



# Critique of Sharon Street's Evolutionary Account Against Moral Realism

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## Abstract

In this article, I argue Sharon Street's evolutionary account in "A Darwinian Dilemma For Realist Theories of Value," faces significant empirical and philosophical problems. I split Street's account into two components: the evolutionary premise and the adaptive link account. The evolutionary premise suffers from issues in its improper application of the models of altruism in explaining the content of our evaluative attitudes when comparing humans and chimpanzees. The adaptive link account suffers because of Street's invocation of inference to the best explanation and the misunderstanding between a trait being an adaption and an adaptive trait. I argue that the adaptive link account results in a just-so story. This is a problem for Street, and I will suggest she has a possible way out.

**Keywords:** Metaethics, Moral Realism, Evolution

In her essay “A Darwinian Dilemma For Realist Theories of Value” (2006), Sharon Street argues that evolutionary pressures that have been placed upon our evaluative attitudes, as understood to include a variety of mental states like desires or judgements about reasons (110), serve to offer a dilemma to the moral realist. Street calls this the *Darwinian Dilemma*. This dilemma states that there is or is not a relationship between the evolutionary pressures on our evaluative attitudes and mind-independent moral facts, and Street argues that problems emerge regardless of the answer the moral realist gives. To bolster this dilemma, Street also puts forth an *evolutionary premise* which serves to undermine the moral realist’s claim that their evaluative attitudes track moral facts, and an *adaptive link account* which is Street’s retort to the moral realist’s tracking account. That is, certain evaluative attitudes were selected because they track moral truths.

Regarding this account, Street says the following: “If the evolutionary facts are roughly as I speculate, here is what might be said philosophically” (112). Thus, in this essay, I will defend two contentions. First, I will argue that the empirical data is not how Street speculates. Second, this misalignment with the empirical data ultimately results in Street’s account devolving into a just-so story. On the empirical front, I will critique Street’s usage of reciprocal altruism as a theoretical model to explain certain evaluative judgements that she thinks are widespread. Next, I will critique Street’s contention that the evidence of shared evaluative attitudes is to be found in the study of nonhuman primates, arguing against the idea that biology serves as the primary basis for our evaluative attitudes. These arguments will be directed towards Street’s evolutionary premise. I will critique Street’s evolutionary picture from an explanatory standpoint and argue that it suffers problems relating to her reliance on inference to the best explanation. These arguments will be directed towards Street’s adaptive link account. Consequently, I will argue that

we have no reason to prefer the adaptive link account over the tracking account. This will lead me to contend that Street herself faces a dilemma regarding the empirical data and just-so-story narrative in certain aspects of her account. Lastly, I will argue that Street may have a potential way out of these problems, but the path that she chooses serve to undermine her argument.

I should note what I am not trying to do with this project. I am not attempting to show that the evolutionary account that Street provides in the Darwinian Dilemma is false or that our evaluative attitudes did not arise through evolution. I am not trying to rebut the evolutionary account with contradictory empirical data as this would take us outside the scope of this project. What I am trying to do is to show that the justification for Street's evolutionary picture is lacking which, and my suggestion serves to weaken the Darwinian Dilemma.

## **The Darwinian Dilemma and How it Functions**

Let us begin with a brief overview of what the Darwinian Dilemma is and how it functions. The Darwinian Dilemma is proposed as an epistemic problem for moral realism. Street defines moral realism as follows: moral realism is the view that “there are evaluative facts or truths that hold independently of all of our evaluative attitudes” (111). To fully appreciate this definition, we must define evaluative attitudes. Street defines evaluative attitudes by appealing to a variety of mental states like desires, rational judgements, or tendencies to see a certain experience counting in favour of a certain action (110).

The Darwinian Dilemma is centred around whether there is or is not a relation between our evaluative attitudes, which have been influenced by natural selection on the one hand, and mind-independent moral facts on the other. Street argues that proponents of moral realism confront a dilemma when they accept the claim that evolutionary mechanisms have heavily influenced our evaluative attitudes (109).

Street maintains that moral realists can proceed in two ways. On the one hand, they can posit that there is no relation between moral facts and our evaluative attitudes which have been moulded by evolution. On the other hand, they can posit that there is a relationship between moral facts and our evaluative attitudes being shaped by evolution. Street argues that problems arise no matter what avenue the realist takes.

If the moral realist posits that there is not a relation between moral facts and our evaluative attitudes being shaped by evolution, then “natural selection must be viewed as a purely distorting influence on our evaluative judgements” (121). This is to say that natural selection functions to disrupt or prevent our evaluative attitudes from having any relationship with evaluative truths (121). However, if it happens that evaluative attitudes do in fact align with moral truths, Streets contends that this is a chance affair (122). Street argues that the vast majority, of potentially all, of our evaluative judgments are misaligned with evaluative truths, or as Street puts it, the relationship between our evaluative attitudes and evaluative truths is “off track” (122). The realist can argue that there is a relationship between moral facts and natural selection which has played a fundamental role in determining our evaluative attitudes. This relationship is instantiated, Street says, by “natural selection favour[ing] ancestors who were able to grasp those truths” (109). Street argues that this position put forth by the moral realist is “unacceptable on scientific grounds” (109).

Now I will briefly discuss how a debunking argument is supposed to function so we can get a sense of how the evolutionary premise in Street’s argument works. We can understand a general debunking argument as follows. As Kahane (2011) notes, there are two premises that are involved a debunking argument, a causal premise, and an epistemic premise (106). We can understand the causal premise as “*S*’s belief that *p* is explained by *x*” and the epistemic premise as “*x* is an off-track process” (106). Thus, the conclusion of this argument would be, “*S*’s belief that *p* is unjustified” (106). What the causal premise is states is some

beliefs are explained by a certain causal mechanism; however, the epistemic premise states this causal mechanism is not connected in any relevant way to the truth or falsity of belief. As AL Mogsensen (2016) notes, we can understand debunking arguments as possessing undercutting defeaters (3). An undercutting defeater is present when the evidence leads to a weakening of the justification that one has for believing  $p$ ; however, this does not mean that one has justification to believe not  $p$ . Given the structure of the debunking arguments, Street's evolutionary premise can be understood as a causal premise rather than an epistemic premise.

### **Street's Evolutionary Premise**

With an understanding of the Darwinian Dilemma, I will begin my discussion of Street's evolutionary premise. What the evolutionary premise attempts to show, according to Street, is "one enormous factor in shaping the content of human values has been the forces of natural selection, such that our system of evaluative judgements is thoroughly saturated with evolutionary influence" (114). We must recognize that evolutionary influence has been responsible, to a significant degree, for shaping the sorts of evaluative judgements that one might hold. However, Street is open to the possibility that not only natural selection has had influence on our evaluative attitudes. She is willing to grant that evolutionary forces that are not selective could be at play, as well as non-evolutionary mechanisms within social and cultural sphere (113–114). Street justifies the evolutionary premise by arguing there have been selection pressures enacted on what she calls the "proto versions" of our evaluative attitudes; and these played a major role in certain judgements that promote survival and reproductive success (114).

Street explains there seems to be a recurring pattern in the evaluative judgements that we make "across both time and cultures" (115). Examples include "[T]he fact that something would promote one's

survival is a reason in favour of it” or “[T]he fact that someone has treated one well is a reason to treat one well in return” (115). The explanation, Street says, that these judgments are so widespread is because these particular judgements aided in survival and reproductive fitness in ways that opposing judgments could not (115). To contrast these evaluative judgements, Street asks us to consider an opposing list of evaluative judgements, ones which ultimately do not aid in survival and reproduction (116). Street suggests that this would be a significant indicator that “the content of our evaluative judgements had not been greatly influenced by Darwinian selective pressures” (116). However, we notice that evaluative judgements which promote survival are widely held, giving evidence for the claim that natural selection has played a significant role in shaping our evaluative judgements (117). Street also alludes to models to explain why these judgements are so pervasive such as kin selection and reciprocal altruism (116).

The discussion thus far brings an important distinction between evaluative judgements and evaluative tendencies. Street writes, “[W]e may view many of evaluative judgements as conscious reflective endorsements of the more basic evaluative tendencies that we share with other animals” (117). Further, we should understand evaluative tendencies as serving as antecedent for what Street calls our “full-fledged evaluative judgment” which describes “a reflective, linguistically-infused capacity to judge that one thing counts in favour of another” (118). Evaluative tendencies are to be seen as a primordial “unreflective capacity” (118). [A]n example to highlight this asks us to imagine “a bird who experiences some kind of motivational “pull” in the direction of feeding its offspring” (119). According to Street, this action would be seen as unreflective as there would be no justification or reason required for the bird to feed their young.

Moreover, she argues a plausible case for evaluative tendencies being widespread is that they result from genetic heritability (119). On the other hand, it seems safe to say that full-fledged evaluative judgements



are not genetically heritable (118–119). To conclude the evolutionary premise, Street argues when it comes to our evaluative judgements, the influence of natural selection is indirect, while by contrast the influence of natural selection on our evaluative tendencies is direct (119–120). Thus, in many cases, these evaluative tendencies exerted a great deal of influence over the particular evaluative judgements (120).

## Critique of the Evolutionary Premise

I will now begin my critique of Street's evolutionary premise. *First*, I will critique the usage of reciprocal altruism as a theoretical model. *Second*, I will wade into empirical data to address the contention that we should look to our primate relatives for evidence that evolutionary forces have primarily shaped our evaluative judgements (117).

Street's usage of reciprocal altruism seems to be a potential misunderstanding regarding the scope of altruistic models. Recall Street's contention that evolution has shaped the content of our evaluative attitudes, or as Levy and Levy put it, "it is what we tend to believe that bears the mark evolutionary influence" (499). Street says specifically that reciprocal altruism may be used to explain why evaluative judgements such as "[T]he fact that someone has treated one well is a reason to treat that person well in return or "[T]he fact that someone is altruistic is a reason to admire, praise, and reward him or her" (115). However, as Levy and Levy note, altruistic models which are used in an evolutionary context are only sufficient insofar as they explain altruistic behaviours (502). Thus, altruistic models would not be equipped to explain "beliefs, concepts or other mental items" (Levy, Levy, 502).

Let us consider the nature of this distinction in further detail. Levy and Levy are keen to make a distinction between biological altruism and psychological altruism. They explain biological altruism as primarily concerned with how reproductively advantageous a certain behaviour will be; while psychological altruism relates to explaining one's

behaviour through one's motives (502). This distinction is further elucidated by Clavein and Chapuiast in their article entitled "Altruism Across Disciplines: One Word, Multiple Meanings" (2012). Clavein and Chapuiast write that altruistic behaviour, according to biological altruism, "is altruistic if it increases other organisms' fitness and permanently decreases the actor's own fitness" (128).<sup>1</sup> The primary concern of biological altruism relates to a "relation of outcomes [which are independent] of the actor's consciousness or subjective motivations" (128). By contrast, Clavein and Chapuiast define psychological altruism as "altruistic if it results only from motivations directed towards the goal of improving others' interests and welfare" (127). The authors conclude psychological altruism is primarily concerned with one wanting a given outcome as opposed to one achieving that outcome. Further, the authors suggest that psychological altruism does not possess a "self-directed consideration" that is responsible for a given action, like reproductive fitness (127). We can see there is a clear distinction between biological and psychological altruism in terms of their intended scope of explanation.

I argue this distinction raises a potential problem for Street's view. Given that reciprocal altruism in its evolutionary context is concerned with behaviour, it seems unclear how it is supposed to account for one's evaluative attitudes. As Clavein and Chapisat write, biological altruism "provide[s] no direct insight into the psychological goals or preferences underlying these behaviours" (129). Given this, while it could be the case that certain evaluative judgements may be widespread because they are reproductively advantageous, reciprocity models of altruism cannot provide any indication as to whether this is the case. At best, one could potentially infer from a biologically altruistic behaviour that the agent's

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1. In their article, the authors use the term "reproductive altruism" to refer to the same reproductive fitness-based behaviours as Levy and Levy's term "biological altruism". For consistency, I will use the term "biological altruism".



judgements are psychologically altruistic. However, there is a further problem with this line of reasoning.

As Okasha (2013) notes, one could take an action while being in a mental state which would be defined as psychologically altruistic, but ultimately have that action not be biologically altruistic (Okasha, SEP, 2013). Moreover, one could take an action which is not psychologically altruistic but is altruistic from a biological perspective (Okasha, SEP, 2013). This is to say that an agent's behaviour is not necessarily a good indicator of what their psychological states may or not be. Further, if one was able to determine the content of the evaluative judgements of another, it would not necessarily follow that those attitudes would promote altruistic behaviour that result in greater reproductive success. Thus, we can be skeptical of Street's claim that "[E]volutionary biology [can tell us that] these sorts of judgements...tended to promote survival and reproduction" (115). What does this distinction ultimately mean for Street's evolutionary premise?

It seems her contention with certain evaluative judgements being widespread is lacking because what she wants to explain is outside of the scope of reciprocity-based models of altruism. This leads to concerns as to what would account for the similarities of our evaluative judgements. Given the potential difficulties Street confronts if she uses models that are apt in an evolutionary context, it seems that Street would have to propose a model that may not be used in evolutionary biology. However, if Street were to do this, it would potentially undermine her claim in the above paragraph that evolutionary biology can provide answers to these sorts of questions. Therefore, given these issues with models of reciprocity, the evolutionary premise thus far seems untenable.

I will shift focus to Street's contentions regarding the primary role of biology in the content of our evaluative attitudes. Street argues that evolution primarily shapes our evaluative attitudes, or as Levy and Levy write, "the biology [is the] overwhelmingly influential factor" (499). Street asks us to consider the "striking continuity" between ourselves and

non-human primates as it relates to evaluative judgements. Her contention is that selection pressures had a primary influence on our evaluative judgements, she provides an example of chimpanzees. Chimpanzees “seem to experience...actions that would promote their survival or help their offspring in some way” (117). However, I argue that this is an insufficient explanation for the claim that natural selection has a primary influence on our evaluative attitudes. In her example of the overlap between chimpanzees and our own evaluative attitudes, she refers the work of Frans de Waal (117). However, Machery and Mallon (2010) write, one should be skeptical of the conclusions that de Waal derives from his work.

Very briefly, the de Waal experiment goes as follows: Capuchins, who are able to exchange a coin for a piece of food are put in three scenarios. 1) Two capuchins are given cucumber in exchange for their coin. 2) One capuchin gets a piece of cucumber for their coin, while the other capuchin gets a grape, which is of higher value. 3) One capuchin exchanged their coin for a cucumber, while the other gets a grape without exchanging their coin. The results indicated that the female capuchin rejected their cucumber most when the opposing capuchin was given a grape without exchanging their coin (6–7). De Waal and colleagues thought this suggested preliminary evidence that some non-human primates may possess expectations relating to fairness similar to humans (7).

However, Machery and Mallon [citing Henrich, 2004], suggest that this is untenable. There is evidence for diversity in moral norms which are culturally based [Henrich, 2004] (10). An example being those from the United States of America generally see fairness as an equal distribution of gains, while in Peru the general concept of fairness is those who receive gains may keep them (Machery, Mallon, 10). They conclude that if it were the case that humans were to share a similar conception of fairness with capuchins, then it must be “species-typical” (10). A trait would be shared amongst all members of its species, and in this circumstance, would need to be shared among all

primates. Instead, conceptions like fairness are “determined by the culture-specific norms governing economic interactions” (10).

One final piece of empirical data regards the claim that we have similar evaluative attitudes to non-human primate relatives. David Buller (2006) notes that it is unwise to use non-human primates to explain certain facets in human psychological evolution. The tension Buller provides is its unclear which primate relative to use as a model when finding continuity between humans and non-human primates. Humans and chimpanzees may have similar physical traits, but this does not necessarily hold true for behavioural traits. A greater concern in determining behavioural traits is the “similarity of ecological conditions (96).” When Street argues our evaluative tendencies serve the purpose of mediating circumstance and response patterns, it may be true for chimpanzees, but it is hard to ascertain the content of their evaluative attitudes and how it is akin to our own.

An objection could be raised regarding of relatedness between ourselves and other non-human primates does not necessarily provide insight into the evolution of certain traits. One would have to look to the environment, then, to try and identify any relevant similarities. Buller argues that this is easier said than done. What one would need to do is to compare the environments of our ancestors to those of either the chimpanzee or the capuchin to see the ways in which the environment may have led to the selection of certain traits as opposed to others (96). However, Buller notes that we do not know the environment of our ancestors in detail, thus making the comparison very difficult to do (96). Subsequently, a problem arises regarding which non-human primate is a suitable candidate for comparison (96). One may be thinking that the answer to this objection would undermine my arguments regarding de Waal’s work with capuchins. However, I will suggest that it does not. Street is arguing that if we look at the behaviours of chimpanzees, this constitutes evidence of continuity between the evaluative attitudes of chimpanzees and the evaluative attitudes of humans. By contrast, I am

arguing that if we look at capuchins, we see that they seem to have a different conception of fairness than humans do.

Accordingly, this seems to suggest that there may be a lack of continuity between the evaluative attitudes between capuchins and ourselves. All of this is to say that Street needs to do more than just appeal to certain evaluative attitudes that chimpanzees may or may not possess and argue further that the environments of our ancestors and chimpanzees are relevantly similar in ways that lead to the evaluative attitudes and behaviours that promote survival. The reason that I say this is because I can simply point to capuchins, or perhaps another non-human primate, and offer evidence which undercuts her claim. Consequently, merely appealing to the alleged evaluative attitudes of chimpanzees does not suffice to show a continuity between them and us. Of course, one could critique many arguments on potentially the same basis and argue that I would need to marshal similar environmental data. However, recall my contentions at the outset of this essay. I am not attempting to falsify Street's evolutionary account, nor am I attempting to show that evolution has had no influence on our evaluative attitudes. What I am trying to show is that Street's account lacks justification.

Given these empirical concerns, I argue that we have good reason to question Street's claim that our evaluative tendencies have a primarily biological underpinning. As Jessica Isserow (2019) contends, our evaluative tendencies are quite malleable as "their contexts vary with different cultural contexts" (7). Accordingly, Street's comparison of our evaluative tendencies to very static nervous system patterns, such as that of a reflex arc, which Isserow suggests is an example of our evaluative tendencies being "inflexible and cue-bound" (7), seems to not necessarily be the case. Thus, I think we have a good reason for the claim that not all of our evaluative tendencies have an overwhelmingly biological influence. Moreover, I think we have a good reason that our environment, specifically our cultural environment plays a potentially more important role than biology. As Levy and Levy conclude, it is the prevailing notion

to “identify culture as the predominant driver of the content of moral norms, according [to] only a minor role to biology” (499).

## The Adaptive Link Account

Having discussed the evolutionary premise and some of the empirical issues that it faces, I will now turn to the other facet of Street’s evolutionary picture—the adaptive link account. Before explaining in detail, some background on how it functions in the Darwinian Dilemma is necessary. Street argues that if the moral realist maintains that there is a relationship between natural selection pressures being exerted on our evaluative attitudes and mind-independent moral truths, there is a problem they confront. She argues the moral realist does have an intuitive account at their disposal for the nature of this relation which she calls “the tracking relation”. It might be the case that certain evaluative attitudes were selected through evolutionary mechanisms because they tracked some evaluative truth (125). One could argue that it is advantageous to one’s survival for their evaluative attitudes to track moral truths (125). Street says that this account is scientific in nature as it offers an explanation as to why we have certain evaluative judgments and not others. However, Street maintains the tracking account must compete with other scientific hypotheses regarding our evaluative attitudes (126).

With this background in mind, I turn to the adaptive link account. Street takes the adaptive link account to be far more plausible than the tracking account (127). The main thrust of the adaptive link account is humans, and perhaps other animals, possess “tendencies to make certain kinds of evaluative judgements rather than others [which] contributed to our ancestors’ reproductive success. . . because they forged adaptive links between our ancestors’ circumstances and their responses to those circumstances” (127). Our reactions to the environment are premised upon the idea that these actions will aid our survival. The adaptive



link account states that natural selection pressures are responsible for a variety of “mechanisms that serve to link an organism’s circumstances with its responses in ways that promote survival and reproduction” (127). To illustrate what sort of mechanism she has in mind, Street provides us with a rough example of the human reflex arc. We should understand a hot surface and the almost instantaneous removal of one’s hand when they encounter it as an adaptive response. Consequently, we should think of our evaluative judgments and “the more primitive—proto—forms of valuing we observe in other animals” similar. Just like the reflex arc, the evaluative judgements that helped an individual, can be seen as “a pairing between the circumstance of one’s being helped and the response of helping in return” (127).

Street suggests there are obvious differences between the mechanisms of reflex arc and evaluative judgement, with the former being biophysical in nature, while the latter a mental phenomenon which is “subject to reflection and possible revision in light of that reflection” (128). Despite these differences, the functional roles these mechanisms play are fundamentally the same. The role these mechanisms have from an evolutionary standpoint, Street says, is “to get the organism to respond to its circumstances in a way that is adaptive” (128). In the case of our evaluative judgements, we form a link between our circumstance and response “by our taking of one thing to be a reason counting in favour of the other” (128). We can see there is a clear difference between these two accounts with the adaptive link account not invoking evaluative facts while the tracking account does invoke such facts (127). Street concludes that “[T]he power of the adaptive link account is that. . .it illuminates a striking, previously hidden unity behind many of our most basic evaluative judgements, namely that they forge links between circumstance and response that would have been likely to promote reproductive success in the environments of our ancestors” (134).

There are several reasons that Street takes the adaptive link account to be superior to the tracking account. First, the adaptive link



account abides by the rule of parsimony which suggests that the simpler explanation is preferred. The adaptive link account is parsimonious—it does not posit any mind-independent evaluative truths. Second, the adaptive link account possesses a greater deal of clarity. If the moral realist is to suggest that it is reproductively advantageous for our evaluative attitudes to track moral facts, they need to offer an explanation as to why this tracking confers reproductive benefits (127). Third, the adaptive link account better explains why certain judgements are widely adopted. As stated above, these judgements led to our ancestors responding to their environment in ways that were conducive to reproductive success (132).

## **Critique of the Adaptive Link Account**

To begin my critique of the adaptive link account, let us look at the following quote from Street. Street writes that “[A]s a result of natural selection, there are living in us all kinds of mechanisms that serve to link an organism’s circumstances with its responses in ways that tend to promote survival and reproduction” (127). Recall that evaluative judgements, for Street, would be this kind of mechanism. However, we have reason to doubt this contention. William FitzPatrick (2015) notes, “even if we grant that evolution gave our ancestors dispositions that influenced the content of their judgements, nothing follows about how deeply or widely this influence pervades our current moral beliefs” (900). Indeed, as Buller notes, certain mechanisms were selected because of how they elicit responses to circumstances in the environment (56).

This point brings us to an important distinction between a trait being an adaption and adaptive. Buller writes, we can understand adaptations as the presence of traits that resulted from “solv[ing] an adaptive problem that enhanced fitness in an ancestral population. . . [thus] [O]rganisms have those traits because they were beneficial to their ancestors” (35). In other words, an adaption as the presence of a trait in a population through the dissemination of that trait from an ancestor

whose fitness was enhanced by the possession of that trait (35). A trait is adaptive if it serves the purpose of enhancing reproductive fitness. Whether an ancestor possessed this adaptive trait is not necessarily relevant. What we can see, then, is that a trait is adaptive if it has “current utility” (35), while a trait is an adaption when it has had “past utility” (36).

Buller elucidates this distinction by saying adaption can be understood as “a historical concept, applying only to traits with the right evolutionary history” (35). Adaptiveness, by contrast, is “an ahistorical concept, only applying to only to traits which enhance fitness” (35). What this distinction ultimately means is there can be traits which are adaptations but not simultaneously adaptive. For Street’s adaptive link account, the primary concern is with linking the past utility of evaluative judgements which would have been advantageous to the survival of our ancestors (127–128). Given Buller’s distinction, evaluative attitudes would be seen as adaptations. However, it seems to be an open question as to whether our evaluative attitudes are currently adaptive. Are our evaluative judgements concerned at this moment with promoting reproductive fitness? We have reason to suspect this might not be the case as a given trait can be selected for, thus making it an adaption, but due to fluctuations in the environment, a trait that was perhaps once adaptive is no longer adaptive.

I argue that this discussion poses a problem for the strength of Street’s account. The realist can accept Street’s contention that natural selection did have a role in shaping the evaluative attitudes of our ancestors, but maintain this ultimately has no bearing on what shapes our current evaluative attitudes. It could be argued that due to changes in our environmental surroundings, our evaluative attitudes have ceased to be adaptive and their primary function no longer motivates reproductively advantageous outcomes. Perhaps it is the case that our evaluative judgements no longer arise out of more basic evaluative tendencies but from a “variety of emotionally laden human interactions

informed by decent moral training” (FitzPatrick, 900). I will not make the case here, rather this is just to show that the moral realist can accept aspects of Street’s account without it necessarily undermining their position.

It is possible Street has a response at the ready which relies on the distinction between evaluative judgements and evaluative tendencies. Recall that evaluative tendencies have a biological basis while evaluative judgements are potentially influenced by non-biological forces. As Street writes, “other causal mechanisms can shape our evaluative judgements in ways that make them stray. . . from alignment with our more basic evaluative tendencies” (120). Our current evaluative attitudes may be shaped by mechanisms that are not biological in nature and thus not adaptive in the sense that Buller defines. However, this objection misses a crucial point. Buller’s observation suggests that our evaluative tendencies, while possibly adaptations, may no longer be adaptive in that their purpose is no longer to promote survival in current environmental contexts. This may be the case no matter what mechanism influences our current evaluative judgements. In other words, because certain evaluative tendencies may have been adaptive in the past does not mean they are necessarily adaptive currently. Street’s appeal to the distinction between evaluative judgements and evaluative tendencies does not bypass this concern.

## **Street and Just-So Stories**

This brings us to the next part of our discussion. As we have seen, there are empirical problems that render Street’s account implausible. This leads Isserow to argue that Street’s account is merely a “how-possibly” story (7). How-possibly stories, Isserow says, consist of “cumulative narratives” which serve the purpose of explaining the evolutionary pathways through which something as our evaluative judgements may have developed (7). Isserow suggests Street’s story moves at a rapid pace from our base

evaluative tendencies to our evaluative judgements which exhibit a reflective capacity (8). Further, there are a variety of gaps that need to be filled in to account for evaluative judgments such as language [Joyce, 2006] (8). Consequently, Isserow concludes that these gaps in Street's account decrease its plausibility. Isserow's commentary provides us with the foundation for a discussion of Street's evolutionary account from its hypothetical understanding. Indeed, as Street writes, "it must suffice to emphasize the hypothetical nature of my arguments" (113). While it could certainly be the case that Street may find some of the empirical considerations I have marshalled against her evolutionary account compelling, Street could resort to the claim that her account is merely a plausible account of how we come to make certain evaluative judgements as opposed to an account that describes that way that we actually came to have evaluative judgements. In other words, Street could justify the hypothetical nature of her project as a way to bypass concerns relating to empirical data that would undermine her position. If Street is to make this move, however, she confronts a problem relating to explanations in evolutionary psychology called just-so stories.

Hubalek (2021) writes, we can understand the term "just-so story" as a type of explanation which puts forth a speculative evolutionary hypothesis which exhibits a certain narrative structure (451). From this definition, Hubalek suggests two potential strategies that one could use when invoking a just-so story as an explanation, a negative strategy and a positive strategy. Let us look at each strategy in turn. The primary features of the negative strategy are that unsubstantiated evolutionary stories are cast as "fully-fledged explanations of the evolutionary origin and function(s) of individual traits and behaviours" (451). At the heart of the negative strategy for just-so stories is the notion they lack explanatory power and merely postulate a series of events that unfold in sequential order [Valeri, 2000, 254] (Hubalek, 452). Contrasting the negative strategy, the positive strategy is one in which a just-so story is understood as "a description of explanatory strategies producing

evolutionary accounts of the origin and function(s) of individual traits and behaviors” (453).

As it relates to how we should understand Street’s evolutionary picture, recall Street’s contentions regarding the evolutionary picture she proposes should be understood as hypothetical (113). This leads me to contend Street’s evolutionary project, specifically the adaptive link account, should be understood as being an exemplar of the positive strategy of a just-so story. If so, I would suggest that her claim that the adaptive link account is superior to the tracking account “by all the usual criteria of scientific adequacy” (129) is severely deflated. Though, it is worth discussing first the criteria that make an explanation a just-so story. Smith (2016) provides a useful criterion for determining this. What makes an explanation a just-so story, is that it possesses a “narrative explanation” which has “a sequence of events with a beginning and an end”. Further, there is “a causal order of events...and a central subject that is explained (278). In Street’s adaptive link account, we have these biologically ingrained evaluative tendencies which served as adaptive links in our environment to cue certain responses. These tendencies ultimately gave rise to our robust evaluative judgments. Given this reconstruction, it seems that the adaptive link account does have the characteristics for it to be called a just-so story. The subject matter that Street attempts to explain with the adaptive link account is why certain evaluative judgements are made rather than others (126). Moreover, this account seems to be causal in nature as these evaluative tendencies promoted actions that were reproductively advantageous.

Given that we have some reason to think the adaptive link account portion of Street’s account can be understood as a just-so story, let us return to my contention that Street’s account is best understood as a positive strategy. I will reiterate my reasoning for this, Street claims her evolutionary picture is hypothetical. The adaptive link account should be understood as a speculative explanation which may potentially prompt further investigation [citing Barash and Lipton] (Smith, 283).

Hubalek furthers this point that just-so stories should be thought of in heuristic terms (453). Just-so story should be understood as some sort of approximation for what might be the case.

This may potentially get Street out of the problem of appealing to empirical data to make her case for the adaptive link account, but making this move to the positive strategy comes at a high cost. As Smith notes, one way in which someone can assess narratives is through inference to the best explanation (280). Inference to the best explanation requires a process where one first gathers plausible explanations from a set of possible explanations which leads to choosing the most plausible explanation. This process is completed according to what Smith calls “explanatory virtues” (280). The explanatory virtue I would like to focus on in particular is the virtue of parsimony.<sup>2</sup> Recall Street’s contention that one of the upsides to her adaptive link account is that it is more parsimonious than the tracking account (129). The reason for this is a tracking account has the added theoretical posit of evaluative facts while the adaptive link account does not (129). Accordingly, the adaptive link account simply points out we make certain evaluative judgements rather than others because these judgements promoted actions which were beneficial to reproductive success (129). Thus, on the basis of parsimony, the adaptive link account should be preferred because there does not exist “any need to posit a role for evaluative truth” (129).

There is a problem when one uses inference to the best explanation to make choices between two explanations. As Smith, citing Van Fraassen notes it is not the case that one is simply comparing two alternatives to see which one is better. It seems likely that one will hold an antecedent belief regarding which hypothesis is most likely to be true (280). Thus,

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2. Smith uses the word “simplicity” in place of the word “parsimony” (280). I will keep to the usage of the word “parsimony” to be consistent with Street’s usage as it relates to the adaptive link account.



it is not the case that Street would pick the adaptive link account over the tracking account merely because parsimony suggests that it should be preferred. Rather, it seems plausible that Street already might think that the adaptive link account is more likely to be true. FitzPatrick (2014) provides greater insight by arguing that one who already rejects moral realism would find parsimony to be a compelling criterion to prefer one account, such as the adaptive link account over the tracking account (893).

Moreover, FitzPatrick contends merely appealing to a story which explains the content of our evaluative attitudes which does not postulate moral facts is certainly possible, it does not follow from this, however, that the moral realist's account is ultimately untenable (893). What Street would need to do, according to FitzPatrick, is show such an account is correct (893). Further, the proponent of evolutionary debunking arguments cannot merely appeal to parsimony and expect others to follow suit in agreeing with a debunking argument such as Street's (893). Given this, FitzPatrick concludes that the proponent of such an evolutionary story must "make a positive non-question begging case for the actual truth of their debunking story" (893). What this means for Street's adaptive link account is that its argumentative force seems to be nested in a prior rejection of moral realism which would lend credence to her contention that the adaptive link account is superior to the tracking account because it is parsimonious. Thus, the parsimony criterion of the adaptive link account makes the account superior to the tracking account insofar as one already has the penchant to disregard the moral realist's claim that there are moral facts.

It seems unclear as to why the moral realist would find the adaptive link account compelling given that one of the reasons Street suggests the adaptive link account is compelling is it does not posit any moral facts. The moral realist could reply to this claim and say the adaptive link account is not better because of its parsimony, rather it is insufficient as moral facts are an important theoretical posit for their account of the relation between our evaluative attitudes and moral facts. There is

another question Street's reliance on the hypothetical nature of her account brings to the fore. Levy and Levy ask if we are to take the hypothetical understanding of Street's project seriously "[D]oes evolution actually undermine moral realism or does it merely have the potential of doing so?" (493). I think we have good reason to suspect the evolutionary considerations, as presented by Street, do not put one's justification in the belief that their evaluative attitudes track moral facts when we are to look at the empirical data.

Moreover, Street's reversion to a hypothetical understanding of her account results in a loss of argumentative force. Therefore, one would prefer the adaptive link account only because it is consistent with their prior ontological commitments regarding the status of moral facts. Subsequently, this seems to put the adaptive link account on par with the tracking account as the tracking account would also be dependent upon ontological commitments which posit the existence of moral facts. It seems that we have no reason, outside of our metaphysical presuppositions, to conclude the adaptive link account is superior to the tracking account.

## **A Potential Way Out**

Now that I have laid out the dilemma that Street faces regarding the empirical inadequacy of the evolutionary premise and the just-so story formulation of the adaptive link account, I now suggest that Street can potentially avoid the consequences of this dilemma. As David Enoch (2009) writes, "there is nothing essentially Darwinian about [the] Darwinian Dilemma" (426). Enoch says further that Street's evolutionary (causal) premise can be supplanted by any such mechanism which results in our evaluative attitudes being off-track. Indeed, Street echoes this statement when she suggests that an "analogous dilemma could be constructed using any kind of causal influence on the content of our evaluative judgements" (155). Further, Street says the dilemma is "much

larger” than a dilemma that is primarily Darwinian in scope.

This general dilemma, according to Enoch, is that when one affirms a certain moral judgement that this moral judgement is likely to be true. (421). Moreover, when one is to deny a certain moral judgement, it seems to be the case that the moral judgement is false. Enoch says this correspondence calls out for an explanation (421). This specifically relates to the non-naturalist brand of moral realism<sup>3</sup> where the moral truths are “response-independent” (415). It is not the case that moral judgements play any causal role in determining moral truths (421–422). In other words, non-natural moral truths are not casually efficacious, they do not provide the imputes for our moral beliefs (422). Enoch concludes that at the heart of this dilemma is that one must provide “an explanation of a correlation between our relevant [moral] beliefs and the relevant [moral] truths” (426). There is still a problem that the moral realist must attempt to solve even though that problem is not presented in a manner that includes evolutionary biology. Consequently, Street could argue that the moral realist still has the general problem of accounting for how their moral beliefs are to track moral facts given that moral facts would not cause them to have these beliefs.

This is certainly a way that Street could go, but I argue this move is detrimental to her argument. Regarding Street’s argument, Levy and Levy argue evolutionary debunking arguments, given their evolutionary foundations, pose “a novel and distinctive challenge” to moral realism. The reason they provide for the unique nature of the argument is that foundations of the argument are “grounded in evolutionary biology” (492). Levy and Levy go on to suggest the evolutionary grounding of the Darwinian Dilemma “serves to distinguish [it] from traditional

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3. The moral realism that Enoch is describing is what he calls “robust” realism. However, it seems that the definition of non-natural moral realism seems to be consistent with Enoch’s robust realism. Thus, I will continue to use the phrase “moral realism” when discussing Enoch to avoid any potential confusion.

skeptical challenges, lending them some added credibility by comparison” (493).

We can see the force of this point if we consider some excerpts from the opening paragraph in Street’s article. She writes that “[C]ontemporary realist theories of value claim to be compatible with natural science...I call this claim into question by arguing that Darwinian considerations pose a dilemma for those theories” (109). What we can see with this passage is Street is positioning her argument to be contingent upon relevant findings in evolutionary biology. Moreover, these findings are supposed to be inconvenient for the proponent of moral realism. If Street is to jettison her Darwinian considerations, is evolution a concern for the moral realist at all? Indeed, Street could argue that this broader challenge still confronts the realist which may be a potential problem. But if this is the case, it seems that purpose of Street’s argument is undermined. The reason is Street is arguing that her evolutionary account is, at the very least, likely to be true. Put differently, the moral realist confronts this dilemma because these evolutionary considerations are likely to be true. If Street’s evolutionary picture is potentially dispensable, the question now becomes “[D]oes evolution actually undermine realism or does it merely hold the potential of doing so?” (Levy, Levy, 493). If this question is not necessarily relevant to Street, then I would argue the intuitive scientific appeal of Street’s account is lost.

Turning to Street’s claim that another causal mechanism could suffice to pose a similar dilemma to the moral realist, she says for this causal mechanism to offer the same problems to the moral realist, then some criteria that must be met (155). In particular, for any causal mechanism, “it must be possible to defeat whatever version of the tracking account is put forward with a scientifically better explanation” (155). However, as we have seen, Street put forward parsimony as a feature that would make an explanation scientifically superior to another. In the case of the adaptive link account, it was seen as superior because it did not posit the existence of moral facts. As noted by FitzPatrick,

however, this account only seems plausible if one has already rejected moral realism. Accordingly, there is potential for the same problem to arise no matter what the causal mechanism happens to be. If moral realism is seen as untenable prior to one suggesting a new, perhaps non-evolutionary causal mechanism, a discussion would again be had regarding whether this new account was correct as opposed to just being preferred for its simplicity.

To conclude, I have attempted to show that Street's evolutionary account suffers from a variety of problems which are both empirical and philosophical in nature. Consequently, this harms Street's account and potentially makes it untenable. Moreover, there is a path that Street could take to relieve herself of these problems but as I suggest, this comes at a high cost for her theoretical account.

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