have seen – they do share a common thread. They share a commitment to the reality of moral truths, and our capacity to access them. Apart from this, they also share the view that *our access to moral truths is mediated, in some or other*

fashion, by ‘moral intuitions’ because our ‘moral intuitions’, to some degree, in some cases, are regarded as epistemically reliable.

Section 6: Closing Remarks

I set out to defend two claims

P1. ‘Moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is epistemological and ontological moral realism.

P2. The ‘moral method’ depends crucially on the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are, in some cases, and to some degree, ‘epistemically reliable’

I believe that I have shown that ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is committed to its epistemological and its ontological theses. The realist view is that there are moral facts, these facts are objective, we have access to these moral facts, and that access is mediated by some moral method. Whatever the variety of ‘moral realism’ we are reviewing, they must accept these four features.

The second contention I have defended is that the moral method relies on the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are, to some degree, in some cases, epistemically reliable. We have seen that there are a variety of different ways of justifying moral realism. The particular details of each of those ways are not my concern. I have wished to highlight simply that each of them, in some manner, to one degree or another, relies on the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ (in some qualified sense) are epistemically reliable. I believe I have shown that to be the case.

I must note that I have left as an open question the nature of ‘moral truth’ in three distinct ways. In my construal of ‘moral realism’ I have not taken a position on whether ‘moral truths’ are ‘natural’ or ‘non-natural’. Also, I have not taken a position on whether they are contingent truths, or necessary truths, or whether they are universal (in the sense that they apply to all ‘rational beings’) or whether they are human specific. Further, more generally, I haven’t taken a position on the nature of moral truths at all.

Regarding the first omission, I have not wanted to prejudge the issue in favour of naturalists or non-naturalists. If moral realism is correct, then possibly it will be naturalistic or non-naturalistic. Regarding the second omission, I have not wanted to prejudge this matter here because I take it up in Chapter 4. There I provide an argument to suggest that moral truths are more plausibly conceived of as contingent and human specific. That view is, however, controversial. Some, like Boyd, I believe, could accept this view. Others would not. Nevertheless, I do not think this is an issue relevant for the purposes of this chapter.

Regarding the third omission, I argue in Chapters 5 and 6 that a central problem regarding whether or not moral realism is compatible with evolutionary science is that no one has the capacity to advance a

prior account of 'moral truth' without begging the question, or without falling into incoherence. That is a strong claim, and requires further elaboration beyond the scope of this chapter.

These two premises I have defended are premises within a broader argument. The purpose of P1 is two-fold. I want to be clear on what exactly is being denied when scholars suggest that evolutionary science renders 'moral realism' unjustified or implausible. I also want to be clear on what it means to advance a 'non-traditional' view of moral realism which is not in conflict with evolutionary science.

The purpose of P2 is to show that a central feature of 'moral realism' (traditionally construed) is dependent on a particular view about the epistemic relevance of our 'moral intuitions'. If it can be shown that this view is incorrect then, as I explained earlier, this renders moral realism implausible, or at least unjustified. Further, in the face of such considerations, moral realists will have no recourse to the (minimal feature of their) moral method, because the very efficacy of the moral method is in question. Given that moral realists do not have another moral method, they will have no recourse at all. Those are considerations which will be taken up later. For the moment I believe that I have given sufficient justification for P1 and P2.

Chapter 2

Naturalism, Evolutionary Naturalism and Metaethics

Section 1: Naturalism and Evolutionary Naturalism

Terms like ‘naturalism’ and ‘naturalist’ do not enjoy a single or fixed definition (Flanagan 2006, 432). There are, however, numerous different ‘varieties’ of ‘naturalism’ (Flanagan 2006, 430-431). Broadly speaking these are ‘methodological naturalism’, ‘ontological naturalism’ and ‘epistemological naturalism’.

Unfortunately, as I’ll proceed to show, not even a robust generalization can be generated from analysing such variety. What can be gleaned is a more or less vague statement about the general approach a naturalist should take to philosophical problems. This, in conjunction with a development of the view called ‘evolutionary naturalism’, which I will get to later on, will suffice for my purposes.

According to Schmitt ‘methodological naturalism’ is the view that the best method of inquiry in the social sciences and philosophy are, or at least ought to be modelled on, those of the natural sciences (Schmitt 2009, 434).

Price refers to something similar but uses the label ‘philosophical naturalism’ instead (Price 2004, 71). Price points out that philosophy and natural science have overlapping concerns. ‘Philosophical naturalism’, according to him, is the view that when the concerns overlap we should defer to the scientific, rather than the philosophic, results. As I see it this is a weaker version of Schmitt’s methodological naturalism. The natural sciences should *constrain* the method of inquiry and the results of philosophy and the social sciences. But Price, unlike Schmitt, does not demand that those disciplines adopt the *methods* of the natural sciences.

Flanagan, on the other hand, in discussing the ‘methodological naturalism’ of economists, states that this is a view which suggests that supernatural (or, non-natural) entities provide no explanatory power and so can be dispensed with in that field of inquiry (Flanagan 2006, 434). Now, Schmitt and Price take the term ‘natural’ to relate somehow to the natural science or its methods. Flanagan, in this context, appears to think that the term ‘natural’ is simply the contrary of whatever is ‘supernatural’ (Flanagan 2006, 437). There isn’t consensus, then, regarding what is to be denoted by ‘methodological naturalism’.

Regarding ‘ontological naturalism’ Schmitt tells us that it is the view that the only things which are real are those things (objects, kinds, properties, etc.) recognized by the natural sciences (Schmitt 2009, 434). Price puts it somewhat differently by telling us that ‘ontological naturalism’ is the view that the world studied by science is, in some sense, the only world that there is (Price 2004, 73). More concisely: “Ontological questions [...] are on a par with questions of natural science (Quine 1953,

45)”. As Rea notes in his comments on ‘ontological naturalism’, the message is that the correct ontology is identical with the ontology of science (Rea 2007, 6).

Relative agreement notwithstanding, Flanagan raises a potential problem with this view. He suggests that the scope of the view is too wide. It is an ‘all-encompassing’ ontological position proclaiming that what there is, *and all there is*, is the world studied by the natural science (Flanagan 2006, 436). He rejects this view on the basis that he does not think human beings have the cognitive capacity or access to information to make warranted ‘all-encompassing’ claims (Flanagan 2006, 437).

He suggests that rather than making such claims about ontology (what there is) *tout court* we should rather make judgments about what we should be ontologically committed to given our cognitive capacities and limitations. As such, he offers the somewhat weaker version, still calling it ‘ontological naturalism’, that, *for all we can and do know*, the natural world (the world studied by natural science) is all there is (Flanagan 2006, 437).

That response blurs the line between what Flanagan has called *ontological* naturalism and what Price calls *epistemological* naturalism. Price tells us that ‘epistemological naturalism’ is the view that only natural scientific knowledge is genuine knowledge (Price 2004, 73). This does not differ much from suggesting that the only entities to which we can ontologically commit with warrant are those entities countenanced by the natural sciences. That, however, is essentially Flanagan’s view. There is then, also, little consensus to be found regarding either ‘ontological’ or ‘epistemological’ naturalism.

There are still further varieties. Armstrong, for example thinks that ‘naturalism’ is the view that reality only consists of a single all-embracing spatio-temporal system (Armstrong 1981, 149). Rea, on the other hand, takes the contentious view that ‘naturalism’ is not a philosophical position at all (Rea 2006, 1). Rather he takes ‘naturalism’ to be a ‘research program’ which he defines as a set of methodological dispositions which treats the methods (and presumably the results) of the natural sciences as basic sources of evidence (Rea 2006, 3).

It is clear that there is no unified perspective on how to understand the term ‘naturalism’ (Rea 2006, 4). A generalized and substantive view cannot be generated from assessing the various positions. Indeed, even if we allow for distinctions and look to the varieties themselves for clarity we find yet more disagreement.

We have no choice but to accept a vague definition of ‘naturalism’. This is just that naturalists conduct their inquiry in tandem with the methods and results of science (Rea 2006, 5ff). What precisely to make of this, either methodologically, or epistemologically, or ontologically, is unclear, and a matter of controversy, as we have seen. However, as Ruse notes, the vague but workable definition of a naturalist is *someone who employs science and the scientific method in order to gain*

understanding and knowledge. A naturalist will take a ‘scientific approach’ to the issues he considers (Ruse 1995, 1).

What may be said of ‘evolutionary naturalism’? Rosenberg uses the term ‘Philosophical Darwinism’ to mean the same as ‘evolutionary naturalism’. He suggests, in the broad spirit of ‘naturalism’ detailed above, that we look to the theory of natural selection in our attempts to solve philosophical problems arising within ‘human affairs’ (Rosenberg 2009, 1). Ruse says much the same thing, highlighting the relevance of the theory to questions about human nature (Ruse 1995, 8). He predicts that it is only by taking an evolutionary approach to issues related to human nature, or human affairs that, “we can hope to solve some of the most pressing questions of traditional ethics (Ruse 1995, 9)”.

Now, a naturalist is someone who conducts their inquiry following a scientific approach, taking science to comprise a reliable body of data (generated by a reliable method) to employ in, or to render compatible with, their philosophical claims. *An evolutionary naturalist, then, is a peculiar kind of naturalist*. An evolutionary naturalist conducts inquiry regarding the human being, or human affairs, including those of ethics and Metaethics, by utilizing data from the evolutionary sciences.

I believe I have established P3 and P4. In general a ‘naturalist’ conducts their (general philosophical) inquiry in tandem with the methods and results of natural science (broadly speaking). Speaking more specifically, an ‘evolutionary naturalist’ conducts their inquiry regarding the human being, or human affairs, including those of ethics and metaethics, by utilizing data from the evolutionary sciences.

In order to capture what I can about ‘naturalism’, given the controversy surrounding the term, I will use the terms ‘naturalism’ and ‘evolutionary naturalism’ in the following sense. P5: A ‘naturalist’ will allow scientific data to underwrite ones philosophical views where possible. Where this is not possible, a naturalist will seek to render ones philosophical views compatible with that data. Further, a naturalist will reject perspectives which cannot reasonably fit into a broadly scientific worldview. An evolutionary naturalist will act similarly with regards to the data of evolutionary science regarding matters about human beings or human affairs. Thus I have defended the three minor claims I sought to.

Section 2: What is The Relevance of Evolutionary Science for Metaethics?

Part of my project involves bringing evidence from the evolutionary sciences to bear on the metaethical question of whether or not moral realism is correct. As such, my project is motivated in part by my evolutionary naturalism.

This may strike some as misguided. They may ask, “Why should we concede science a special authority to decide questions about the nature of [human beings]? What of the authority of philosophy, of religion, of morality [...]? Why do I set the authority of science above all these? Why

this “scientism” (Armstrong 1981, 2)?” Put differently, why should we attempt to fit the square peg of metaethics into the round hole of evolutionary science?

There are a few answers to this question, and I will focus on two. I find both of them compelling, but I only require others to accept the second answer. First, my answer would be similar to Armstrong’s, who notes that science, and the scientific method, have proven to be highly reliable and successful. He says that, “...in philosophy [...] in moral questions in so far as they are thought to be matters of truth and falsity, there has been a notable failure to achieve an intellectual consensus about disputed questions [...] Must we not then attach a peculiar authority to the discipline that can achieve a consensus? And if that presents us with a certain vision of the nature of [the human being], is that not a powerful reason for accepting that vision? (Armstrong 1981, 3)”

I think that is a powerful reason to attach such authority to science. Saying this, however, is not more than saying that I am committed to evolutionary naturalism. The worry may remain: what relevance has any of this for metaethics? Let me then provide an answer which does not beg the question against a non-naturalist.

The metaethical question whether moral realism is true does depend, in part, on a particular view of human beings. It is the view that we have psychological capacities such that we can ‘perceive’ (by means of ‘moral intuitions’), to some degree, in some cases, moral truths. That is, as I previously explained, moral realism depends on the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are, to some degree, in some cases, epistemically reliable.

If evolutionary science has something to say about our psychological capacities (of which our ‘moral intuitions’ form a part), as it does, then this has some relevance for our metaethical theorizing, at least as it pertains to moral realism. That claim does not, I believe, depend on an evolutionary naturalistic approach. The question is: why should we attach a peculiar authority to natural science on such matters? The answer is that natural science is reliable at least regarding matters properly within its domain.

The claim that I will now motivate, and only demonstrate in Chapter 3, is the following. Our psychological capacities are a matter for scientific investigation, and particularly fruitful work has been done in the evolutionary sciences. Given this it is sensible to utilize the data from the evolutionary sciences in our ethical and metaethical theorizing. Let me now move on to motivate that claim.

That evolutionary theory should have implications for our understanding of the nature of human beings is not a novel idea. Darwin, even at the inception of his proposed theory of evolution, believed this to be so. He saw, and took great interest in, the implications of evolutionary theory for our

understanding of the human behavioural capacities and dispositions, and even the human mind (Griffiths 2008, 393).

Subsequent scholarship on evolutionary theory also adopted a similar attitude. Sedgwick and Wilson, for example, went so far as to suggest that the theory of evolution had shown that the study of psychology and sociology were properly inseparable from the study of biology. They said, “the *instincts* and *other mental actions* ... are truly subjects of psychology as of physiological inquiry (emphasis added) (Sedgwick et al 1899, 8)”, and say much the same for the complexities of social life and sociological inquiry. Later on Moon would remark that, “certainly man is an animal just as truly as the beast of the field (Moon 1921, 321)” and “man has also been developed over time by natural selection (Moon 1921, 333)²”

If Darwin and his followers were correct the lesson is clear. The idiomatic division between our biological (‘animal’) nature and our other social (‘civilized’) capacities is not as distinct as common sense would have it. “Our sociality is part of our nature. The evolution of social systems is but one aspect of human evolution (Wuketits 2009, 400)”.

Let me then lay out an argument with the aim of justifying the salience of ‘evolutionary naturalism’ to matters of metaethics.

² One must note the unfortunate biological racism implicit in such tables as they produce on page 340 of their work. This clearly betrays a somewhat misunderstood notion of the nature of ‘natural selection’. I make reference to their work simply to show that from quite an early stage in the development of the evolutionary sciences, it was a common (if not properly understood) view that human beings, their physical, social and mental, capacities and dispositions, are the product of evolution by natural selection.

Argument for P6 (Here C6.1)

P6.1. Our moral capacities (particularly our ‘moral intuitions’) are relevant to the justification of our ethical and metaethical perspectives.

P6.2. Darwin and his contemporaries were correct about the relevance of evolutionary theory to our psychological capacities (of which our moral capacities are a part).

C6.1. Therefore, evolutionary science has relevance for our understanding of the nature of our moral capacities

C6.2. Therefore, evolutionary science has relevance for our ethical and metaethical views.

P6.1 is a more concise way of expressing P2. If my argument there is sound, then P6.1 here is correct. Regarding P6.2, the proviso that our moral capacities are part of our overall psychological capacities is one taken from my idealized view of ‘moral intuitions’. I cannot here demonstrate the correctness of P6.2; I can only briefly motivate it. I will demonstrate it more fully in the next chapter. Nevertheless, *if P6.2 holds, then we are justified in accepting C6.1 and C6.2.*

Now, Darwin’s initial proposals have proved fruitful as can be seen in the development of contemporary evolutionary psychology. Evolutionary psychology seeks to predict which behaviours, and behavioural capacities and dispositions, would have been adaptive during the evolutionary phase of *Homo sapiens* (Griffiths 2008, 402). Human behaviour, even in its variety, can thereby be explained, at least to some degree, in terms of mental mechanisms which evolved during that evolutionary phase (Griffiths 2008, 402).

As I will later show, this research program has been relatively successful, although it is noted that such success is not without controversy or contestation (Pinker 1997, 205). One of the central controversies is whether or not the mind is an adaptation. Some authorities do regard it as an adaptation. Pinker, for instance, thinks that the mind is an evolutionary adaption which resulted from natural selective pressure (Pinker 1997, 23). Put differently, “the overall task of the mind is survival and reproduction in the ancestral environment [...] (Griffiths 2008, 405)”, and that the nature of our current mental, and resultant behavioural, capacities, dispositions and tendencies are (at least partially) thereby explained.

Authority cannot be used as a justification for P6.2 here, especially if there isn’t the kind of consensus which Armstrong valued. I intend only to motivate P6.2’s plausibility by highlighting that there is a great deal of data which does support P6.2, Pinker and Griffiths being two of the proponents of that data.

Section 3: Closing Remarks

I have provided a workable definition of ‘naturalism’ and ‘evolutionary naturalism’. The view that I have taken on ‘naturalism’ and ‘evolutionary naturalism’ is, as I see it, a diplomatic way of absorbing the controversy surrounding methodological, ontological, and epistemological naturalism. It is vague, but nevertheless, workable. I have, then, defended the three minor claims I introduced at the beginning of this chapter.

I have also provided some motivation for regarding the findings of evolutionary science as relevant to our ethical and metaethical theorizing. The claim which I endorse is: P6. Evolutionary science has relevance for our understanding of the nature of our moral capacities (read: ‘moral intuitions’). This claim, however, depends on a premise (P6.2. Darwin and his contemporaries were correct about the relevance of evolutionary theory to our psychological capacities (of which our moral capacities are a part)).which, as far as I have shown, remains controversial. I will demonstrate the plausibility of P6.2 in the next chapter. For now, I hope I have provided some motivation for endorsing, at least, the plausibility of P6. Formally, however, what I have shown is P6* (if P6.2 holds, then we are justified in accepting C6.1 and C6.2.) if evolutionary theory can be applied to matters of psychology then evolutionary science has relevance for our understanding of the nature of our moral capacities (read: ‘moral intuitions’).

Chapter 3

Evolutionary Science

Section 1: The Problem of Human Sociality

What is referred to by the notion of ‘human sociality’ is, broadly speaking, the array of human social institutions, behaviours and norms. These are characterized, it seems, by social cooperation, altruistic – non-self-serving – exchanges, and by the observance of moral codes which require unselfish behavior and attitudes (Rosenberg 2008, 190). Human sociality is a real phenomenon, and non-human sociality can also be observed variously in nature (Alexander 2008, 416). Such phenomena pose problems for evolutionary theory. It would seem that cooperative and altruistic behavior, generally regarded as fitness diminishing behavior, would not be selected for. It’s only behaviours which increase individual fitness which would be selected for (Alexander 2008, 415). The solutions to these problems, and principally those provided by evolutionary psychology, have, I will argue, particular salience for our practices of ethical and metaethical theorizing.

One early solution to the problem was the theory of ‘kin selection’ and ‘inclusive fitness’ (Rosenberg 2008, 190). The proposal was that altruism toward close kin (family members sharing genes) could be selected for because this kind of altruism would increase the relative frequency of those genes in the gene pool. That is, altruistic, even self-sacrificial, behavior toward kin could enhance inclusive fitness in terms of genes even if not in terms of individual organisms, and would, then be selected for (Rosenberg 2008, 190). While that may have solved the problem of cooperation among kin, it doesn’t solve the problem of human sociality. Human sociality, after all, is characterized by cooperation among unrelated individuals (Rosenberg 2008, 191).

One such solution was that of ‘reciprocity’, or ‘reciprocal altruism’ (Alexander 2008, 416). Simply put this is the idea that cooperation, under particular circumstances, can benefit both cooperating parties more so than if they fail to cooperate (Rosenberg 2008, 191). The ‘Prisoners Dilemma’³, a particular game featured in Game Theory, is capable of rendering the reciprocal altruism hypothesis testable. Axelrod (1984) was able to put the hypothesis to a test of sorts. He confirmed that reciprocal altruism could have been selected for by showing that a ‘tit-for-tat’ strategy in the iterated prisoner’s dilemma is the best strategy for players who are rationally self-interested (Rosenberg 2008, 194). Many more different experiments have been performed, and the results have consistently shown what Axelrod first revealed (Rosenberg 2008, 197).

Reciprocal altruism gives us an explanation of how altruistic and cooperative behavior can evolve even among non-related individuals (Alexander 2008, 418). In order to successfully carry out, and be

³ For a detailed explanation of Game Theory, and Prisoners Dilemma games, see (Rosenberg 2008, 191-193)

motivated toward, such behavior people require certain other capacities and talents. This will include capacities to recognize fairness and equality (Rosenberg 2008, 197), as well as capacities to recognize ‘cheating’, or ‘unfair’, behavior, and motivations to punish such behavior (Rosenberg 2008, 201). On the other hand people must be motivated against ‘cheating’ behavior, providing more incentive to ‘cooperate’. This requires something like the emotions of guilt and shame incurred after one does something one recognizes to be ‘wrong’ (Rosenberg 2008, 203).

So, clearly, reciprocal altruism provides a plausible solution to the problem of human sociality. The solution, however, requires making reference to a range of other (let’s call them) socially relevant emotional capacities and motivational dispositions. These, in turn, are used as partial explanations for our more particular ethical habits and institutions (Ruse 2010, 299).

Section 2: Evolutionary Psychology

This brings the work of evolutionary psychology to the fore. Evolutionary psychologists are ‘nativists’ about the human mind. That is the view that many of our behavioural traits, capacities and dispositions are the results of, or at any rate enabled by, particular psychological ‘modules’ which are genetically coded in our brains (Rosenberg 2008, 199). This is the result of the view that behaviours are events the causes of which are certain mental states. As such, to detail the evolutionary development of some kind of behavior, or behavioural disposition, is an elliptical way of detailing the evolutionary development of certain psychological mechanisms and capacities, the output of which are the behavioural events (Buller 2007, 259).

I think that natural selection will surely be responsive to our behavioural outputs⁴, but what is selected for is what allows for such behavioural outputs, which are the mental states which lie behind our behaviours. It is, properly speaking then, certain psychological mechanisms and capacities which are the selected for adaptations, rather than the behaviours as such. The goal of evolutionary psychology, then, is to describe the nature and functions of those psychological mechanisms and capacities (Buller 2007, 259).

This is significant and relates to what I just alluded to above. Evolutionary science has given us explanations for capacities and dispositions towards altruistic and cooperative behavior. These explanations must make reference to – in fact, it provides explanations for the emergence of – certain psychological capacities and dispositions.

In order for ‘tit-for-tat’ (reciprocal altruistic) strategies to work, users of that strategy must have a “free rider detection device” (Rosenberg 2008, 201) which is genetically encoded. That is, creatures must have, as a matter of their genetics, psychological capacities to recognize and pick out cheaters,

⁴ Say, for instance, ones behaving in a cooperative way, the result of which is increased fitness.

creatures who play ‘unfairly’, who won’t or don’t reciprocate. That creatures have this psychological module is evidenced by the ‘Wason Selection Test’⁵. This enables creatures to recognize which members ‘ought’ to be punished for their failure to cooperate (Koukl 1998, 3).

The nativist hypothesis can also explain why we happen to fear some of the things we ordinarily do. Nativists argue that our psychological capacities and dispositions would have evolved during what is called the Pleistocene epoch (approximately 1.8 million to 10 thousand years ago) (Buller 2007, 259). As such, our psychological adaptations would have been those selected for by the environmental pressures of that time, rather than of the present day (Buller 2007, 259). Rather than having an innate fear of, say, cars and electrical plugs (in fact, statistically, quite dangerous features of our present environment), we find that we have innate fears, or phobias, for things like snakes and mushrooms (Rosenberg 2008, 202). The latter, and not the former, would have been threats during the Pleistocene epoch. This adds support to the nativist hypothesis – we should expect, if they are right, that we do have such phobias for snakes and mushrooms, rather than cars and electrical plugs.

The point is that our brain, and its capacities, has been developed by natural selection (Danninger 1994, 1). This includes all of our emotions, those of friendship, or sympathy, including our senses of justice, fairness, shame, and guilt (Danninger 1994, 6). This even includes our capacity for happiness and our capacities for pain, and the resultant motivations they provide us (Danninger 1994, 7f). These nativist explanations enjoy a good deal of experimental support. The details of these experiments and their results are not my current concern. For further details, however, see: (Rosenberg 2008, 203-204), (Danninger 1994, 1.), (Greene 2003, 848f), (Krebs 2008), (Krebs 2008), (DeScioli et al 2009).

What I wish to highlight is that the claim is that ‘ethical’ behavior, for which our ancestors were selected, likely is more accurately described along psychologicistic lines. That is, what was selected for in our ancestors, because of their ‘ethical’ (read: adaptive) behavior, was certain psychological capacities and dispositions which allow and motivate us to behave ‘ethically’.

All of this data shows that evolutionary theory can be fruitfully applied to matters of psychology. As I indicated in Chapter 1, our ‘moral intuitions’ form part of our evolved psychology. If I am correct about that, then P6 is justified. Evolutionary science, then, does have relevance for our understanding of the nature of our ‘moral intuitions’. I will continue in the next section to further support my take on ‘moral intuitions’ described in Chapter 1, thereby to providing further support for P6.

Section 3: Responding To Challenges to Nativism

Now, there are various problems and objections which have been raised against the enterprise of evolutionary psychology and, in particular, the nativist hypothesis. I cannot deal with these issues

⁵ For a more detailed account of what this test involves see (Rosenberg 2008, 200)

exhaustively, but I will mention two of them, and say a few words in response. The first major strand of objections are politically motivated (Rosenberg 2008, 203-207).

The nativist hypothesis has been used to infer that certain social phenomena (such as differences in gender norms, differences in gender abilities, the inferiority (in terms of IQ) of certain racial groups to name just a few (Rosenberg 2008, 206)) are the results of evolutionary adaptations. Some have taken this to be the view that certain features of the current (unjust) social arrangements are genetically determined, and that as such we cannot expect to alter this arrangement (Rosenberg 2008, 205) and it may even be harmful to attempt it (Rosenberg 2008, 203).

Critics, then, have seen the nativist hypothesis as linked to the justification of unjust social and political arrangements. On this basis they have rejected it. In response I agree with Rosenberg who says that there is nothing in the nativist hypothesis which logically entails a political ideology in favour of these injustices. Nativists may be correct, say, that gender differences are adaptive, but this does not mean that we must view political, social and economic gender inequality as justified (Rosenberg 2008, 206). The objection that since nativism justifies political injustice it is incorrect is not a good one.

Another more serious concern comes from the view that nativism is incorrect because our psychological (including our moral) capacities are possibly not *adaptations* at all. The suggestion is that they may be ‘spandrels’. Rather than being adaptations, these are by-products of other adaptations and have themselves no adaptive value (Ruse 2010, 299). Nativist hypotheses are said to be “just so” stories about the alleged adaptive value of this or another trait or module. But because of the nature of these “just so” stories (easily invented, difficult to disconfirm or confirm) they cannot serve as credible evolutionary explanations (Rosenberg 2008, 207). As such, our psychological capacities may, after all, just be spandrels, in which case it would not be correct to say that they, or our moral capacities, were adaptations.

What is ultimately at issue, for my purposes, is whether or not our ‘moral intuitions’ may be regarded as epistemically reliable. I think that if it is accepted that our psychological capacities are adaptations *or* spandrels (and not the work of some divine intelligence or some occult power) we will find that we cannot affirm that our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable.

In the first case, if our moral capacities are adaptations, as others in the literature suggest (the details of which are in Chapter 4), our ‘moral intuitions’ would not reflect ‘moral truths’, just evolutionarily adaptive strategies which worked sufficiently well for our ancestors. In the second case (also developed in Chapter 4), if our moral capacities are spandrels, it would be very implausible to suppose that our ‘moral intuitions’ reflected ‘moral truths’ because we would have no reason to

expect them to develop in accordance with such truths. That is, we may take it as highly improbable that our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable, in the second case.

My position regarding the second case is a version of Street’s position. She argues that if moral realists believe that there is no relation between moral truths and the evolutionary development of our ‘moral intuitions’ they must regard our ‘moral intuitions’ as very probably not epistemically reliable.

She says, “Allowing our [‘moral intuitions’] to be shaped by evolutionary influences is analogous to setting out for Bermuda and letting the course of your boat be determined by the wind and the tides [...] the historical push of natural selection on the content of our [‘moral intuitions’] has nothing to do with [moral] truth [...] every now and then, Darwinian pressures *might have happened* to push us toward accepting a [‘moral intuition’] that accords with one of the realist’s independent [moral] truths. But this would be purely a matter of *chance*, since *by hypothesis there is no relation between the forces at work and the “destination”* in question, namely [moral] truth (emphasis added) (Street 2006, 121f).”

She continues, “[...] we are left with the implausible skeptical conclusion that our [‘moral intuitions’] are in all likelihood mostly off track [...] we should have been evolving towards affirming the independent [moral] truths posited by the realist, but instead [...] we have been evolving toward affirming whatever evaluative content tends to promote reproductive success. (Street 2006, 121f).”

Her position, as quoted, relies on the nativist hypothesis in question, but I believe that we can get similar results without the nativist hypothesis. Whether or not our ‘moral intuitions’ are adaptations, realists must take a position on the relation between their development and moral truth. Even if our ‘moral intuitions’ are spandrels, if there is no relation between their non-adaptive development as by-product of other adaptations and moral truth, then it remains highly unlikely that they track moral truths. That is, even if they are spandrels, it remains unlikely that our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable.

In neither case, then, may we conclude that it is plausible to regard our ‘moral intuitions’ as epistemically reliable. Now, while this objection is an important objection for the nativist hypothesis *per se*, if it succeeds it does not provide support for the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable. Just so long as we are evolutionary naturalists, and do not countenance occult forces which directed our moral adaptations or spandrels to track moral truths, we do not have good reasons to suppose that they are epistemically reliable.

Whether our psychological capacities are adaptations or spandrels, then, is a question on which I *need not* take a stand just as long as our psychological capacities have been influenced by our evolution at

all. This controversy only becomes relevant in Chapter 6. My support for ‘moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed) does depend on nativism. But this controversy is irrelevant until then.

Section 4: Moral Nativism – The Evolution of ‘Moral Intuitions’

What scholars intend by these various labels (conscience, moral sense, etc. (see Chapter 1)) is, I take it, what moral philosophers generally, and moral realists in particular, intend by the notion of ‘moral intuition’. If I am correct, then we may regard our ‘moral intuitions’ as evolved. We may regard them as adaptations, of some kind, and as selected because they were fitness enhancing for our evolutionary ancestors (Ruse 2010, 307). Let me continue to support this view and so to further motivate my take on the notion as described in Chapter 1.

Moral realists take our ‘moral intuitions’ to be propositional – they represent truth-functional claims. Evolutionary science indicates that we have evolved cognitive capacities to solve (that is: make decisions about) various social dilemmas. While this involves the application of emotive responses – so-called ‘gut reactions’ – it also involves the more robust cognitive judgments that we have the capacity to infer from these emotive responses. Perhaps the most primitive aspects of our ‘moral intuitions’ are non-cognitive, but it’s clear that our moral capacities are developed such that we have the capacity to reformulate such non-cognitive responses into *bona fide* propositional judgments about what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. Evolutionary science, then, seems to confirm one of the central contentions raised by moral realists: that our ‘moral intuitions’ and judgments are propositional.

Moral realists also rely on the universality of our ‘moral intuitions’ and judgments. Our ‘moral intuitions’ cannot be, according to realists, entirely culturally relative, but there must be some underlying uniformity in our capacity for recognizing which things are intuitively right and wrong. Here, again, evolutionary science appears to confirm this realist contention. Our ‘moral intuitions’, because they are adaptations, are likely to be (are hypothesized to be) “species-typical and species-specific” (Buller 2007, 261). That is, the kinds of intuitions which we have are likely to be universal among human beings, but are not necessarily present in other creatures whose evolutionary trajectory involved different environmental pressures. Nativists view the variety among human value systems as merely a surface property of human sociality which is underwritten by a more universal genuine ‘human nature’ (Buller 2007, 261). Different *cultural* trajectories can account for some of the surface differences, but they are variations made possible by a basically uniform underlying nature (Ruse 2010, 307).

Another feature still is the very obviousness with which we apprehend the content of certain ‘moral intuitions’. That is, certain moral judgments appear so obviously correct that it would be difficult to seriously consider their error. This is accounted for by the very innateness of our ‘moral intuitions’ – a general feature of the nativist hypothesis.

We may also consider the issue that our ‘moral intuitions’ are not necessarily stable regarding certain problems, and particularly unhelpful regarding certain others. Here I think of various moral dilemmas, both real and contrived, to which we do not have intuitively obvious answers. For example, as Peter Singer pointed out, it is clear that we should help a drowning child if no cost will be incurred by us in doing so. It is less clear, however, that we should give money to charities which help dying children in distant countries.

Evolutionary science can provide a plausible explanation of why this happens. In particular, it can tell us why there are certain moral questions for which we have clear answers, and certain other questions, technically similar, to which we do not have clear answers. It is hypothesized that our ‘moral intuitions’ evolved to solve the particular problems faced by our evolutionary ancestors (Buller 2007, 259). These would have been the problems faced by pre-industrial, pre-agricultural, hunter gatherers (Buller 2007, 259), who lived in small, close knit societies (Danninger 1994, 1). Our adaptations are not selected for, and might not function ideally, in our current, ‘post-Pleistocene’, environments, which is in some ways significantly different to our Pleistocene environments (Buller 2007, 259).

Plausibly then, the explanation for our lack of intuitive grasp on the morality of certain issues, which relate to our current environment, is that our ‘moral intuitions’ were not designed for our *current* environment. Plausibly the reason why we are so motivated to save a drowning child, say, but so relatively unmotivated to donate to charities which do the same thing, is that our evolutionary ancestors did not have to deal with, and weren’t affected by, the problems of distant people. This is a version of the explanation provided by the experiments performed by Greene, regarding our distinct responses to the two functionally equivalent versions of the ‘trolley problem’⁶ (Greene 2003, 848). Our ‘moral intuitions’, then, have a limited field of application because they were selected for a limited, and quite specific, set of problems.

I think I have sufficiently justified my particular take on ‘moral intuitions’. Evolutionary science does provide some plausible explanations for a number of features of our ‘moral intuitions’ (as thought of by moral philosophers). We are correct, I think, to regard our ‘moral intuitions’ as aspects of our psychology. We are justified in thinking that our psychology, including this component of it, is evolved. I believe that this justifies P6.2. Since we found there that if P6.2 holds, then we are justified in accepting C6.1 and C6.2, we are justified in accepting P6. That is *we are justified in accepting that*

⁶ See (Greene 2003) and (Singer 2005) for a more elaborate discussion of the issue. The essentials of the ‘trolley problem’ are the following. In one scenario there is a trolley on its way to hit and kill 5 people. One has a choice to divert the trolley away from the 5 people by flipping a switch so that the trolley switches rails and instead only hits and kills 1 person. In another scenario there is a trolley on its way to hit and kill 5 people. One has a choice to push a large person in front of the trolley which will stop the trolley, save the 5 people, but kill the large person in the process. For the first scenario most people find it intuitively clear that they must flip the switch to save 5 people by killing 1 person. For the second scenario most people find it intuitively wrong to push the large person in front of the trolley, thus finding it wrong to save 5 people by killing 1 person. The scenarios are essentially the same, and it is a source of confusion why we should have such different responses to the two scenarios. Greene’s solution is that our brains have evolved to be more sensitive to ‘up-close-and-personal’ conflicts, and less sensitive to impersonal conflicts. Plausibly, in the first scenario, the killing of 1 person to save 5 is a quite impersonal conflict. In the second scenario matters are more ‘up-close-and-personal’.

evolutionary science has relevance for our understanding of the nature of our moral capacities (read: 'moral intuitions'). By implication we are correct generally in regarding evolutionary science as relevance for our ethical and metaethical views.

Section 5: The Relevance of Evolutionary Science to Ethics and Metaethics

I would like, now, to provide a sketch of what various philosophers have taken the implications of evolutionary science for moral realism to be. I will go into more detail about the implications in the next chapter.

One of the implications is with regards to the epistemic reliability of our 'moral intuitions'. Earlier on I noted that our 'moral intuitions' are adaptations, and we have them as a result of natural selection. This is taken to have serious implications for our moral theorizing. Rosenberg notes that an evolutionary explanation of our moral norms, and the 'moral intuitions' which underlie them, threatens to explain our norms *away* (Rosenberg 2008, 222). The nature of our 'moral intuitions', including their content, can be explained by evolutionary science without "the hypothesis that any moral norms [or the 'moral intuitions' underlying them] are true and justified (Rosenberg 2008, 223)".

Ruse is quite convinced that taking seriously the evolutionary explanations of our 'moral intuitions' leads us to a kind of anti-realism. No metaethical *justification* can be, he believes, given for our moral norms and the 'moral intuitions' underlying them. Ultimately, we have our 'moral intuitions', and they are the way they are, for quite contingent reasons. We have them as a result of adaptive problems faced by our evolutionary ancestors, and not because they are 'epistemically reliable', as moral realists would think (Ruse 2010, 308).

One evolutionary scientist cited in Koukl's paper says, "It is amazing that a process as amoral and crassly pragmatic as natural selection could design a mental organ that makes us feel *as if* we're in touch with a higher truth. Truly a shameless ploy (emphasis added) (Koukl 1998, 4)." This is in reference to a phenomenon which Ruse has highlighted, that our 'moral intuitions' provides us with a genuine feeling that certain things are right and other things are wrong. It is not a masked, or muffled, vague awareness, but often a very vivid appreciation of what seems to be a moral reality (Ruse 2010, 307). Of course, it is this 'vivid appreciation' which is alleged to be a shameless ploy. It is a trick, if you will, played on us by evolution because it was beneficial that our evolutionary ancestors fell for it.

Singer notes that evolutionary science poses a threat to the veracity of the method of wide reflective equilibrium (Singer 2005, 348). That is, evolutionary science poses a threat to the current method employed by moral realists in justifying their metaethical realism as well as their ethical theories. He says, "[...] recent scientific advances in our understanding do have some normative significance [...]"

At the more general level of method in ethics, this same understanding of how we make moral judgments casts serious doubt on the method of reflective equilibrium. There is little point in constructing a moral theory designed to match considered moral judgments that themselves stem from our evolved responses to the situations in which we and our ancestors lived during the period of our evolution as social mammals, primates, and finally, human beings (Singer 2005, 348).” I believe the point is that there is something amiss in thinking that employing the contingent solutions to problems faced by our evolutionary ancestors (solutions which helped them survive and reproduce) in our ethical and metaethical theories guides us to some objective moral reality.

He notes, though, that it appears as if ethical and metaethical theorizing requires, even in just a minimal sense, employing some kind of ‘moral intuitions’. Otherwise, he fears, the enterprise would be quite unworkable. I have also defended this view, it is the proposition expressed in P2. The moral method crucially depends on the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are, in some cases, to some degree, ‘epistemically reliable’. Our ethical and metaethical theories depend on this view and, as a consequence, must employ, even in some minimal sense, our ‘moral intuitions’.

He fears that following through on his line of reasoning, negating the epistemic reliability of our ‘moral intuitions’, entails that we become moral skeptics or moral nihilists (Singer 2005, 349). Singer’s fears are not unreasonable. Here is the argument. If evolutionary science does not require the hypothesis that our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable; If their nature and content is purely contingent, the result of blind forces of natural selection; if the sense that they give us, that they point to a moral reality, is a trick which was simply beneficial to our ancestors, who lived in a significantly different environment to us; then (depending on how strongly we read these premises) there is little to suppose, the view that our intuitions can count as epistemically reliable data which can be used to guide us to some moral truth.

Singer says that, in light of such data, we face a choice. Essentially he says that we can take evolutionary science seriously, which leads us to a form of moral scepticism or moral nihilism. Or we may embark on the “ambitious” task of separating those moral judgments which we make as a result of our evolutionary history, and those which have a ‘purely rational’ basis. Taking the latter option, he believes, allows for one way to continue with the moral philosophic enterprise (Singer 2005, 351).

Section 6: Closing Remarks

It’s not my intention here to evaluate these gloomy prospects, but it is important to make a note of them. To conclude, we are justified in accepting P6, that evolutionary science is relevant to ethical and metaethical theorizing, and, in particular, to moral realism. It can provide us with important information regarding the nature and content of our ‘moral intuitions’. In particular, it has implications for how we view the epistemic significance of our ‘moral intuitions’. Evolutionary

science seems to suggest, *contra* moral realist's, that our 'moral intuitions' are not epistemically reliable. Given P2, this suggests that a crucial aspect of the moral realist enterprise cannot succeed. Singer's fears may be justified, for it seems that evolutionary science may support some form of moral anti-realism. For now I have sought to highlight this potential problem, in a broad, but not yet detailed, fashion. I will take up the details of this problem in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Evolutionary Debunking Arguments

Section 1: Argument 1

“The first thing we observe about moral rules is that, although they exist, they are not physical and don’t have physical properties [...] they are immaterial entities [...] if nonphysical things – like moral rules – truly exist, then [naturalism] as a world view is false (Koukl 1998, 6).”

“Indeed, these [moral] statements appear to report non-natural facts which cannot be accommodated in naturalism’s metaphysics, nor are they amenable to evidential support by the employment of scientific methods that naturalism countenances (Rosenberg 2009, 346)”

- P1. ‘Moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is epistemological and ontological moral realism.
- P7. The objective moral facts countenanced by ‘moral realism’ are non-natural
- P8. Evolutionary naturalism entails that there are no non-natural entities
- C1. Therefore moral realism is false.

P8 is an implication of P5. As I indicated, an evolutionary naturalist will reject perspectives which cannot reasonably fit into a scientific world view. If objective moral facts cannot be naturalistically construed then, for an evolutionary naturalist there can be no such facts at all. This is an uncontroversial implication.

P7 is the more controversial premise. The view expressed by P7 has historical precedence. Historically moral realists have been non-naturalists for one reason or another. Plato, for instance, believed that moral facts literally resided in a separate ‘realm’ which really existed independently of the empirically observable world (Jacobs 2002, 3).

Moore followed this view somewhat (Jacobs 2002, 5). He endorsed the further claim that what was morally ‘good’ could not be linguistically defined – such definitions would identify what was ‘good’ with items or concepts one could always show to have a distinct, and so, non-identical, meaning (Moore 2004, 86). What is ‘good’ must be so *sui generis*, for Moore. Kant, for various complex reasons, believed that moral worth was the product of (resided in) a distinctly non-empirical reality (that in which the ‘rational will’ properly resides), in virtue of its non-empirical, and ‘pure’ nature (Kant 2002, G 4: 400).

Examples could be multiplied and elaborated; the point is that at least if history is anything to go by, there is a historical trend for moral realists to endorse the non-naturalism expressed in P7. Perhaps Rosenberg is following this historical trend. He says that (realistically construed) moral judgments express non-natural facts (Rosenberg 2009, 346). Certainly Craig (Craig 1997, 10) and Koukl (Koukl 1998, 6) take this position for theological reasons. The view that they express is not, however, unique. I already argued for P1, and P8 is simply an implication of ‘evolutionary naturalism’. If P7 is correct (and there is historical precedence to accept it) as I said, clearly ‘moral realism’ is false.

I think that P7 is disagreeable for three reasons. The first is that, as presented by Koukl and Craig, it seems to represent their religious bias, rather than the conclusion of a considered argument on their part. Neither argues for that position, both simply presuppose it. Further, nothing that we have seen so far suggests that non-naturalistic moral realism is the only way to construe ‘moral realism’. I take it then to be question begging against non-theistic, or naturalistic, moral realists such as Boyd and his ‘homeostatic consequentialism’.

Thirdly, it does not seem as if P7 is an implication of P1. Nothing about my construal of ‘moral realism’ presupposes naturalism or non-naturalism, and so P1 begs no questions against either position. ‘Moral realism’ is, so I think I have shown, compatible with either a naturalistic or a non-naturalistic perspective. If there are reasons to think that naturalism or non-naturalism are false, they are not implicit in the definition of ‘moral realism’ and so require independent argumentation. None of the scholars under review provides those arguments.

I have already justified my position on P1, and it does not require that one take a stand on naturalism or non-naturalism. P7 is not an implication of P1. The conclusion does not follow from its premises, so Argument 1 is unsuccessful.

Section 2: Argument 2

“In short, ethical premises [...] can be understood solely as mechanisms that are adaptive for the species that possesses them [...] No abstract moral principles exist outside the particular nature of individual species [...] this is obviously quite inconsistent with the notion of morality as a set of objective, eternal verities. Morality is rooted in contingent human nature, through and through. Nor is it possible to uphold the true objectivity of morality by believing in the existence of an ultimate code, such that what is considered right corresponds to what is truly right (emphasis added) (Ruse and Wilson 1986, 186)”

P9. Moral realism requires that there are universal, non-contingent, moral principles which to which our ‘moral intuitions’ give us epistemic access.

P10. Evolutionary science provides us with an explanation of our ‘moral intuitions’ which renders our ‘moral intuitions’, and their content, radically contingent.

C2. Therefore, we have no warrant to believe that there are any universal, non-contingent, moral principles

C3. Therefore, evolutionary science takes away our warrant for endorsing moral realism

The basic issue here is the view that moral realism requires that ‘objective moral facts’ are non-contingent facts. If it turns out that moral facts are contingent then moral realism cannot be true. If it turns out that our epistemic capacities grant us access to merely contingent ‘moral’ facts, then we have no warrant to endorse moral realism.

Ruse and Wilson suggests that moral realism requires that there are “objective eternal (Ruse and Wilson 1986, 186)” moral truths, represented by realistically construed ‘abstract moral principles’ existing independently of the nature of individual species (Ruse and Wilson 1986, 186). Joyce agrees with this. He holds that ‘moral realism’ is basically identical to Kantian deontology, in which ‘morality’ as such is viewed as a system of ‘categorical’ imperatives. These categorical imperatives are normative injunctions which apply to persons irrespective of any goals, beliefs, or empirical (read: genetic) nature of those persons (Joyce 2000, 1). Rosenberg and Sommers also endorse this view of moral realism (Sommers and Rosenberg 2003, 667). This is the view distilled in P9.

P10 is an implication of P6 which I argued for in Chapter 3. Ruse and Wilson (as well as Joyce and Rosenberg and Sommers) highlights that our moral capacities are the results of solutions stumbled upon by our evolutionary ancestors to the adaptive problems they faced (Ruse and Wilson 1986, 186). Our particular moral capacities, then, are grounded in our particular, contingent, human nature. Other creatures, with a different evolutionary trajectory, may well develop other forms of ‘morality’. The nature and content of our ‘moral intuitions’ (and, even that we have them at all) are contingent.

I claimed in Chapter 3 that we are justified in holding this whether or not we view our ‘moral intuitions’ as adaptations or spandrels. In the case that they are adaptations, then they, and their content, are the result of contingent circumstances. In the case that they are spandrels then they, and their content, most likely are accidental and similarly contingent (since they are the by-products of other adaptations). If our ‘moral intuitions’ are evolved in either sense, (or not the product of occult forces) then P10 is justified.

If P9 and P10 are correct, then I believe that C2 and C3 follow. However, for two reasons, I do not think that P9 is correct. For one, it strikes me as implausible that a moral realist must require that the truth-makers of moral judgments are independent of contingent facts about human beings. Morality, it seems to me, must relate very particularly to human beings if it is to be meaningful at all.

I think that for the following reason. Most of the claims we make which we recognize as ‘moral claims’ do relate one way or another to contingent facts about the world, or about our natures. We ordinarily make reference to the badness of misery and pain, or the goodness or happiness or joy. Some theorize about how best to treat each other, or children, or animals. Some speak about the environment and which steps we should take so as not to destroy it. All of these claims as we saw in Chapters 2 and 3 make reference to contingent facts.

As such, I disagree with Joyce (Joyce 2000, 10) in his insistence that our moral discourse implies a commitment to ‘categorical imperatives’. Our moral discourse, in which we make claims about what *in the world* is good and bad, and make judgments about which courses of actions were right and wrong, and so on, is saturated by claims which depend nearly entirely on *contingent* facts.

Let us take ‘pain’ as a narrow example. We saw in Chapters 2 and 3 that we have good reasons to suppose that the nature of the pains we might feel, and our very capacity to feel pain at all, are adaptive features of our natures. If not this, then they are the by-products of other adaptations. In either case, they are probably the results of quite contingent (Darwinian) forces. The claim that to inflict pain on an innocent person is wrong is, if true, dependent in some complex sense on such contingent happenings. This does not need to imply that it is not really, objectively, wrong to inflict pain on innocent people.

It may be wrong for any human being to inflict pain on innocent people, even if the emergence of human beings is a contingent happening. It may even be wrong to inflict pain on innocent people for any ‘rational being’ (if we follow Kant’s terminology) even if the emergence of rational beings is, in some ultimate sense, a contingent affair. Construing P9 as Joyce, and Ruse, et al, do seems to construe it in an unnecessarily strong sense. Nothing about the contingency of our moral capacities, or our human nature, or the world itself, need imply that there cannot be objective facts about what is good or bad. More specifically, what I mean is that *objective* facts need not be construed as non-contingent and universal.

This leads to the second reason for my rejection of P9. As I showed in Chapter 1 nothing about ‘moral realism’ demands that we take this strong view. There is no reason to think that a moral realist must be committed to the existence of ‘abstract moral principles’ which are eternally true and which are true apart from our contingent natures.

It is open to us to take the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are not indubitable insights into moral truth, but pieces of evidence, fallible and revisable, which can be marshalled in favour of certain moral claims. In this case they are like our empirical observations. We do not regard the objectivity of scientific claims as requiring that their truth-makers are ‘abstract scientific principles’, which bear no relation to the contingent facts of the world. Similarly we need not regard the objectivity of our moral claims to require that either. Even if that is not to follow the letter of the early moral realists described in Chapter 1, it is to follow their spirit, and it is to follow the claims of contemporary moral realists like Boyd, FitzPatrick, Daniels, and others.

There is, as I’ve already shown, a perfectly sensible notion of ‘moral realism’ which does not require that there are ‘universal, non-contingent, moral principles’. I think that is, anyway, much more plausible, because that renders moral claims responsive to facts about this world.. The central flaw of Argument 2, then, is its endorsement of P9. Argument 2 is therefore not successful.

Section 3: Argument 3

“According to the adaptive link [non-truth-tracking] account [...] making such [moral] judgments contributed to reproductive success not because they were true or false, but rather because they got our ancestors to respond to their circumstances with behavior that itself promoted reproductive success[...] (Street 2006, 126)”

“Thus, the adaptive link account explains the widespread presence of certain values in the human population more parsimoniously, without any need to posit a role for evaluative truth. (Street 2006, 126f)”

“The evolutionary explanation makes the objective morality redundant, for even if external ethical premises did not exist, we would go on thinking about right and wrong in the way that we do [...] surely redundancy is the last predicate that an objective morality can possess (Ruse and Wilson 1986, 187)”

“[...] everything of importance to us, including [...] our ethical beliefs, is the product of mindless purposeless forces [...] importance is explainable without residue in terms of mindless purposefulness. And if there is no residue left to explain, we can answer the challenge of the anti-Darwinian, “You’ll never explain this!” [...] at least to our own Darwinian satisfaction. There is nothing left of morality to explain (Sommers and Rosenberg 2003, 667)”

P1. ‘Moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is epistemological and ontological moral realism.

P11. Moral realists must either believe that all our moral beliefs are probably false or they must believe that our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable (‘truth-tracking’)

P12. A moral realist would not accept that all of our moral beliefs are probably false

C4. Moral realists must believe P2 which is that “the ‘moral method’ depends crucially on the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are, in some cases, and to some degree, ‘epistemically reliable’”

P13. Either our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable (truth-tracking-moral-nativist-hypothesis) or they are not (non-truth-tracking-moral-nativist-hypothesis)

P14. The non-truth-tracking-moral-nativist-hypothesis and the truth-tracking-moral-nativist-hypothesis explain the data equally well, but the former is more parsimonious

P15. The non-truth-tracking-moral-nativist hypothesis is the better explanation.

C5. Probably our ‘moral intuitions’ are not epistemically reliable (probably they do not track the moral truth)

C6. Probably there is no moral truth at all

C7. Therefore, probably moral realism is false.

The version of the argument I am presenting as Argument 3 is, in truth, a combination of two different kinds of arguments. Both arguments exploit the conjunction of the correctness of a non-truth-tracking-moral-nativist hypothesis and the principle of parsimony. Rosenberg, Sommers, Joyce, Ruse and Wilson, however, assume, or assert, that this hypothesis is correct, Street, on the other hand, presents an argument in its favour. Before turning to the details of this argument, let me say a few words about how best to view it.

I have established P1. The inference from P11 and P12 to C4 is fairly straightforward and is taken from Street’s construal of the problem. She argues basically that it would be unacceptable to a moral realists to endorse the first disjunct of P11 and that they must therefore endorse the second disjunct. C4, then, is a restatement of P2, which emphasizes that a moral realist must accept it for the sake of their realism. I have argued for P2 differently, but I don’t think that should affect the argument here. P1, P11, P12 and C4 are justified.

Let me turn to Street's argument. She begins by noting that moral realists must take a position on the relationship between objective moral facts, on the one hand, and the natural selective forces which have shaped our 'moral intuitions', on the other hand. Moral realists must either accept that there is some relation, or deny that there is one, and Street argues that neither position has a favourable result for the realist (Street 2006, 121).

If there is no relation between the realist's allegations that there are moral truths and the evolutionary development of our 'moral intuitions', then it is highly unlikely that any of our moral beliefs are true. If any of our 'moral intuitions' are accurate this is simply accidental. I provided an elaborate quotation of her position here in Chapter 3. So, if there is no relation between the two, then we must suppose that probably all of our 'moral intuitions' are false. (Street 2006, 121f).

If there is a relation between the two then the realist must give us an account of the relationship. The realist must, then, propose that our 'moral intuitions' are truth-tracking (i.e. that it was adaptive for our evolutionary ancestors to have epistemically reliable 'moral intuitions' (Street 2006, 126)) (Street 2006, 125). She says, "According to this hypothesis, our ability to recognize [moral] truths [...] conferred upon us certain advantages that helped us flourish and reproduce[...] the evaluative judgments that it proved most selectively advantageous to make [so, also the 'moral intuitions' it proved most advantageous to have] are, in general, precisely those evaluative judgments which are true. (Street 2006, 125)"

She suggests that this is an empirical hypothesis about the nature of the evolutionary development of our moral capacities (I call it the truth-tracking-moral-nativist-hypothesis). It may therefore be evaluated along similar lines to other empirical hypotheses (Street 2006, 126).

She believes that the truth-tracking account is less parsimonious than its competitor, the non-truth-tracking-moral-nativist-hypothesis. She explains, "The [truth-tracking-moral-nativist-hypothesis] obviously posits something extra that the [non-truth-tracking-moral-nativist-hypothesis] does not, namely, independent [moral] truths [...] The [non-truth-tracking-moral-nativist-hypothesis], in contrast, makes no reference whatsoever to [moral] truth; rather it explains the advantage of making certain evaluative judgments directly, by pointing out how they got creatures who made them to act in ways that tended to promote reproductive success. Thus the [non-truth-tracking-moral-nativist-hypothesis] explains the widespread presence of certain values in the human population more parsimoniously, without any need to posit a role for [moral] truth (Street 2006, 126f)."

The non-truth-tracking hypothesis adequately explains how and why our moral capacities developed without supposing that they developed because of (or, while 'guided towards') moral truths (we also saw this in Street's explanation featured in Chapter 3). As such the non-truth-tracking hypothesis commits itself to less (it is simpler, more parsimonious) while explaining the target phenomenon

equally well. Insofar as simplicity and parsimony are explanatory virtues of an empirical hypothesis, the non-truth-tracking-hypothesis is the better explanation (Street 2006, 129). Thus stands Street's arguments in favour of P13, P14 and P15.

I think that P13 is acceptable. It may be read as the view that it is possible that our 'moral intuitions' are not epistemically reliable. Of course, that is correct, and if it is, then we may ask whether or not they, in fact, are. P15 is an implication of P14 and the principle of parsimony. Clearly, also, the non-truth-tracking-hypothesis is more parsimonious and, on an adaptationist view, exhaustively explains the target data. P15 is acceptable if P14 is. We have seen, through Chapters 2 and 3 that, so long as one does not countenance occult forces, our moral capacities are amenable to scientific investigation. An account of the nature of our moral capacities then may be fairly regarded as an empirical account. If realists must suppose that our 'moral intuitions' were developed to be truth-sensitive, then they are proposing an empirical hypothesis of sorts. I think, then, that we have good reasons to accept P13, P14 and P15.

Ruse and Wilson suggest, then, that if we take seriously the non-truth-tracking-moral-nativist hypothesis (as most appear to (Joyce 2013, 3)), we find that all reference to 'moral truth' is rendered redundant (Ruse and Wilson 1986, 187). We believe that our 'moral intuitions' reflect moral truths because such a belief was beneficial to our evolutionary ancestors (Ruse and Wilson 1986, 179).

As Rosenberg and Sommers explain, if our best explanation of why people believe that P does not require that P is true, then there aren't grounds for believing that P is true (Sommers and Rosenberg 2003, 666). This, Ruse and Wilson argue, lends credence to the idea that there simply aren't any objective moral truths for our 'moral intuitions' and judgments to reflect (Ruse and Wilson 1986, 186). That is, given that we can explain our moral capacities without reference to the truth, and reference to truth is redundant, and there is nothing left of our moral capacities to explain, then likely there is no truth to which our moral capacities could, but fail to, connect.

The inference from P15-C5 is acceptable. If we are justified in believing our best account of our 'moral intuitions', then probably our 'moral intuitions' aren't epistemically reliable. This, in conjunction with P1 and C4 shows that 'epistemological moral realism' is false. It is not clear what justifies C6, it may be the result of overzealous statements made by Rosenberg, Ruse et al. Nevertheless, given C6, C5 and P1, C7 follows; (epistemological and ontological) 'moral realism' is probably false.

Joyce, however, raises some concerns with the principle of parsimony. He argues that what does the work for the principle of parsimony in this argument is the implicit belief that 'moral truths' are radically unlike any naturally explicable truths, least not those which would have been relevant to our

evolutionary ancestors (Joyce 2013, 6). Perhaps at work here is a more hidden endorsement of the view that genuine moral truths are non-natural.

Joyce suggests that Utilitarians, for example, take moral truths to relate primarily to claims about human happiness. He suggests that it is not so clear that the principle of parsimony alone, without further argument, can suggest that our ‘moral intuitions’ do not track truths about human happiness and, if Utilitarians are correct, then the principle of parsimony alone cannot suggest that our ‘moral intuitions’ do not track some kind of moral truth (Joyce 2013, 6).

After all, we have seen that our morally salient emotions – one of which is happiness – also serve an evolutionary function: to motivate us toward further cooperative and altruistic behaviours. Nothing presented thus far seems to rule out that Utilitarianism cannot be rendered compatible with the evolutionary data. In this case we would be incorrect to regard our ‘moral intuitions’ (generally) as failing to track any moral truths. This, at least, renders P14 and P15 problematic.

I take issue with what seems to be the inference from C5 to C6. The move from the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are probably not truth-tracking, to the view that there probably is no truth to track seems to be unwarranted within the context of this argument. Nothing in what these authors have said suggests that it is impossible that even if our ‘moral intuitions’ did not track any moral truths, there could still be a realm of moral truths. C6 does not seem justified, and, as such, C7 does not follow.

I do not believe that Joyce’s problems render P14 and P15 unacceptable. I offer independent arguments for those premises, and deal with the issue in the next chapter as well. Tentatively, then, I think that this argument gives us fair reasons to accept C5, and as such to accept the view that epistemological moral realism is false. Formally, Argument 3 is not successful, since its main conclusion (C7) does not follow. Nevertheless it is successful up to C5 and this is certainly damaging for the moral realist enterprise.

Section 4: Argument 4

P1. 'Moral realism' (traditionally construed) is epistemological and ontological moral realism.

P2. The 'moral method' depends crucially on the view that our 'moral intuitions' are, in some cases, and to some degree, 'epistemically reliable'

C8. Moral realism (traditionally construed) is unjustified if our 'moral intuitions' are not epistemically reliable

P16. Probably our 'moral intuitions' are not, to any degree, in any cases, epistemically reliable

P17. Moral realism may remain plausible insofar as there is a moral methodology which can motivate realism without relying on the epistemic reliability of our 'moral intuitions'.

P18. There is no alternative methodology

C9. Moral realism (traditionally construed) is unjustified

C10. Moral realism (traditionally construed) is implausible

P1 and P2 have been argued for in Chapter 1. P16 is the equivalent of C5 from Argument 3. I think that Street et al have provided us with good reasons to accept this premise. Evolutionary science explains that the referents of our 'moral intuitions' are facts about *evolutionarily stable strategies for solving the contingent adaptive challenges faced by our evolutionary ancestors*. These relate principally to whatever would have better conduced to survival and reproduction of individual *Homo sapiens*. Unless there is an argument to suggest that these scientifically explicable referents are identical with moral truths (and I argue in the next chapter that traditional moralist realists do not have such an argument), it must be accepted that our 'moral intuitions' do not track moral truths.

Even if we do not accept this adaptationist view of our 'moral intuitions', given P6 established in Chapters 2 and 3 we have good reasons nevertheless to regard our 'moral intuitions' as the direct *or* indirect product of evolutionary forces. Taking the view that they are spandrels is to take one horn of Street's dilemma previously reviewed. Taking that view renders it highly unlikely that our 'moral intuitions' are epistemically reliable, and gives us no good reasons to put our faith in their epistemic reliability. Adaptationist or not, P16 is acceptable.

If we were to assume C8, P17 and P18 then C9 and C10 follow, given that the other premises are justified. So let us turn to those premises. C8 is an inference of P1, P2 and the view, established in Chapter 1, that moral realists employ the 'moral method'.

Let me describe the logical structure of the inference.

Let 'M' be 'moral realism'.

'O' is 'ontological moral realism'

'E' is 'epistemological moral realism'

'I' is that our "'moral intuitions' are (ceteris paribus) epistemically reliable'

If [M is identical with (O&E)], and [if E then O], and [if not-I then not-E]

We can infer that [if not-I, then not (O&E)]

Therefore if [not-I then not-M].

I want to get across that there is some kind of dependence relation between ontological and epistemological moral realism, in which epistemological moral realism is, in some sense, logically prior to ontological moral realism. Further, I believe that epistemological moral realism depends on the (ceteris paribus) epistemic reliability of our 'moral intuitions'. Since 'moral realism' is epistemological and ontological moral realism then if our 'moral intuitions' are not epistemically reliable then 'moral realism' is false.

P17 is essentially the claim that it is *possible* that epistemological moral realism does not depend on the 'moral method' (if there is another, better, method, then moral realism need not be false). P18 is the claim that *actually* moral realism does depend on the moral method. If these premises hold, and if the inference principle from P1-C8 holds, then C9 and C10 are acceptable.

I believe that much of the work done in Chapter 1 is sufficient to establish these claims. I did this in three ways which I will now make explicit. Firstly the subtext of Chapter 1 was meant to suggest, in a broad fashion, that no matter the particulars of the methodology used, whether for the purposes of justifying ethical or metaethical claims, the 'moral method' was employed. I showed that historically and contemporarily, particular moral claims are justified by employing the moral method. This was the case whether we considered the straightforward intuitionism of Ross and Moore, or whether we considered the more elaborate methods of Daniels and Boyd. Clearly then 'epistemological moral realism', or, more particularly, our belief that we have, or could have, some kind of moral knowledge, depends on the 'moral method'.

We saw in the discussion about the 'presumption of moral realism' that the ontological portion of moral realism (that there are objective moral facts) is also justified by this method. The discussion

about the ‘disputation of moral realism’ (and its parallels with scientific realism) makes this clearer. Boyd believes, much in the spirit of Ross and Moore, that we are warranted in accepting a realist perspective regarding moral values because we are able to discover genuinely true moral theories or claims. Ontological moral realism for Boyd is justified by the success of the ‘moral method’. This is quite sensible. After all, if we regard our ‘moral intuitions’ as epistemically reliable we commit ourselves to the view that there are facts for them (to some degree, in some cases) to reliably reflect.

This all goes to suggest that it is the (*ceteris paribus*) reliability of our ‘moral intuitions’ which justifies our moral claims and theories, and our ontological views about such claims and theories, *and* which commits us to epistemological *and ontological* moral realism. Our ontological views depend in some way on our epistemological views. If we have epistemic access to moral facts then there are moral facts to which we could, and do, have epistemic access. Our belief in that claim depends entirely on the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ (*ceteris paribus*) are epistemically reliable. That is a belief held, in various ways, with various strengths of conviction, by all moral realists in the literature under review – hence why I refer to it as a condition of ‘moral realism’ (*traditionally* construed).

If our ‘moral intuitions’ are not (*ceteris paribus*) epistemically reliable ‘moral realism’ *traditionally* construed is implausible because its plausibility (as well as its formal justification) depends on our ‘moral intuitions’ being (*ceteris paribus*) epistemically reliable.

I used an analogy about ‘Religion X’ and ‘Book Y’ at the beginning of Chapter 1 to say, in brief, what I have just covered. There is another analogy regarding empiricism and the view that our sensory modalities are not (*ceteris paribus*) epistemically reliable. We believe that we can gain knowledge about the external world because we have some (meagre) contact with it through our senses. Our belief in an external world is plausible because of the alleged reliability of our senses. If, however, it was revealed to us (say, by some infallible revelation) that our senses are not epistemically reliable at all this would not only take away our justification for our belief in the external world, but also render the view that there is an external world highly improbable. The only reason we believe in such a world to begin with is because that is what our senses suggest, and we regard our senses as (*ceteris paribus*) epistemically reliable. If they turn out not to be, and if we have no other reasons for believing in the external world, then the view that there is one would be rendered very implausible.

Both analogies bring out what I have argued for regarding ‘moral realism’ (*traditionally* construed) and the (*ceteris paribus*) reliability of our ‘moral intuitions’. If we have reasons to believe that our ‘moral intuitions’ aren’t epistemically reliable at all then ‘moral realism’ (*traditionally* construed) is rendered implausible if there are no other reasons for adopting ‘moral realism’. I believe I have justified C8.

P17 should now seem less controversial. If ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is motivated by anything other than the (*ceteris paribus*) reliability of our ‘moral intuitions’ then we may not conclude that ‘moral realism’ is implausible. As I have just explained, and as I demonstrated in Chapter 1, among moral realists (historically and contemporarily) there is no alternative motivation. From the literature under review there is no alternative to the ‘moral method’. As I showed in Chapter 1 whichever of the various methodologies moral realists use, they each rely, to some degree, on the ‘moral method’. P18, then, is also justified. As such, C9 and C10 follow. ‘Moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is rendered implausible by considerations (as we saw earlier in this Chapter, and in Chapters 2 and 3) from evolutionary science and evolutionary naturalism.

Section 5: Closing Remarks

I have assessed 4 arguments which attempt to confirm Singers fears expressed in the previous Chapter. If we take seriously the claims of evolutionary science, in conjunction with evolutionary naturalism, we must accept some form of moral anti-realism. The first 3 of these arguments are taken from the literature under review. I have argued that they are not successful. The 4th argument is, I have argued, successful. If Argument 4 is sound, and there are good reasons to think it is, then evolutionary science in conjunction with evolutionary naturalism renders ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) implausible.

Chapter 5

Responses to Evolutionary Debunking Arguments

Section 1: Rejecting Evolutionary Naturalism

As indicated in P7, Koukl thinks that it is an uncontroversial datum that there are objective moral facts, and that these facts are non-natural facts (Koukl 1998, 6). Rea expresses similar sympathies. He believes that it is an important part of our common sense view of the world that there are objective moral facts. Both also endorse P8. Unlike Rosenberg, they think that insofar as naturalism fails to accommodate this datum, naturalism fails to capture a real aspect of the world. On these grounds they believe that naturalism is rendered implausible, and that we may accept moral realism (Rea 2006, 1).

This amounts to a rejection of P16. Evolutionary science does not seem to suggest that our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable (I’ve argued for this in Chapters 3 and 4). But Rea and Koukl’s ‘common sense’ tells us that they are, to some degree, in some cases, epistemically reliable. If we accept their claim then, there is more to our ‘moral intuitions’ than can be scientifically explained. Naturalism cannot accommodate this ‘extra feature’, so naturalism must be incorrect. Regardless of what evolutionary science tells us, it does not, therefore, give us the full story. We therefore do not have grounds to reject moral realism.

The main problem for this argument is this. The ‘common sense’ (another label for our ‘moral intuitions’, as indicated in Chapter 1) on which this objection relies can be given an exhaustive evolutionary explanation in which its truth does not feature. We have seen, through Chapters 2 and 3, that evolutionary science indicates that our ‘moral intuitions’ are not epistemically reliable. As noted previously, this is the case whether or not we regard our ‘moral intuitions’ as adaptations. The available data indicates that we are not justified in regarding our ‘moral intuitions’ as accurate when they suggest to us that there are objective moral truths. As noted in Chapter 4, evolutionary science undercuts the presumption of moral realism (discussed in Chapter 1) of which this objection seems to be a recital.

These realists, then, must rely on the mere *assertion* that evolutionary science doesn’t exhaustively explain our ‘moral intuitions’, directly or indirectly, and that there *is* an extra factor. However, that is to commit oneself to a position which, given the available data, is unjustified. As we saw in Chapters 2 and 3, whether or not one is an evolutionary naturalist we have good reasons to follow the findings of evolutionary science. As I argued in Chapter 4 there is nothing in ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) which requires that we regard moral facts as non-natural. There are, then, good reasons to find this objection to be unsuccessful.

If one, however, disregards those arguments, and takes a stand on the issue and declares that one is a non-naturalist, and that moral truths *are* non-natural truths, then what this objection demonstrates is the incompatibility between the conjunction of evolutionary science and evolutionary naturalism, and moral realism.

Section 2: Our ‘Moral Intuitions’ Are Epistemically Reliable

Copp (2008) suggests that we are still capable of moral knowledge even if our ‘moral intuitions’ have an evolutionary explanation (Tropman 2013, 5). Copp advocates a moral position which is called the ‘society-centred theory’. According to his theory a moral code is authoritative for some society if it enables that society to best meet its ends. Societal needs may include physical continuity, peace, and social cooperation. Social cooperation, say, is right because cooperation allows members of the society to better meet their needs than if they failed to cooperate. Copp interprets this realistically: what makes a normative claim correct is if it in fact helps the society in which it features to meet its needs. Such facts about what best supports social needs exist quite independently of people’s beliefs and attitudes about those facts (Tropman 2013, 5).

Now, if Copp is correct, and morality is essentially concerned with satisfying the needs of society, then, given what we know of our evolutionary history, it is likely that there will be some overlap between our evolved moral capacities and the moral facts (Tropman 2013, 5). As such, P13 is incorrect. At least some of the time we can expect our ‘moral intuitions’ to be epistemically reliable, given the ‘society-centred theory’.

My concerns with this objection are similar to Street’s, who argues that Copp begs the question against the anti-realists (Tropman 2013, 6). Street correctly identifies that the force behind this objection resides in Copp’s suggestion that his society-centred theory is correct. *Given* its correctness, one can plausibly suggest that some of our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable despite their evolutionary development. I don’t think that Copp can show that his society-centred theory is correct, however, without begging the question. As such, Copp cannot show that some of our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable without begging the question.

I believe that Copp faces a dilemma: he must answer the question, “what justifies the society-centred theory?” He may (Option 1) respond by citing certain intuitively plausible moral considerations, or showing that some fundamental moral principle which features in his theory is intuitively obvious. Or perhaps he might suggest that failing to believe some feature of his theory is highly implausible since it is highly counter intuitive. Alternatively he might (Option 2) fail to give any justification for his position, and just assert that it is true.

Option 2 is obviously unappealing. If this is the option he takes, then he provides us with no reasons to accept his view. Further he provides us with no reasons not to endorse another moral theory with different moral principles.

Without any reasons for accepting his view, he provides no reasons for accepting that some of our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable. Further, we may, with as much justification, assert some contrived view such that morality is really about being as cruel as possible to each other. In Copp’s case our some of ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable. In the contrived case most of our ‘moral intuitions’ aren’t epistemically reliable. But, under Option 2, Copp gives us no reason to suppose that his case is the right one. Taking Option 2, then cannot demonstrate that some of our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable.

Option 1 is much more appealing. It is, more or less, how we ordinarily argue for our moral positions. However, in taking Option 1 Copp is assuming that what he finds (even at a very fundamental level) to be intuitively plausible is *evidence* that it is likely true. That is, in taking Option 1 he is assuming the view that at least some of his ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable.

This, however, is precisely what is in question, and the anti-realist has provided us with plausible reasons to think that our ‘moral intuitions’ are not epistemically reliable (Tropman 2013, 6). The only way that Copp can argue for his position is by begging the question. Since this cannot be accepted, Copp does not give us a reason to suppose that some of our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable. Copp’s objection is not successful.

Tropman notes that this *kind* of argument, as well as the response that it is question begging, can be generalized to other conceptions of morality as well (Tropman 2013, 6). We saw in Chapter 1 that our moral theorizing depends on the ‘moral method’, which centrally features the view that some of our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable. As such, any moral theory justified by this kind of method will beg the question.

Section 3: It Doesn’t Matter That Our ‘Moral Intuitions’ Aren’t Truth Tracking (1)

The following argument, presented by Weilenberg, is similar to Copp’s. I believe that it shares a similar degree of promise. Copp’s objection is premised on an allegedly successful argument for some moral position. As I showed, we cannot accept this because it begs the question. The following objection essentially takes up the second (Option 2) of the dilemma I presented for Copp’s position. Instead of presenting some moral position believed to be correct, it simply *assumes* that some moral position is correct, and argues from there.

Weilenberg seeks to show that it is false that because there is an evolutionary explanation for our ‘moral intuitions’ (the best interpretation of which suggests that our ‘moral intuitions’ are not truth

tracking), then probably none of our moral beliefs (developed from our ‘moral intuitions’) are justified (Weilenberg 2010, 1). He argues that, assuming that some moral claims are true, and given a reliabilist conception of warrant, even given an evolutionary explanation of our ‘moral intuitions’ we do have moral knowledge. This is the denial of P16 because P16 does not follow, he claims, from the moral nativist hypothesis.

Weilenberg centres on the belief that we have certain rights, one of which is to bodily integrity and so to not being tortured for entertainment (Weilenberg 2010, 5), and he admits freely that this is an assumption (Weilenberg 2010, 8). He notes that having capacities to form such judgments (say, that it is wrong if I am arbitrarily tortured by others) would be plausibly fitness enhancing.

What he intends here is it would have been fitness enhancing for our evolutionary ancestors to pay special attention to their bodily integrity, and to view it as wrong (and therefore to be avoided) if our bodily integrity is violated. He supposes that having capacities to form such beliefs about the value of our own bodies could be behind our more contemporary beliefs in ‘rights’.

He claims that having such capacities *can* be explained by evolution without the added hypothesis that we really do have rights of this kind. What is normally concluded from this is that we have no justification to believe in the correctness of our ‘moral intuitions’, even if our ‘moral intuitions’ are *in fact* correct and we do have such rights. He wishes to argue that if we take a reliabilist approach to warrant, then it can be shown, on the assumption that there are such moral truths, that we can be justified in regarding our ‘moral intuitions’ regarding rights as correct.

Weilenberg suggests that if some belief is produced by a reliable process, that it is so produced can grant us warrant, sufficient for knowledge, in regarding that belief as true (Weilenberg 2010, 9). What Weilenberg wants to get across is that natural selection is likely to select belief forming capacities which are epistemically reliable. Weilenberg cites the work by Carruthers who argues that it is likely that if evolutionary processes are instrumental in the development of belief forming capacities, then they will produce reliably accurate belief forming capacities (Weilenberg 2010, 12).

There are two reasons in support of this. One is that it is more evolutionarily beneficial, generally speaking, if the beliefs from which we act are true beliefs. Another is that there are certain belief forming capacities, such as those of perception and memory, which are generally reliable (Weilenberg 2010, 12).

Presumably with the aid of an implicit argument from analogy Weilenberg reasons that if evolutionarily developed belief forming capacities are reliable, so too must be our *moral* belief forming capacities (Weilenberg 2010, 12). So, *if* we have rights and if we are disposed to think that we have rights because of evolutionary forces, we have justification to regard our beliefs in rights as

accurate. If some (moral) belief is produced by a reliable process (in this case, belief forming mechanisms developed by natural selection), and if that (moral) belief is true, then we have warrant to regard the (moral) belief as true, and we have (moral) knowledge.

This is another way of blunting the force of the claim that our ‘moral intuitions’ are not epistemically reliable. The claim is this. Perhaps our ‘moral intuitions’ were not developed by mechanisms which were truth-sensitive. Nevertheless, *if* there is some moral truth, because evolution is generally reliable, we can regard our moral capacities as reliable. Since reliability in belief production is all that is required for warrant, even if our ‘moral intuitions’ were not developed by truth-sensitive mechanisms, we are still warranted (given the reality of certain moral truths) in regarding our moral beliefs as true. Evolutionary science, then, does not show that we have no reason to believe that any of our moral beliefs are true, and as such does not even suggest that moral realism is unjustified.

I will not discuss the epistemological issues regarding reliabilism. I also will not discuss Weilenberg’s use of Carruthers’ position on the reliability of evolutionarily developed belief forming mechanisms. I believe both points to be controversial, but I can grant them to Weilenberg for the sake of argument. Rather I want to take issue with his assumption that we do have rights, and in particular, rights to bodily integrity.

What does the work for Weilenberg’s case is neither his reliabilism nor his view on the reliability of evolutionarily developed belief forming mechanisms. It is not even that there is *some* moral truth. Rather that there are *particular* moral truths; particularly, *those truths which happen to be compatible with our ‘moral intuitions’*. Unless Weilenberg can give us a reason to suppose that the particular moral truths are the ones which comport with our intuitions, Weilenberg has not demonstrated very much, and I believe he falls prey to Option 2 of the dilemma I earlier posed to Copp.

He has demonstrated just that *if* there are moral truths to which our intuitions comport, and *if* we are reliabilist, then we can still be moral realists. Or, more deflationary still, that moral realism is possible given certain conditions. I take it that this was not in question. What is in question is whether, *given what we can reasonably believe*, we have sufficient warrant to believe that moral realism is correct. It looks as if we do not.

Weilenberg would benefit from giving us some independently plausible reasons for thinking that there were moral truths, or that we do have rights to bodily integrity. Doing that, however, would land him in Copp’s position regarding the question begging problem of Option 1. He opted for Option 2, which I have shown is also unfavourable. As such, Weilenberg’s objection is also unsuccessful.

Section 4: It Doesn’t Matter That Our ‘Moral Intuitions’ Aren’t Truth Tracking (2).

Like Weilenberg, FitzPatrick argues that despite our ‘moral intuitions’ being epistemically unreliable, this does not diminish the justification for moral realism (FitzPatrick 2013, 2). He accepts the non-truth-tracking-moral-nativist hypothesis (FitzPatrick 2013, 7). He does not believe that this alone shows moral realism to be unjustified. He thinks that all that follows from accepting that hypothesis is that we should not expect our basic ‘moral intuitions’ to track moral truths. It does not follow, he thinks, that we cannot bolster our bare moral capacities by training these capacities in “cultural contexts in such a way that we can [...] exercise them reliably to track moral truths accurately and arrive at justified moral beliefs (FitzPatrick 2013, 9)”.

His argument, in general, is the following. Just as long as our claims to moral knowledge are not logically dependent *only* on our (inaccurate) ‘moral intuitions’, there is no real problem presented by the fact that we have inaccurate ‘moral intuitions’ (FitzPatrick 2013, 9). Some of our moral beliefs may be directly linked to our ‘moral intuitions’, and we can expect these to be inaccurate, but many of them are not. Many of them are beliefs which we have arrived at through a process of critical reasoning, in conjunction with other factual and theoretical considerations (FitzPatrick 2013, 12).

I think that FitzPatrick is correct, as far as he goes. The standalone claim that our ‘moral intuitions’ are not epistemically reliable does not entail anti-realism. And certainly many of our beliefs are not directly related to our ‘moral intuitions’, many of them are highly complex, and the result of complex processes of reasoning.

I do not think, however, that his considerations address the problem at hand. The problem is that a central aspect of the methodology of moral realists (the ‘moral method’) *does* depend on the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable. While many of our moral beliefs are predicated on complex processes of reasoning and reflection, central to those processes is the presupposition that certain basic ‘moral intuitions’ are accurate. As Singer pointed out, our moral inquiry requires some minimal reliance on ‘moral intuitions’, without which, Singer thinks, moral scepticism or nihilism becomes unavoidable (Singer 2005, 349). If that central presupposition is false then regardless of the complexity of our reasoning processes they are unlikely to be capable of developing moral knowledge.

FitzPatrick says, “If there is a special problem for the domain of ethics [to employ some theoretical considerations, rather than simply relying on our bare ‘moral intuitions’], it would have to be because for some reason we cannot [...] develop and train the various capacities bequeathed by natural selection in order to conduct successful inquiry into ethical facts (FitzPatrick 2013, 9)”.

I would not go so far as to suggest that we *cannot* develop such a method., but simply to point out that in fact so far we *have not*. So far, the methods used to justify our moral beliefs, however complex they are, rely at some level on the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable. FitzPatrick

accepts that they are not, and so must accept that this undermines moral realism in the way that Argument 4 suggests it does. If not, then he is forced to beg the question against the anti-realist by presupposing the veracity of ‘our moral intuitions’ in endorsing some complex moral methodology. Neither option is favourable for the moral realist. This objection, too, is not successful.

Section 5: Closing Remarks

I have considered an objection to evolutionary naturalism and I have suggested that it is not strong enough to discredit the anti-realist argument. I’ve considered three further arguments, each of which has been shown to be unsuccessful for a quite simple reason: they are question begging.

The basic problem, as I said before, is that moral realists are reliant on a particular methodology, one of the central tenets of which is false. Without any other methodology, there are no arguments that realists can marshal which justify their position. The very foundation of their enterprise is in question, and they cannot rely on those foundations in attempting to justify them. I conclude that Argument 4 from Chapter 4 holds: evolutionary naturalism in conjunction with evolutionary science renders moral realism implausible.

Chapter 6

Defending Moral Realism (Non-Traditionally Construed)

Section 1: Harms' Teleosemantics

Harms has provided an argument which he believes renders moral realism both compatible with and underwritten by evolutionary science. I do not agree wholeheartedly with his position, my own view is slightly different. Nevertheless, my view can be seen as a variation on his. Let me then begin by detailing Harms view. Thereafter I'll highlight what I take issue with. Then I'll provide my response to it.

Harms wishes to employ a particular theory of meaning (he refers primarily to Milikan's 'biosemantics' or 'teleosemantics' (Harms 2000, 701)) in which the truth conditions of some utterance (or 'signal') are determined by that utterances (or 'signals') evolutionary function (Harms 2000, 701). The evolutionary function of a trait is the reason why that trait was selected (Joyce 2013, 2).

Harms believes that this will allow us to countenance true and false moral statements and that it is possible that the truth conditions of such moral statements can be scientifically explicable (Harms 2000, 702). This will show that moral realism is not ruled out by evolutionary science; rather that evolutionary science, in conjunction with some particular theory of meaning, supports moral realism of a special kind (Harms 2000, 701).

He explains that if some trait is an 'adaptation' (so, it has an evolutionary function) then that trait is capable of 'malfunction'. If the function is the reason the trait was selected, the malfunction is a failure to perform in those ways (Harms 2000, 703). Harms thinks that the proper function of an adaptation is an objective matter of fact. That is, the function of some adaptation is not determined by our opinions, beliefs or desires, but rather by the actual evolutionary history operative during the selection of some trait (Harms 2000, 703).

Harms utilizes a study (conducted by Cheney and Seyfarth (1990)) in which a signalling system of Kenyan vervet monkeys is detailed to get his general point across. From that general point he will draw conclusions about the particular case of morality. Harms focuses on one of three environmental threats faced by these monkeys. If there are leopards close by, then the monkeys will climb up a tree, eliciting a particular cry. The rest of the troop responds appropriately to this distinctive cry (the 'signal') by exercising the appropriate avoidance behavior (Harms 2000, 705).

If we call the cry elicited by the threat of the leopard the 'A' signal then 'A' is true when there is, in fact, a leopard in the vicinity. 'A' is false if there is no leopard there. The truth conditions for 'A' are

determined by the historical conditions for the correct functioning of the signalling system (Harms 2000, 705).

If the signalling system evolved as a result of some environmental pressure (say, leopards are threats to the survival of vervet monkeys, the 'A' signal is an adaptation which allows the monkeys to avoid the threat), then the conditions for correct functioning of that signal system are given by its evolutionary explanation. In particular, the signalling system is functioning (the A signal is true) when it occurs because of the detection of a leopard, and it malfunctions (the A signal is false) when it occurs despite there being no leopard.

I only agree with the first of two points Harms wants to get across. Firstly, adaptive signalling systems do have objective truth conditions for the production of the signals. The objective truth conditions are whether the adaptation fulfils its evolutionary function. As such, insofar as the human moral capacities are adaptations and utilize signalling systems of some kind, there are objective truth conditions for our moral claims and utterances (Harms 2000, 707).

Secondly, there are objective truth conditions for such signals even if those signals lack propositional content. What is at issue is not whether the propositional content of some signal is true, but whether the signal itself fulfils its evolutionary function. Consequently, our moral language may also have objective truth conditions even if such language lacks propositional content. He says, "what is at issue is not whether or not moral language can be translated into scientific language [...], but whether there exist objective standards for the correct issuance of moral claims and imperatives [...](Harms 2000, 707)".

He explains that it is not required that there is some separate realm of moral facts in order for moral statements to be true. By employing his version of teleosemantics he has shown that all that is required for this is that 'morality' is an adaptation, and that its evolutionary function requires eliciting certain kinds of signals to which other actors can make particular responses in particular kinds of circumstances (Harms 2000, 707).

He explains, "My statement, "you shouldn't do that" is morally true if the issuance of this fulfils at least my end of the function of the moral regulatory system (Harms 2000, 707)." This is all that is required to justify a "realist attitude" (in which we regard our moral claims as capable of being objectively true or false) toward morality.

So, he believes that he has restored promise in 'moral realism' because he has shown that moral objectivity is not an 'illusion' (as, for instance, Ruse believes). Moral objectivity is just a matter of correctly fulfilling the evolutionary functions of our moral faculties. Evolutionary science does not support moral anti-realism; rather it underwrites a particular kind of moral realism.

Section 2: Evolutionary Functions and ‘Moral Truth’

I endorse the first point in the following sense. I agree that if we can speak about an evolutionary function of some trait, then we can speak also about its malfunction. This gives us the minimal capacity to say when a trait is ‘correctly’, ‘properly’, or ‘rightly’ functioning, and when it is not.

I don’t agree with the second point. As we saw in Chapter 1, moral realism involves the view that our moral language is propositional, and that these propositions can be made true by the actual instantiation of moral properties that our moral claims are capable of objectivity. Harms doesn’t accommodate this central feature of moral realism. He seems to suggest that the propositional content of our moral claims is irrelevant to whether or not our moral claims are ‘true’ (in this evolutionary sense). I do not think that is enough for moral realism.

My variation on Harms position is motivated by the issue of ‘moral truth’. We have seen in the literature under review (Chapters 2, 3 and 4) that various scholars suggest that evolved moral capacities do not track any moral truth (our ‘moral intuitions’ aren’t epistemically reliable). They distinguish this from, say, our evolved perceptual faculties which do often track truth.

Their point is *not* that since something is an adaptation it cannot be epistemically reliable. Their point is that the kind of adaptation morality provides us no reasons to think that it is epistemically reliable in the sense that our ‘moral intuitions’ track some kind of objective moral truth. Rather than tracking truth all that is required is that our moral capacities allowed our evolutionary ancestors to evince successful solutions to certain kinds of social problems of cooperation and that these capacities were evolutionarily advantageous. That is basically an expression of P16, and it is centrally important to the anti-realist position. I will now present two related problems for this view.

Section 3: The Scientific Approach To Moral Truth

I do not believe that evolutionary naturalists have not taken a properly scientific approach to the matter of morality. Here I will outline what I think a properly scientific approach would look like. In the next section I will suggest that failing to take this approach means that we must remain sceptics about P16. I will suggest, thereafter, that to avoid this sceptical result, we should adopt this scientific approach, and doing so will show, in some sense, that P16 is not true.

Let me make this point by way of analogy. Suppose that the evolutionary function of our perceptual capacities is to represent accurately the motion and lay of the external environment. There are plausible reasons why such a capacity would have been adaptive. We can assess our perceptual capacities, knowing what their evolutionary function is, and find that they are often ‘truth-tracking’. That is, we do often perceive accurately the motion of certain macro-objects, we can detect barriers and other features of the external environment, and so on.

To speak about ‘perceptual truth’ is to speak about the various external physical features of our environment. Asking whether our perceptual faculties track any ‘perceptual truth’ is just to ask whether our perceptual faculties accurately represent the motion and lay of the external environment. Asking *that* question is just the same as asking whether our perceptual faculties fulfil their evolutionary function.

We have various independent tests which indicate that our perceptual faculties, in this sense, do track perceptual truths. We can conclude that our adaptive perceptual faculties are truth-tracking. Of course, if our perceptual faculties rarely, or never, accurately represented the motion and lay of the external environment we would conclude that our perceptual faculties are not truth-tracking.

There are two reasons why this is a legitimate method of drawing conclusions about whether or not our perceptual faculties track truth. Firstly, *we know what the evolutionary function of our perceptual faculties is*; or, to put it simply, we know what our perceptual faculties are ‘about’. Secondly, we have independent methods of testing whether our perceptual faculties currently fulfil their evolutionary function – we know whether or not they are, in fact, about what they are meant to be about.

For example, we may subject the deliverances of one sense modality against that of another. If we think we see a fire, say, we can check whether this sighting is veridical by attempting to feel if the temperature in the surrounding vicinity is increased. Or, perhaps, we must see whether other objects (a sheet of paper, say) catch fire when put in contact with the alleged sighting, knowing that if there truly is fire the object should be set alight. We can also subject our observations to various experimental tests checking whether our observations are repeatable, or whether others also observe the same thing when they repeat the experiment.

We do not theorize along similar lines, however, regarding our moral faculties and their relation to ‘moral truth’. Anti-realists have argued that *rather than* tracking moral truths, our moral faculties tracked truths about the evolutionary benefit of certain cooperative interactive strategies. They conclude, on that basis, that our moral faculties don’t track any moral truths.

But if our moral faculties have developed in order to solve certain problems of human sociality then *the evolutionary function of our moral faculties is to provide evolutionarily beneficial solutions to the problems of human sociality*.

Properly speaking then, asking the question whether our moral faculties track any ‘moral truths’ is just the same as asking whether they fulfil their evolutionary function. We do also have independent tests which we can perform to see whether or not their evolutionary function is being fulfilled. Often, our moral faculties allow us to properly fulfil their evolutionary function. In that case, our moral faculties are truth-tracking.

This is the obvious route to take if we are asking questions about the veracity of certain evolved capacities for making judgments (whether they are perceptual or moral judgments). This is sufficient to show that we have not approached the question of morality scientifically. I say this because our approach to this question is not appropriately similar to the approach taken to the question of whether our perceptual faculties track ‘perceptual truths’.

The general point I have tried to make by analogy is that asking whether our ‘X-faculties’ track any ‘X- truth’ is just to ask whether our ‘X-faculties’ fulfil their evolutionary function. If we can ascertain the evolutionary function of our X-faculties, then we can draw conclusions about whether or not the X-faculty is epistemically reliable.

The difficulty is that in the case of our ‘moral faculties’, the ‘moral truths’ which this approach would refer to are not ‘moral truths’ that a moral realist would ordinarily recognize. They are ‘just’ truths regarding certain evolutionary functions. I believe this to be a mistake, and a result of not taking a properly scientific approach. The scientific approach is the approach we take regarding the epistemic reliability of our perceptual faculties. Given that P16 is predicated on a non-scientific approach, I believe it to be problematic. I will continue now to detail the problem.

Section 4: The Traditional Approach To Moral Truth

A question I find natural to ask is why this scientific route is not taken in the literature. Answering that question will indicate what the second problem is. I think the main reason is that it doesn’t *seem* as if ‘morality’ as it has been thought of by moral philosophers is the same thing as ‘contingent solutions to problems of human sociality’. Doing what is just, say, or standing up for another person’s rights, just doesn’t seem like it is reducible to issues about how best to propagate the selfish genes of individuals, given that those individuals reside in social environments.

I think a related reason is that, as we saw in Chapter 5, suggesting some moral perspective (say, Copp’s ‘society-centred theory’) can only be endorsed if it can be found to cohere with some of our central ‘moral intuitions’. If one proposes that morality is ‘about’ ‘how best to propagate the selfish genes of individuals (call it ‘selfish-gene-centred-theory’), insofar as this proposal fails to accommodate certain central ‘moral intuitions’, this proposal, *from the perspective of the moral method*, can be rejected.

I believe that this is not the right way to approach this issue. Let me present a complex ‘tri-lemma’ for the anti-realists which should result in scepticism regarding P16.

Now, typically in the literature this is how the arguments play out. Scholars generally believe on the basis of certain considered and central ‘moral intuitions’ that morality is not ‘about’ our selfish-genes. On this basis anti-realist’s support the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ do not track any ‘moral truths’,

and are therefore inaccurate. Realists resist this conclusion in many different ways, but their resistances, as we have seen, are unsuccessful mainly because they are question begging. Anti-realists, I believe, face a similar problem.

Either (Option 1) anti-realists rely on some of our ‘moral intuitions’ to tell us what morality is about, or (Option 2) they do not. Option 1 results either in a self-undermining view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are not epistemically reliable, or in the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable.

The first result is unacceptable because it is self-undermining. The second result is question begging since the question at hand is whether or not our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable. Assuming that they are does not demonstrate that they are. Option 1 is not open.

Taking option 2 means that we cannot rely on our ‘moral intuitions’ in order to tell us what morality is about. In this case, if there is no other way of establishing what morality is about, we cannot conclude either that our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable or not. I do not think that there is another way of establishing what morality is about from a traditional perspective.

As we have seen in Chapter 1 the ‘moral method’ is central both to our ethical and metaethical theorizing. What we take to be instances of ‘morality’, what we take to be the nature of ‘morality’, and, therefore, what we take morality to be about appears to depend on the ‘moral method’.

The contrived proposals I made in Chapter 5 (such as that morality is about inflicting cruelty on others) would not be acceptable because, as far as our ‘moral intuitions’ indicate, that is not what morality is about. I expect the implication of the ‘scientific approach’ I proposed above (that morality is ‘about’ its evolutionary function) will be resisted for similar reasons.

The justification (as we saw in Chapter 4) for the anti-realist view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are not epistemically depends on some minimal account of morality in which morality is not about ‘selfish-genes’ (or that they are about species independent, or non-natural, truths). That view relies on our ‘moral intuitions’ as is not open if we take Option 2. If we take option 2, then, from the traditional perspective, we could not say what morality is about. As such, option 2 would not allow us to draw conclusions about whether or not our ‘moral intuitions’ were epistemically reliable.

Anti-realists must either endorse a self-undermining view, or a question begging view, or scepticism. None of these options secures P16, and I suppose that the least damaging option is the option of scepticism. We should take Option 2. If what is in question is the veracity of our ‘moral intuitions’, then we cannot assume their veracity in answering that question. Unless there is another approach to take, we must then remain sceptical about P16.

The problem essentially is that the ‘moral method’ continues to be employed even when the veracity of the ‘moral method’ is in question. We have asked whether or not our ‘moral intuitions’ are epistemically reliable and we cannot presuppose their reliability in our attempts to demonstrate that they are or are not epistemically reliable. But if there is no other method than the ‘moral method’ we seem to be unable to say whether or not it is reliable.

My suggestion is that we simply apply the same evolutionary logic that we apply to our perceptual faculties to our moral faculties. That, it seems, would be to take a properly scientific approach to the matter.

If we take a scientific approach to the question of whether our evolved moral faculties track the moral truth we are asking whether our evolved moral faculties fulfil their evolutionary function. Our evolutionary ancestors found themselves faced with strategic problems. How should they behave, given their environment, so as best to survive in order to reproduce? As we saw in Chapters 2 and 3, the development of certain psychological capacities (those relating to happiness, pain, misery, guilt, joy, etc.) as well as a sense of ‘fairness’ and ‘justice’ (where fairness and justice in a social situation normally correspond to mutually adaptive outcomes) has been useful.

Our moral capacities, in a general sense, are about finding solutions to these strategic problems. In a phrase, let me say that our *moral capacities are ‘about’ our individual survival in certain social contexts*.

There are certainly truths regarding how best to behave in such contexts. Do our moral faculties, then, track these truths? They do, quite often. This is enough to suggest that our ‘moral intuitions’ are (to some degree, in some cases) truth-tracking. Let me now turn back to Harms proposal, and thereafter evaluate the prospects of this position for moral realism.

Section 5: Non-Traditional Moral Realism

If we can speak about an evolutionary function of some trait, then we can also speak about its malfunction. This gives us the minimal capacity to say when a trait is ‘correctly’, ‘properly’, or ‘rightly’ functioning, and when it is not.

The evolutionary function of our moral faculties is to encourage the user of such faculties toward behavioural strategies which will benefit their survival. If our moral faculties fail in this, then our moral faculties are malfunctioning. It is right, in this minimal sense, if we behave in ways which benefit our survival. Put differently, insofar as cooperative and altruistic behavioural strategies fulfil their evolutionary function, our moral faculties motivating us toward such behavior will be tracking certain ‘moral’ truths.

Our moral claims and judgments are judgments about the benefits of certain behavioural strategies. As we earlier saw, Harms thinks, “My statement, “you shouldn’t do that” is morally true if the issuance of this fulfils at least my end of the function of the moral regulatory system (Harms 2000, 707).”

My end of the function of the ‘moral regulatory system’ (what I’ve called our ‘moral faculties’) is to utilize strategies in a social context which result in my benefit. Historically that has meant that one should utilize strategies in a social context which are properly cooperative and altruistic. Often, contemporarily, this means the same thing.

The truth conditions of a moral claim are whether or not that claim fulfils its evolutionary function. A moral claim is true, then, if, in fact, it is directed to what would be one’s own benefit. Whether or not some course of action would be to one’s benefit is an empirical question, the truth of which depends on certain objective and scientifically explicable facts. Whether or not our ‘moral intuitions’ track these truths is an empirical question. It seems as if our moral faculties, broadly speaking, do track these truths insofar as they provide us with capacities to make such judgments and embark on such courses of action. If this is acceptable so far, then it means that evolutionary science does not show us that our ‘moral intuitions’ are not truth tracking, it shows us the opposite. As such, P16 is false.

Section 6: Moral Realism and Naturalized Normativity?

I said, in Chapter 1 that ‘moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed) would be like ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) except that it would not rely on the moral method. I believe that what I have outlined above is ‘moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed). What this means is that non-traditional-moral-realism does not endorse feature 4 of traditional-moral-realism. Our epistemic access to moral facts is not mediated by the ‘moral method’. As we saw in Chapter 1 the ‘moral method’ relies on the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are, to some degree, in some cases, epistemically reliable.

Non-traditional-moral-realism regards moral questions as essentially empirical questions, and our moral claims as empirical claims. ‘Moral intuitions’ play an epistemic role here insofar as they indicate to us the means to achieve certain ends pertaining to individual benefit. They are, in that sense, *rules of thumb*, which are likely to be accurate in situations which approximate those faced by our evolutionary ancestors. We can expect them to be epistemically useful in such cases.

What is important, however, is not that our moral judgments in those situations comport with our ‘moral intuitions’ about them. That would be the purport of the ‘moral method’. Rather it is that our ‘moral intuitions’ comport with the facts about what is to our individual benefit. For that reason our ‘more intuitions’ are dispensable. Regarding certain problems (those which are novel from the perspective of Pleistocene *Homo sapiens*), I suspect, we must dispense with them. The mark of a true

moral judgment is that it comports with what is to our individual benefit, whether or not those moral judgments are intuitive.

Section 7: The Is-Ought Distinction

Normativity, as we saw in Chapter 1, is a central feature of moral realism generally. It might seem as if non-traditional-moral-realism cannot provide this kind of normativity. All that non-traditional-moral-realism countenances, after all, are descriptive statements about what benefits individuals.

Hume noted that the following argument would be illegitimate (Wilson et al 2003, 670).

Argument A

P1. Cooperating with others is to our own benefit (factual premise)

C. We ought to cooperate with others (normative claim)

A factual statement *on its own* cannot be used to derive a normative statement (Wilson et al 2003, 671)

What is required is something like the following argument (Wilson et al 2003, 671).

Argument B

P1. Cooperating with others is to our own benefit (factual premise)

P2. It is right to (we ought to) act in ways which result in our own benefit (value premise)

C. We ought to cooperate with others (normative claim)

It is only when a factual premise is combined with a value premise that a normative conclusion (a moral claim about what is right) can be derived.

The issue, then, is that as far as it looks my proposal is reflected by Argument A, rather than Argument B, and my proposal therefore runs afoul of the is-ought distinction (Wilson et al 2003, 670).

My solution is the following. Rather than asking “what is right?” we need to ask instead, “what may we implore people to do?” In general, we can only implore people to do something that they have a reason to do. We can only say of someone that they should do A if, to them, A is the means to one of their ends. Evolutionary science indicates that we each ‘have a reason’ to do what it is in our own benefit to do.

Perhaps it is more correct to say that, rather than *implore* people to do A, *if* they have a reason to do it, we are to *point out* to people that they *do* have a reason to do A. Getting them to do A (getting them to recognize that they ought to do A), then, is just a matter of describing certain implications of their extant ‘reasons’.

We have seen in Chapter 2 and 3 that our evolutionary development has equipped us with various psychological capacities and dispositions (I’m referring to those which are pertinent to problems of human sociality) or ‘reasons’, some of which are motivational or inhibitory.

What these psychological capacities are ‘about’ is our own benefit. We are predisposed to be motivated to act in certain ways, or for certain reasons, and motivated differently to abstain from certain courses of actions. These ‘certain ways’ are those strategies and courses of action, broadly speaking, from which our evolutionary ancestors benefited – typically pro-social, cooperative and altruistic.

While ordinarily our motivations result in those kinds of behaviours, what stands behind them are directives which are ‘about’ our own benefits. What we may implore people to do, then, is what will benefit them.

If that is correct, then, for any given individual we are warranted in saying what they ought to do insofar as our claim relates to how they ought to behave so as to achieve their benefit. Argument B can be reformulated as follows.

Argument C

P1. Cooperating with others is to our own benefit (factual premise)

P2’. We have a reason to act so as to achieve our own benefit (‘value’ premise)

C. One should to act cooperatively (normative claim).

We are justified in telling people what they ought to do insofar as this relates to their achievement of their benefit. There are certain facts about how to achieve ones benefits. And so there are certain true statements which we can make regarding what people ought to do.

More elaborately, ‘normative statements’ are justified, first and foremost, as statements which pertain to *individuals* in particular circumstances. What one ought to do in one situation might be different from what one ought to do in another situation. And these might differ from what another person ought to do in both situations.

Normative statements of the familiar kind, like ‘it is wrong to steal’, are generalizations of these individualistic statements. ‘It is wrong to steal’ is a generalized way of saying, ‘for any individual it is

to their benefit if they refrain from stealing'. That is an empirical statement, and implies a certain prediction (namely, that no individual that steals will benefit), whether or not the statement is true, or to what degree it has warrant, is an empirical matter.

The value premise in Argument B has become, essentially, a statement about psychology in Argument C. This psychological statement finds its justification in evolutionary science, and what that science tells us about the evolutionary function of our psychological adaptations.

It plays the role of a value premise because it serves as the inference principle which allows one to derive a normative conclusion from a factual premise. Nevertheless, its truth is an empirical matter, and if nativist evolutionary psychologists are correct then we are justified in endorsing it. The conclusion is simply the implication of the two premises, and this is what serves as a normative directive – it is a statement which is action guiding.

This is a way, then, of by-passing the 'is-ought' distinction. Value premises are, in some sense, factual premises about fundamental aspects of our psychology. The normative claims we can infer from them are, to that extent, empirical claims. They are, nevertheless, genuinely normative: they are action guiding.

Might this fall prey to the open question problem? Even if something is to by benefit, why does that make it 'good'? There are two answers to this question which I will briefly detail. The first is strong the second is more conservative.

The strong answer is this. I have shown that one may justifiably say of some person P that they ought to commit action A in situation S. This claim is a normative claim, it is action guiding. It is capable of being objectively true or false. Its truth or falsity is not determined by the 'moral method' but by the empirical facts of the matter.

In Chapter 1 I mentioned four main claims of moral realism, and said that 'moral realism' (non-traditionally construed) would not rely on the 'moral method' (the 4th claim). The four claims were these.

1. There are moral facts
2. These facts are objective.
3. We have epistemic access to these facts.
4. Access is gained through the use of the 'moral method'

Perhaps one might not wish to say that I had succeeded with regards to the first claim. These are not 'moral' facts (they are not facts about what is 'good'), they are just objectively true normative

directives. If this is the objection, then I believe it is more a linguistic issue than a substantive one. If non-traditional-moral-realism is correct then we can have what is important for ‘moral realism’, but we cannot call it ‘moral’. My first answer, then, is that perhaps this does not give us an indication of what is ‘good’, just simply of what we have objectively valid reasons to do. I think that is enough for ‘moral realism’ in everything but its name.

The second, more conservative, reply is this. The question “it is do ones benefit, but why does that make it good?” is calling for an *intuitively* acceptable answer of that ‘the good’ is. As we saw in Chapter 4 (Argument 1), Moore believed that there was no acceptable answer, for any given answer would leave a further question open. Arguably that is the result if we attempt to define ‘the good’ by relying on our intuitions.

I have argued, however, that this approach is problematic and unscientific. Moore saw that it was problematic, but the scientific approach was not open to him. The proposal I have given is a way of avoiding that question begging approach in favour of a scientific approach.

I believe I have shown that non-traditional-moral-realism avoids the is-ought problem as well as the open question problem. Further that it can provide genuine, and objective, normative directives.

Section 8: Is Naturalized Moral Realism Acceptable?

I consider non-traditional-moral-realism to be a kind of naturalized moral realism. On this account there are objective moral truths to which we have epistemic access. These truths are action guiding, they are normative.

Recalling the definition of ‘evolutionary naturalism’ discussed in Chapter 2 this is the result of allowing evolutionary science to underwrite our philosophical claims. The view that morality is ‘about’ what best benefits individual survival in social contexts is an implication of taking a properly scientific approach to the question. The further implications, about objective, action guiding, moral truths, to which we have epistemic access, are implications of that approach as well. However, I think that traditional moral realists will find this proposal unedifying because it does not seem as if the moral statements we ordinarily endorse are compatible with non-traditional-moral-realism.

For example, it might not seem as if statements about the wrongness of murder, or the legitimacy of equality before the law, and so on, are reducible to barren statements about individual benefit. My hypothesis is that many of these statements (appropriately qualified) are so reducible. What I have offered, I think, is not a view substantially different from the typical one. I have offered, I think, a view at the most reduced level of moral statements – a view to (naturalistically construed) foundations of our moral claims.

I cannot defend these proposals adequately here. As such, they must remain hypothetical. I will say a few brief words in an attempt to motivate the plausibility of these proposals. My proposals may be regarded as a naturalistically construed version of Hobbes, or Rawls, social contract theories. Their theories, also, present a quite barren perspective about the foundations of our normative (political) claims. People are construed as ‘rationally self-interested’, in those theories (as, indeed, they are in Game Theory and the prisoner’s dilemma mentioned in Chapter 3). I see this as akin to the claim here that we are concerned, individually, with our own benefits. On my proposal, as with Hobbes and Rawls, it is from this barren perspective that our other more complex and familiar normative claims arise.

For example, the claim that we should refrain from murder on the social contract theorists account is a complex claim about what rationally self-interested people agree on in order to further their (individual) ends. It does not seem to me so striking that similar views may be generated even if we construe people as motivated by dispositions, faculties, and capacities that have evolved in virtue of their tendency to contribute towards their own benefit in social situations.

The significant difference between my proposals and those of Rawls and Hobbes is that my proposals support a kind of moral realism and theirs do not. Of course, social contract theories have their problems. I do not hope to saddle my proposals here with the same problems. What I want to suggest is just that the proposals I have offered here, barren as they may appear, need not strike us as unworkable for our more familiar moral purposes.

Whether traditional moral realists find non-traditional-moral-realism acceptable probably depends on whether ordinarily acceptable moral claims are reducible to claims about individual benefits. Whether the sketch, or outline, I have given here of non-traditional-moral-realism is acceptable depends more so on the arguments I have presented in this chapter.

Section 9: Closing Remarks

I have assumed here that our moral capacities are adaptations. On that assumption I have argued that P16 is false. If non-traditional-moral-realism is acceptable, then I have also shown that P18 is false. The conclusions of Argument 4, therefore, do not follow. Further moral realism (non-traditionally construed) is defensible given evolutionary science and evolutionary naturalism.

Anti-realists may defend P16 on different grounds. Perhaps they may suggest that ‘moral truths’ must be non-natural, or species independent, or non-contingent. If we accept that (and there are moral realists, as we saw in Chapter 5, who would accept this), then even on the assumption that our moral capacities are adaptations P16 would not be false. Whatever truths Harms and I might suggest are tracked by our ‘moral intuitions’ they could not, according to that view, be ‘moral’ truths. I provided

some arguments against this reply in Chapter 4, but they only go so far as to suggest that a moral realist is not *required* to endorse such a view (Boyd is an example of one). They are not sufficient, I think, to show that it is wrong altogether to view moral realism as non-naturalistic (or as universalistic).

Anti-realists may then hold on to P16 in the qualified sense that our ‘moral intuitions’ do not track non-naturalistic or universalistic truths. I do not think that shows that non-traditional-moral-realism is false. It may be still that there are (quasi) moral truths which can be countenanced by evolutionary naturalists which our ‘moral intuitions’ do track. I suspect that these (quasi) moral truths will be sufficient for our moral enterprises, even if they are not non-natural or universalistic. That is, these (quasi) moral truths would indicate, practically, how we should behave and act in certain social situations. They can tell us, with objective force, what we should and should not do regarding simple and complex problems of social interaction. This will not be sufficient for non-naturalist, universalistic, concerns; but it seems like it will be sufficient for our other practical concerns.

All of this, of course, depends on the assumption that our moral faculties are adaptations. Moral nativism is an empirical hypothesis about which (as we saw in Chapter 3) there is controversy. If moral nativism is confirmed this may render non-traditional-moral-realism more promising. If it is rejected, then, as I have construed non-traditional-moral-realism, it is not very promising. Further, without the moral nativist hypothesis there is no current reason to reject P18. Furthermore, if moral nativism is rejected, as I argued in Chapters 3 and 4, there may still be promise for P16, in which case ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) would be rendered implausible.

The promise held by non-traditional-moral-realism is highly dependent on the moral nativist hypothesis. Further, anti-realism may be plausible independently of this hypothesis, so long as evolutionary naturalism is not rejected. Where the truth lies in this debate then is partially an empirical question which can only be decided by further research. Nevertheless, if moral nativism is correct, then a kind of naturalized moral realism, in which all but one of the central aspects of ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) are featured, is defensible given evolutionary science and evolutionary naturalism.

Conclusion

I have argued that ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is probably not compatible with evolutionary naturalism. I have also argued that ‘moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed) probably is.

I supported the first claim with Argument 4, reproduced below.

P1. ‘Moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is epistemological and ontological moral realism.

P2. The ‘moral method’ depends crucially on the view that our ‘moral intuitions’ are, in some cases, and to some degree, ‘epistemically reliable’

C8. Moral realism (traditionally construed) is unjustified if our ‘moral intuitions’ are not epistemically reliable

P16. Probably our ‘moral intuitions’ are not, to any degree, in any cases, epistemically reliable

P17. Moral realism may remain plausible insofar as there is a moral methodology which can motivate realism without relying on the epistemic reliability of our ‘moral intuitions’.

P18. There is no alternative methodology

C9. Moral realism (traditionally construed) is unjustified

C10. Moral realism (traditionally construed) is implausible

I argued for the second claim by proposing objections to P16 and P18. What those objections allowed me to establish, on the assumption that moral nativism is correct, is that ‘moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed) is underwritten by evolutionary science, and so is compatible with evolutionary naturalism.

What that claim amounts to is that there is a version of moral realism which does not rely on the ‘moral method’ (in which our ‘moral intuitions’ are taken to be epistemically reliable). Non-traditional-moral-realism depends on a different kind of method which can be countenanced by evolutionary naturalism if moral nativism is correct.

An important question, then, is whether or not moral nativism is correct. This is an empirical question which can only be decided by further research, and its answer is therefore beyond the scope of this dissertation.

If moral nativism is correct then evolutionary naturalism is compatible with a kind of moral realism. I believe this to be a naturalized version of moral realism. While I have only given an outline of what it may look like, I believe that this is one way in which we might naturalize normativity.

If moral nativism is not correct, then my argument against P16 is weakened, and my rejection of P18 is rendered unjustified. My argument against P16 was two-fold. I firstly tried to establish that P16 is question begging, or self-undermining and that as such we should remain sceptics about it. On the assumption that moral nativism is correct, I proposed a solution to that sceptical challenge which is, essentially, that our moral capacities are ‘about’ our individual survival in certain social contexts. If that were the case, then our ‘moral intuitions’ would be epistemically reliable in certain cases because they would often track (‘moral’) truths about which courses of actions would be individually beneficial. As such, if moral nativism is not correct, I may only suggest that we should regard P16 sceptically, and I cannot reject P18.

I presented some reasons to suggest that moral realism does not require that moral truths are non-contingent and universal, or that they are non-natural. These were not exhaustive reasons, however. Although I tried to argue against the plausibility of these options, it remains open to an anti-realist to argue that ‘moral truths’ must be either non-natural, or non-contingent or universal, or some combination thereof. If such arguments are successful, an anti-realist may endorse P16, qualifying it with the claim that ‘moral truth’ is non-natural, or non-contingent, or universal. As we have seen, there are moral realists, historically and contemporarily, who would agree with this.

This is why I draw my two-fold conclusion. ‘Moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is probably not compatible with evolutionary naturalism. This is the case if moral nativism is false, and if my contentions regarding ‘moral truth’ are misguided. As we saw, much of my defence of ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) – that is, my rejections of Arguments 1, 2, and 3 of Chapter 4 – depends on the very broad view of ‘moral realism’ which I took in Chapter 2. Not everyone takes that broad view because different scholars do take positions on the nature of moral truth which I did not.

My first conclusion amounts to the claim that there are many ways of construing ‘moral realism’ such that it will probably be incompatible with evolutionary naturalism. What I call ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is itself a quite minimal version of moral realism, and even this minimal version faces quite forceful challenges from evolutionary naturalism. I maintain, then, that if moral nativism is false, and if my contentions regarding ‘moral truth’ are misguided, then ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is probably not compatible with evolutionary naturalism.

‘Moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed) probably is compatible with evolutionary naturalism if moral nativism is correct and if my contentions regarding ‘moral truth’ are sound. In closing off I will say a few more words for ‘moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed).

I am optimistic about the prospects of ‘moral realism’ (non-traditionally construed). If it is correct, then it does seem to allow for what I take to be the most important aspects of moral realism. It would give us the capacity to make objectively true normative judgments about which actions, things, or events ought and ought not to occur. These judgments would be scientifically vindicated and could be believed with as much warrant as can our other scientific claims. We would not have to rely on our ‘moral intuitions’ for insight into how we ought to behave and could then, I believe, come to have a more secure grasp on what is genuinely normatively required of us.

Our moral claims would find consilience with our scientific claims. Naturalist or not, this is a virtue, because we have independent warrant to regard our scientific claims as correct. Currently ‘normativity’ stands seemingly apart from our developing scientific image of the world (it is even ‘queer’ in Mackie’s view), but if non-traditional-moral-realism is correct, this need no longer be a problem.

I believe that whether traditional moral realists will find this compelling will depend partially on whether the program of reduction I proposed can be successfully carried out. I have tried to motivate an optimistic view about that by noting certain essential similarities between non-traditional-moral-realism, and more familiar social contract theories. Nothing on the face of these proposals should indicate that the reduction program (of ordinarily accepted ‘moral’ claims to claims about individual benefits) is impossible if it has been partially demonstrated already by social contract theories and certain features of game theory.

It is, ultimately, I believe, the reduction program which is the most unsettling aspect of this. It is, essentially, the proposal that ‘genuine normative’ claims are reducible to claims about our psychology and our individual homeostasis (to borrow Boyd’s term). Normative claims are, in that sense, at bottom complex kinds of empirical claims. These claims, of course, can be countenanced by naturalism, and would be underwritten by evolutionary science. But I suppose that the worry is that rather than providing a foundation for ‘normativity’ they indicate that there is no ‘genuine’ normativity at all.

I don’t think that is the right way to look at the issue. For if ‘complex empirical claims’ can tell us with genuine objective force how we ought to behave, what we ought to do, and which things ought to happen then I am at a loss for what might be more appealing to anyone concerned about normative questions. If non-traditional-moral-realism is correct, then it really can achieve what we want from a normative theory and it does so while remaining compatible with the data of our best sciences. We

can even expect it to vindicate certain of our cherished ‘moral intuitions’, not only because of its similarity to social contract theories, but because of the scientific explanations we have for the nature of our ‘moral intuitions’.

Of course, these lofty claims cannot be demonstrated here, and require further research. They also require that moral nativism is correct. If, however, moral nativism is correct (and if my position in Chapter 6 is sound) then there is, I believe, a plausible, though non-traditional, form of moral realism which would be compatible with evolutionary naturalism.

In exploring the relationship between evolutionary naturalism and moral realism I have tried to get more clarity on what these two positions entail and how they relate to each other. One of the central features of this relationship, and why it is so complex, is the nature of moral methodology. If the moral method depends on our ‘moral intuitions’, and if there is no alternative methodology (as, traditionally, there is not) then evolutionary naturalism can marshal considerations which render moral realism implausible. If moral nativism is true, then I believe there is a possible alternative moral methodology which will render a non-traditional form of moral realism compatible with evolutionary naturalism. This non-traditional form of moral realism holds promise, and would secure the centrally important features of moral realism. If it cannot be justified, however, then probably moral realists will have to maintain some form of non-naturalism, or otherwise regard moral truths as non-contingent and universalistic. Neither of these options seems favourable to me, and I have argued (in Chapters (2 and 3) and (4 and 5), respectively) against their acceptability. I conclude, then, that ‘moral realism’ (traditionally construed) is probably incompatible with evolutionary naturalism and that ‘moral realism (non-traditionally construed) is, given moral nativism, probably compatible with evolutionary naturalism.

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