

Jove's Bodega

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of Philosophical Inquiry
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On Religions: The Problem with Conflicting Testimonies

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Abstract

Richard Swinburne's "Is There A God?" articulates an argument for God's existence with the key premise being the *principle of testimony*. The principle postulates that one should believe the experiences of others if oneself does not have said experiences. While I accept the principle of testimony and agree that people's experiences can give them a *prima facie* justification for God's existence, I argue the diversity of conflicting religious testimony acts as a defeater to Swinburne's argument. One does not have, all things considered, justification for God's existence through testimony. My strategy will present a scenario of religious diversity which illustrates the dynamics of conflicting testimony across disparate groups.

Keywords: Epistemology, Religion.

RICHARD SWINBURNE'S "Is There a God?" articulate an argument for God's existence. One key premise in his argument is the *principle of testimony*, which postulates that one should believe the experiences of others if oneself does not have said experiences. While, I accept the principle of testimony and agree that people's experiences can give them a *prima facie* justification for God's existence, I argue the diversity of conflicting religious testimony acts as a defeater to Swinburne's argument. One does not have, all things considered, justification for God's existence through testimony. My strategy is to present a scenario of religious diversity as a defeater which illustrates how conflicting testimony across disparate religious groups challenges our *prima facie* justification for God's existence. I argue that a decisive conclusion for God's existence cannot be reached through the principle of testimony, because each religion's account of God contradicts the others' testimonies. Afterwards, I will respond to Swinburne's objection in his work "Response to My Commentators"; that there are similar "core religious elements" within each religion's conception of God. These similar core elements suggest it is not the individual conceptions that are relevant in proving God's existence, but rather their shared attributes; However, I will deny that such shared attributes of God among disparate religions give a justification for Swinburne's interpretation of a Judeo-Christian God over other competing interpretations.

To begin, I will introduce Swinburne's argument. Swinburne states that religious experiences are expected if God exists, and *millions* of people have these experiences. These experiences provide individuals with a *prima facie* justification for God's existence. Thus, Swinburne establishes God's existence through God's interactions with millions, thereby providing a *prima facie* justification for God's existence.¹

Swinburne puts forth the *principle of credulity*, which claims that one should believe what one perceives unless and until there is evidence that

1. Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 113.

suggests otherwise.² If one does not accept this principle and argues that one ought to wait for contrary evidence, then one will never hold any beliefs because perceptions can only be justified through other perceptions. So, if one does not trust the initial perception, one will not trust the contrary evidence because it too will be predicated on perceptions. Therefore, one ought to accept the principle of credulity.

Swinburne also presents the *principle of testimony*, which states that one should believe the experiences of others if oneself does not have said experiences.³ If one does not accept this principle, then one also must reject knowledge in other domains because we would be unable to verify every person's experience. However, Swinburne offers three types of evidence which can delegitimize one's perceptions:

1. The perceptions themselves are derived from altered states of being (e.g. drugs, fasting, or sleep deprivation).
2. The perceptions are physically impossible (e.g., I purport to see a dog with three heads, but that is anatomically impossible).

The origin of the perception has been caused by something other than the perception itself (e.g., I believe the dress is white and gold, but it is blue and black—it is the artificial light that has caused that initial perception, not the dress itself).

Omitting these three errors of perception, one should accept the principle of testimony. By combining both principles, Swinburne's argument limits possible skeptical objections to the denial of God's existence

According to the principle of credulity, the skeptic must provide counter-evidence *against* the existence of God if they wish to support their argument. Further, since millions of people have reported an experience with God, we must believe them under the principle of testimony, unless and until the skeptic can find counter-evidence that suggests God does

2. Swinburne, "God," 115.

3. Swinburne, "God," 116.

not exist.⁴ Therefore, according to Swinburne, the millions of religious experiences are compelling, decisive evidence for God's existence. As a final salient point before I provide my argument, Swinburne outlines and replies to four defeaters:

1. Many people do not have religious experiences.
2. Only religious people have religious experiences.
3. The religious experiences that people have conflict.
4. Religious experiences are precipitated by other factors beyond the experience itself (i.e., drugs, fasting, insomnia).⁵

For this paper, I will address his response to the third defeater. I will begin my argument by offering the following scenario pertaining to religious diversity: Suppose one corrals various proponents of the world's major religions in a room, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam, to name a few. A group represents each religion, all of whom have had their own religious experiences. First, the Buddhists say they do not believe in God *per se*, but more so supernatural entities; the Christians say they believe in God, but God is manifested simultaneously via three entities (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit); the Hindus say they worship one God (Brahma) but recognize many other Gods as well; the Sikhs believe in one omnipresent God (Waheguru), alongside ten gurus; and the Muslims believe in one God (Allah). All of these groups have their own religious experiences to vouch for their perspectives.

The principle of testimony can be applied to each of these disparate groups that share divergent accounts of God. While each group has a *prima facie* justification for God, a definitive conclusion cannot be drawn about God's existence, because the conflicting religious testimonies act as a defeater.

To better illustrate my point, take Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity

4. Swinburne, "God," 116.

5. Swinburne, "God," 116–118.

as an example. They are fundamentally incompatible, given that Islam argues that there is one God, Buddhism says there is no God, and Christianity espouses the trinity. However, God cannot simultaneously be nothing, one entity, and multiple entities, let alone the other contradictory accounts of God from other religions. Nonetheless, each religious group has a *prima facie* justification for their own conception of God under the principle of testimony. While Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims have *prima facie* justification for each of their respective accounts of God, in totality, a decisive conclusion for God's existence cannot be reached because each religion's account of God contradicts one another. So, religious diversity acts as a defeater for justifying God's existence. Therefore, I accept the principle of testimony and agree that people's experiences give them a *prima facie* justification for God's existence; however, I argue that the diversity of religious testimony acts as a defeater, so one does not have justification for God's existence.

An objection to my defeater is Swinburne's point that specific religions' conception of God are not relevant, but rather common traits that are present within each religions' conception of God are what matters.⁶ Swinburne points to the shared belief across contrasting religious experiences that a higher power exists beyond the self. Unfortunately, Swinburne himself does not provide additional details, but Caroline Franks Davis elaborates on his rebuttal with a list of common components inherent in virtually every religion's conception of God:

1. The physical world is not the ultimate reality.
2. There is a "true self" that extends to a different reality.
3. The ultimate reality is ethereal.
4. The aforementioned reality can manifest as a heavenly entity (or holy power) that individuals can have a personal relationship with.
5. The volume and intensity of religious experiences are indicative

6. Swinburne, "God," 120.

of one's relationship with the holy power.

6. A relationship with the higher power grants one liberation and access to the "true self".⁷

One might say that my defeater seems to be moot because religious diversity is irrelevant, given that there are these aforementioned features present in seemingly all religions' conception of God (i.e. the religious "core").

I will offer a two-part response: A statement on religious agreement and a reply to Swinburne's comments on religious diversity in his "Response to My Commentators." First, the idea that there is a "core" set of features inherent in every religions' conception of God ignores the diametrically opposed positions in each religions' conception of God altogether. For example, Hindus recognize numerous Gods, while Muslims stringently support only one. However much of a "core" there is among disparate religious groups, their shared attributes cannot bridge these irreconcilable gaps that explicitly contradict one another. Assuming there is a "core" of religious experience, it is seemingly insufficient in overcoming the inconsistent conception of God across various religions.

Second, Swinburne himself seems to acknowledge that there are notable differences that undermine the religious "core," with Christianity as an outlier. Case in point, in Swinburne's "Response to My Commentators," he writes the following:

"I do not need to make a detailed investigation if I can show that none of those [other] religions [besides Christianity] even claim for themselves characteristics to be expected a priori of a true religion and claimed by Christianity, and that there is enough evidence that Christianity does have these characteristics. For then I will be in a position to argue that there are reasons adequate to show that the Christian religion is more likely to be

7. Caroline Franks David, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 191.

true than [the other religions] are."⁸

Swinburne separates Christianity as considerably different from other religions' accounts of God, even stating it as being more likely true than its contemporaries by virtue of offering an a priori explanation. In doing so, Swinburne recognizes that other religions' conceptions of God do have significant differences that make them distinct, otherwise he would not point to the specific features of Christianity. However, this appears to weaken his original assertion that there is a "core" of religiosity, given that Christianity potentially supersedes the truthfulness of other religions' conceptions of God and possesses characteristics that are markedly different.

To summarize my position, I accepted the *principle of testimony* and agree that people's experiences can give them a *prima facie* justification for God's existence; however, I argued the diversity of conflicting religious testimony acts as a defeater to Swinburne's argument. One does not have, all things considered, justification for God. My strategy was to present a scenario of religious diversity as a defeater which illustrates how conflicting testimony across disparate religious groups challenges our *prima facie* justification for God's existence. I argued that a decisive conclusion for God's existence cannot be reached through the principle of testimony, because each religion's account of God contradicts the other's testimonies. Afterwards, I responded to Swinburne's objection in his work "Response to My Commentators"; that there are similar "core religious elements" within each religion's conception of God and the shared attributes among these religious elements are relevant in proving God's existence. I denied that such shared attributes of God among disparate religions give a justification for Swinburne's interpretation of a Judeo-Christian God over other competing interpretations.

8. Richard Swinburne, "Response to My Commentators," *Religious Studies* 38, no. 3 (2002): 310-31.

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Critically Analyzing Restitution and Restorative Justice Through an Ethics of Care Lens

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Abstract

In chapter five of “The Problem of Punishment,” David Boonin (2008) describes a moral problem with punishment. He proposes relying more heavily on victim restitution within our current criminal justice system. Similarly, Jon'a Meyer (1998) explores the restorative justice framework rooted in Indigenous traditions in her article “History Repeats Itself: Restorative Justice in Native American Communities.” Both make convincing arguments for alternatives to our punishment system. However, their claims are controversial because many believe that punishment is vital for a society to function (Boonin, 2008, p. 214). I will introduce the ethics of care perspective to bolster Boonin and Meyer's ideas that support restitution and restorative justice over punishment. I will argue that we should incorporate restitution and restorative justice as a gentler approach to altering our existing criminal justice system.

Keywords: Applied Ethics, Restitution, Restorative Justice, Ethics of Care

DAVID BOONIN'S "THE Problem of Punishment" (2008) describes the moral problem with punishment—that it is wrong to intentionally harm others, even as a form of retribution—and proposes relying more heavily on victim restitution within our current Canadian criminal justice system (pp. 213–216). Similarly, Jon'a Meyer's article: "History Repeats Itself: Restorative Justice in Native American Communities" (1998) explores a framework of restorative justice rooted in Indigenous traditions. Both pieces of literature make convincing arguments for possible alternatives to our punishment system. However, given the current state of the criminal justice system, Boonin and Meyer's claims are controversial because people may still believe that punishment is vital for a society to function (Boonin, 2008, p. 214).

In what follows, I will introduce the problem of punishment and briefly discuss Boonin's proposed solution. Next, I will describe a system of restitution and compare it with restorative justice, demonstrating that when used together, they create a more effective and morally superior system to punishment. After, I will introduce the normative ethical theory *ethics of care* to bolster support for Boonin and Meyer's position for restitution and restorative justice over punishment. Based on this, I will argue that we should incorporate restitution and restorative justice elements as a gentler approach to altering our existing criminal justice system rather than entirely replacing it. Looking through an ethics of care lens can help us understand why it is essential to have both restitution and restorative justice in the toolkit of the criminal justice system because no single theory works for every situation nor solves every problem.

The Problem with Punishment

It may seem intuitive that punishing a transgression is a justified form of committing harm. It is hard to imagine a system of justice without punishment. Even the Kantian standard for just deserts, *lex talionis*,

exemplifies a purely retributivist approach (Kant, 1797). However, while punishment, or retribution, may seem required for an effective system of justice, it is not mandatory. The problem with punishment is that it challenges our moral intuition that it is impermissible to intentionally harm another person (Boonin, 2008, p. 213). Boonin asserts that we should not punish offenders because “in no other realm of human interaction would we allow one group of people to intentionally inflict serious harm on another if no satisfactory justification for the moral permissibility of this practice was available” (p. 213). In other words, Boonin is skeptical of punishment because it subjects offenders to intentionally harmful treatment. He proposes two ways to do without it: replace punishment with something like treatment and therapy or rely more heavily on victim restitution (pp. 214-215). Boonin opts for the latter option and defends a theory of *pure restitution* as morally superior to punishment. Restitution, unlike retribution, focuses on making the victim better off rather than making the offender worse. Even if we deem punishment immoral but excusable, that will not change the fact that it is superfluous, especially considering other viable options exist. Now that I have explained the problem with punishment, I move to give an account of other forms of justice, namely restitution and restorative justice.

An Explanation of Restitution and Restorative Justice

A system of restitution strongly emphasizes compensating the victim of a crime after it has been committed to restore them to the level of well-being they previously enjoyed before being wrongfully harmed (Boonin, 2008, p. 224). Compensation can include various options, including financial and non-financial compensation, such as spending the time to repair a victim's house. The theory of pure restitution maintains that it is morally appropriate to force offenders to compensate their victims. Furthermore, it must be noted that sometimes similar

activities can be used for both restitution and punishment, even though the underlying purpose of the action in each circumstance is distinct. From a restitutive perspective, a fine is designed to restore a victim's position before the transgression. In contrast, a punitive fine is designed to punish a transgressor and deter other would-be transgressors (recidivism). In short, victim restitution does not raise the same complex moral problems as punishment because it avoids intentionally harming anyone. It is evident that restitution is morally superior because sometimes individuals are compelled to make restitution to others when they do something wrong but not illegal, like breaching a contract. In this case, it is common for the individual to be morally compelled to right their wrong through restitution and not punishment. Restitution parallels *torts* rather than punishment and should be used alongside or to shape punishment instead of entirely replacing the current system (Boonin, 2008, pp. 214–215).

Restorative justice and restitution go hand in hand. Meyer (1998) states that restorative justice is an old practice with roots in Indigenous communities (p. 42). Examples of contemporary restorative justice practices include family group conferencing and circle sentencing (Chatterjee & Elliott, 2003, p. 350). Restorative justice is concerned with framing the process in terms of harmony and disharmony (rather than adversarial) and seeking consensus from the community (Meyer, 1998, p. 43). Moreover, Canadian studies have demonstrated that restorative justice is more successful and effective in decreasing recidivism than retributive justice (Chatterjee & Elliott, 2003, p. 347, 350). In a publication by the Research and Statistics Division of the Canadian Department of Justice, Latimer, Dowden, and Muise (2001) found that:

“Generally, compared to traditional non-restorative approaches, restorative justice was found to be more successful at achieving each of its four major goals. In other words, based on the findings of this meta-analysis, restorative justice programs are a more effective method of improving victim/offender satisfaction, increasing offender compliance with restitution, and decreasing the recidivism of offenders when

compared to more traditional criminal justice responses (i.e. incarceration, probation, court-ordered restitution). In fact, restorative programs were significantly more effective than these approaches in all four outcomes (with the exclusion of the offender satisfaction outlier)” (p. 17).

Restorative justice is distinct from our current retributive justice system because it views crime as a violation of people and relationships instead of the conventional understanding of crime as a violation of the law. Likewise, Indigenous restorative justice practices focus primarily on restoring the balance in individuals and their communities through conflict resolution, extending to justice approaches like circle sentencing. In circle sentencing, the accused, the victim(s), the court officers, and other community members sit in a circle, usually outside of a formal courtroom, while listening to each other speak on the accused's actions and agreeing on a sentencing decision together (Chatterjee & Elliott, 2003, p. 349). The circle is a metaphor for the values of restorative justice—love, empathy, honesty, trust, humility, sharing, and forgiveness. Circle sentencing also encourages the coming to agreements and the healing of all parties (Chatterjee & Elliott, 2003, p. 350). In the case of a fine, compensation is not intended to be equivalent to what was lost but is supposed to lead to forgiveness from the victim and the victim's family (Meyer, 1998, p. 44).

Next, I will briefly sketch considerations in favour of restitution and restorative justice. The main reason why people find these systems appealing is that they are more effective than punishment, which is evident in how restitution and restorative justice decrease recidivism rates (Chatterjee & Elliott, 2003). Additionally, restitution and restorative justice actually address the harm done to victims. In contrast, our current punishment system primarily focuses on deterring or incapacitating offenders without formally addressing the harm done to victims. According to Boonin (2008), systems of restitution and restorative justice altogether avoid the moral problems associated with punishment (p. 224). Boonin explicitly contends that he only supports restitution because the

alternative (punishment) is unideal and any good reason to reject restitution is an excellent reason to reject punishment. Furthermore, he argues that whether we accept or reject restitution, we must ultimately reject the practice of punishment (Boonin, 2008, p. 224).

Nevertheless, Boonin's claim is incredibly controversial, and many still have significant concerns about restitutive justice. Some challenges facing restitution and restorative justice are the potential burdens on victims. For example, some victims want nothing to do with their offender(s) since any form of contact following the incident may be traumatic, especially for someone trying to heal. Another concern is that the victim may be deceased or unavailable, not to mention that compensation may be virtually impossible due to the seriousness or scale of the crimes committed. Lastly, there are cases where compelling an offender to provide compensation might not involve much harm to the offender or produce much incentive not to re-offend, especially in cases where the offender is exceptionally wealthy and can easily repay the financial debt to their victim. Therefore, I want to propose additional support for a restitution and restorative justice system using an ethics of care perspective. Boonin's and Meyer's ideas may be effectively bolstered by looking at them through an ethics of care lens.

The Ethics of Care Perspective

Ethics of care theorists use a maternal model to define "care." Care is more than an attitude; it describes a pattern of thinking, feeling, and behaving (Noddings, 1984, pp. 79-81). Ethics of care theorists argue that interpersonal relationships and the specific context of cases are significant when making decisions. In a way, ethics of care resurrect things typically stereotyped as female and codifies them into a moral theory (Gilligan, 1982, p. 30). Some examples are emotions and an emphasis on cooperation over competition. Ethics of care values caring relations, loyalty, and moral emotions such as sensitivity, sympathy, empathy, and

responsiveness because they give us cues about who needs what and how we ought to care for one another (Held, 2006, p. 10).

Ethics of care takes partiality very seriously because our individual outlook and existence in interpersonal relationships define the view (Noddings, 1984, p. 83). While most normative ethical theories are impartial because they value fairness, equality, or utility, interpersonal relationships are not impartial since they require consideration of an individual's unique, context-sensitive perspective. Furthermore, ethics of care is a highly *particularist* theory because, unlike Utilitarianism or Deontology, no tractable set of principles can explain morality (Noddings, 1984, pp. 84-85). Additionally, ethics of care is *anti-abstractionist* because the specific case matters when making moral decisions. There is no universal moral principle that everyone should follow. Noddings (1984) writes: "The decision for or against abortion must be made by those directly involved in the concrete situation, but it need not be made alone. The one-caring cannot require everyone to behave as she would in a particular situation" (p. 89). Noddings continues, "there is no way to disregard the self, or to remain impartial, or to adopt the stance of a disinterested observer" (p. 100).

What Can We Learn from Ethics of Care?

An ethics of care perspective provides positive reasons why people ought to commit to restitution and restorative justice, as opposed to Boonin, who primarily argues that the only reason to accept restitution is that the alternative (punishment) is worse. Our current punishment system is closely aligned with an ethics of justice perspective, which focuses on "questions of fairness, equality, individual rights, abstract principles, and the consistent application of them" (Held, 2006, p. 15). In contrast, an ethics of care perspective focuses on cultivating caring relations, attentiveness, and trust by fostering social bonds and cooperation among individuals. In other words, ethics of care does not consider

justice the paramount determinant. Instead, it examines how caring relations and moral emotions, like sensitivity and empathy, affect how we ought to treat offenders within the criminal justice system. When we look at restitution and restorative justice through an ethics of care lens, trust, mutual concern, and empathetic responsiveness take priority, especially since we are concerned with making the victim better off rather than harming the offender. Using Indigenous-based restorative justice practices, such as circle sentencing, we can demonstrate sensitivity, cultivate relationships, and better respond to the victims' and offenders' needs. It is much more than simply lowering recidivism rates, even though that is one of the many reasons for favouring a restorative justice system.

Another positive reason to adopt the value of care is its practice of healing people and relationships. The philosophy of restorative justice is a lesson in the ethics of care because it turns away from intentionally harming people and instead focuses on practicing what it preaches: facilitating healing (Chatterjee & Elliott, 2003, p. 350). A system of restitution and restorative justice can be seen as a delicate balance between ethics of justice and ethics of care. However, when integrating these two distinct concepts, care should always have priority, even though the primary considerations of justice should also be met (Held, 2006, p.17). Care is more fundamental because there can be care without justice. For example, some people live under an unjust authoritarian regime, but they still experience care because they possess loving interdependent relationships. In contrast, the world would cease to function without care since love, caring relations, and interpersonal relationships are necessities. It follows that there would be no justice without care, primarily because the world would not function in ways that would allow us to achieve justice or do much of anything without care. It should be clear why an ethics of care perspective strongly encourages and promotes the move toward restitution and restorative justice. In the next section, I will apply the ethics of care perspective to explain how to practically approach restitution and restorative justice in the case of lawbreakers and offenders.

The Practical Application of the Ethics of Care

While Boonin argues for the moral rejection of punishment, his claims are still controversial and lack practical insight. How can ethics of care influence the practical application of restitution and restorative justice? First, ethics of care is characterized by anti-unification. The moral theory does not provide a universal moral principle or tractable set of principles to follow. Second, ethics of care is also distinguished by anti-abstractionism because the specific context of a situation is significant when making a moral decision. Similar cases are not and should not be treated the same. Therefore, we should not have a system that relies solely on punishment, nor should we replace our current system with restitution and restorative justice. Ethics of care teaches us that individual cases matter, and we cannot apply one universal moral principle when holding offenders accountable. The solution is to combine punishment, restitution and restorative justice in a nuanced way because, given the values of the ethics of care, it would be a mistake to say there is only one framework that works for every situation and solves every problem. Since individual cases are highly context-sensitive, restitution or restorative justice cannot be the only solution. Nonetheless, restitution and restorative justice are essential in the toolkit of the criminal justice system for scenarios where care is an appropriate response.

We can incorporate elements of both restitution and restoration into our current criminal justice system as a gentler approach rather than completely replacing our current punishment practices. As previously mentioned, this could include relying on traditional Indigenous sentencing methods, such as family group conferencing and circle sentencing. The reason for combining punishment and restorative justice is that there will be cases that involve inherently bad and violent offenders. While we can use lessons in care to shape our justice practices and societal norms, there may be serial rapists or killers beyond rehabilitation or re-education. What do we do then? Here, we should rely on components

from our current justice practices because handling inherently violent offenders with care will not work. Noddings (1984) argues that we should commit such offenders to a mental institution because they do not have the capacity to experience care or maintain caring relations (pp. 81-87). As we are not only justified but morally obligated to do what is required to maintain and enhance care, the right thing to do in this situation is to intentionally harm the inherently bad offender through punishment to ensure that others can preserve their interpersonal relationships (Noddings, 1984, p. 95). Held (2006) expresses that there is nothing soft about care, evident in how a good mother knows how and when to discipline her children (pp. 15-17). Recognizing and using punishment when restitution or restorative justice will not work exhibits the same characteristics of care that a good mother displays when she effectively and rightly disciplines her children.

Though Boonin states that he only accepts restitution because the alternative is worse, ethics of care provides us with additional considerations in favour of restitution and restorative justice. These novel ideas should excite us because they bolster Boonin and Meyer's claims while encouraging us only partially to reject punishment since no single framework works for all. By observing through an ethics of care lens, we can see why cultivating relationships and relying on values of trust, mutual concern, and empathetic responsiveness is a beneficial strategy for the criminal justice system. The practical application of restorative justice already exists in Indigenous-based sentencing options, like circle sentencing. Therefore, we should continue incorporating restitution and restorative justice alongside our current punishment practices to lower recidivism rates and establish a morally superior and more capable criminal justice system.

Conclusion

In this article, I have addressed the moral problem of punishment, that it is impermissible to intentionally harm others, even as a form of retribution, and proposed a system that incorporates elements of both restitution and restorative justice as a soft approach rather than fully replacing our current criminal justice system. This was accomplished in multiple steps. First, I explained what restitution and restorative justice systems are. Second, I introduced the normative ethical theory ethics of care and fleshed out the main assumptions from the theory that are relevant to this particular discussion. Third, I clarified how ethics of care can provide additional support for restitution and restorative justice over punishment. Last, I analyzed how we should approach taking ethics of care from the theoretical and applying it practically to our current justice system. I conclude that we should adopt restitution and restorative justice alongside punishment because it would establish a well-rounded and morally superior criminal justice system.

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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).¹ 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 Chapuisat 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

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.² 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,

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 realism³ 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

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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A Defense and Evaluation of Spinoza's Ontological Argument

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Abstract

Proofs for the existence of God have undergone many forms. However, the tradition surrounding the Ontological Argument is unique in that it is typified by the search for a purely *a priori* method of arriving at God's necessary existence. Spinoza's Ontological Argument is well worth the attention, given its uniqueness with respect to the traditional Anselmian variations. Moreover, within the greater context of Spinoza's "Ethics," the argument advances a wholly foreign notion of a self-contained pantheistic God. In this paper, I shall simplify Spinoza's Ontological Argument and evaluate its integrity against the many critiques raised against it.

Keywords: Metaphysics

The Ontological Argument for the existence of God has had a lengthy history, undergoing many different variations throughout the ages. One such variation is present in Baruch Spinoza's "Ethics," in which God, or "substance," is "that which is in itself and is conceived through itself."¹ The self-determinate nature of God is unique to Him alone, and given that all other things are not "in themselves" nor are conceived through themselves, the necessary existence of God is said to follow as the sufficient reason for the existence of all determinate things. In this paper I shall first introduce Spinoza's version of the Ontological Argument, providing a seven-step reconstruction of the first eleven propositions in Spinoza's "Ethics." Afterwards, I shall next address the Leibnizian objection which affirms the logical possibility of two substances existing alongside each other. Then, I shall defend Spinoza's version of the Ontological Argument from Immanuel Kant's famous critique of the standard versions of the Ontological Argument, paying great attention to Spinoza's conception of essence. I shall also provide a defense of Spinoza's *Necessitarianism*, which is often taken to be a drawback rather than a crucial feature. Finally, I will evaluate whether Spinoza's Ontological Argument stands its ground in the face of compelling objections, making use of David Hume's causal anti-realism in concluding that the reliance upon the Principle of Sufficient Reason was not sufficiently argued for, but was naively assumed *a posteriori*, thereby undermining the purely a priori nature of the Ontological Argument.

1. Benedictus De Spinoza and Seymour Feldman. "The Ethics." (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992).

The Ontological Argument

The Ontological Argument of the “Ethics” works by defining substance in a certain way such that only one substance, God, could possibly exist. According to Spinoza, God is infinite, and an infinite substance containing all attributes is not compossible with any other substance’s affections since such affections are already contained by the infinite scope of God. Moreover, the infinite nature of substance is said to entail existence, because all things (affections/attributes) have substance for their ground. If there is only one substance, and if substance is necessarily self-determinate, it follows that substance/God necessarily exists. Below, I condensed Spinoza’s Ontological Argument in part 1 of the “Ethics”, covering propositions 1–11:

1. Substance is that which grounds its affections (and so is prior to them). (I5d) (Ip1)
2. Particular affections/attributes of substance are unique to the substance from which they are generated, so no two substances can share the same affections/attributes (and there is no intersection between substances of alien natures). (Ip5)
3. “One substance cannot be produced by another substance.” (Ip6)
4. Substance “is necessarily infinite,” for limitation could only occur via another existing substance “having the same attribute” (which is impossible). (Ip8)
5. There is only one substance, because infinitude entails the containment of all attributes, and “There cannot be a substance that has no attributes.”² (Ip8s2)
6. “Existence belongs to the nature of substance” (a substance “necessarily exists if there is no reason or cause which prevents its

2. Don Garrett. *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*. (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 64.

existence,” while a substance is necessarily non-existent if there is a reason or cause within its nature which prevents its existence); substance is self-determinate. (Ip7) (Ip11)

7. Therefore, “God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists.” (Ip11)

The approach undertaken by this argument is to first conceive of something—substance—which is “in itself” and whose essence is “conceived through itself.” Using these parameters, one can easily deduce whether something is a substance through the investigation of its concept. For instance, a unicorn cannot be a substance, because its idea is conceived through a corn, a horse, and a two-dimensional plane. Nor can the most perfect island be a substance, because it is conceived through surrounding water, the surface that grounds it, etc. In other words, the essence of substance must be independent of anything apart from itself. If two substances have no common attributes (being particular instantiations of the essence of a substance), it is evident that “one cannot be the cause of the other,” for they are completely alien to one another. However, one might wonder why two substances cannot share the same affections or attributes.

For the latter, the answer lies within the definition of an attribute. As for the former, substances cannot be distinguished by their affections because, being prior to them, modes can only provide an inadequate conception of the substance through which they exist; substance is conceived “through itself,” through the attributes that instantiate its essence, not through its modes.

Having shown that one substance cannot be causally related to another substance, Spinoza’s next step is proving substance to be necessarily infinite. He reasons that to be finite is to be constrained in some way that prevents infinity, but the only way for a substance to be limited is by another existing substance “having the same attribute”, and this has already been proven impossible. If substance is infinite, then it contains

all possible attributes, having no limitation apart from logical impossibility (i.e. an attribute that renders all other attributes inactive, or anything that is impossible with the other attributes of substance). This entails that there is only one possible substance because a substance must have at least one attribute. Spinoza then utilizes the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), stating that a substance “necessarily exists if there is no reason or cause which prevents its existence,”³ and conversely, that a substance is necessarily non-existent if within its nature lies an internal contradiction that prevents its existence. Since it is within the nature of a substance to be self-determinate, the state of existence a substance occupies is unchangeable. If a substance does not exist then it could not possibly ever exist, due to lacking the requisite condition of actualized self-causation required of substance; an existing substance is that “whose nature can be conceived only as existing.”⁴ Finally, the argument concludes that there is a substance whose independent essence involves existence—God.

How does Spinoza’s version of the Ontological Argument differ from the typical variations in which God is defined into existence simply by being *Ens Perfectissimum*? In exclusively focusing on the concept of substance, the domain of possible conceptual inserts for God within the Ontological Argument is massively restricted. A standard Ontological Argument can prove the existence of just about anything, from the most perfect island to the existence of a maximally evil being!⁵⁶ However, none of these concepts are truly conceived through themselves. Moreover, the standard Ontological Argument treats existence as a predicate; if there is a perfection greater than all others, *x*, then existence must be included within the concept because *x* would be imperfect to lack existence. This strategy is incomparable to Spinoza’s Ontological Argument, having evaded the substitution problem (also known as the “Perfect Island” objection of Gaunilo), and in

3. Spinoza. "The Ethics." 43, Ip11.

4. Spinoza. "The Ethics." 38, 1d1.

5. R. Kane. "The Modal Ontological Argument." *Mind* 93, no. 371 (Jun 1984): 336–50.

6. Michael Tooley. "Plantinga's Defence of the Ontological Argument." *Mind* 90, no. 359 (Jul 1981): 422–27.

doing so it simultaneously discounts the possibility of a non-monistic conception of reality given the infinitude of substance. Rather than treating existence as a property, Spinoza's argument aims to identify the unity of self-determinate essence with existence. I shall next elaborate on the validity of the 'No Shared Attribute' thesis.

The Leibnizian Objection

The Leibnizian Objection against Spinoza's Ontological Argument is as follows: if no substance can share all its attributes with another, it remains to be seen why two substances with entirely different attributes, with the exception of one hypothetical attribute, is an impossibility.⁷ If this critique is granted, then Spinoza's argument for monism fails. To resolve this objection, it is necessary to point to two things: the definition of an attribute as "that which the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence,"⁸ and the 10th proposition in Part I, which states that "Each attribute of one substance must be conceived through itself."⁹ According to Michael Della Rocca, if two substances shared the same attribute that would entail that each substance can be conceived through the other.¹⁰ The argument below shall clarify this position:

1. Substances are "conceived through themselves" (Id3).
2. An attribute is a particular essence of a substance (Id4).
3. Attributes are conceived through themselves, whereas modes are conceived through another; attributes bear no relation to other attributes (Ip10) (Id5).

7. Jason Waller. *Spinoza, Benedict De: Metaphysics*. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. n.d.

8. Spinoza. "The Ethics." 38, Id4.

9. Spinoza. "The Ethics." 43, Ip10.

10. Michael Della Rocca. "Spinoza's Substance Monism." *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes* (Feb 2002): 17–22.

4. There exists two substances, A and B, each having entirely different attributes apart from the attribute x. [reductio premise]
5. A and B have x in common. [from 4]
6. x constitutes the essence of both A and B. [from 2 and 5]
7. There is a conjunction in essence between A and B; since attributes are conceived through themselves, the difference in attributes between A and B has no bearing on x, being independent of them. [from 3 and 6]
8. A and B can be conceived through each other given the conjunction of x; A, sharing a similar nature to B through x, is not entirely conceived through itself, for x conjuncts with B, and vice versa. [premise]
9. A and B are modes, because they are not conceived through themselves, but are rather conceived through another; A is conceived through B via x, and B is conceived through A via x, so both A and B depend upon x, making them modes. [from 1 through 8]

I can make this argument simpler by limiting the attributes of A and B, such that A is ((q)(r)(x)) and B is ((x)(y)(z)). The Leibnizian argument would hold that A and B are truly separate from one another, for x accompanies different attributes in each substance, such that the result is a distinguishable entity. However, since attributes are conceived through themselves, it is incorrect to conceptualize the sets in the following manner: A(qrx); B(xyz). Spinoza is quite clear that an attribute is an independent essence of a substance. Given this, the sets should appear like so: A(q,r,x); B(x,y,z). In this arrangement, A and B conjunct in x, consequently making it impossible that they are substances, for A and B are no longer conceived through themselves.

Having shown the failure of the Leibnizian critique against Spinozistic monism, a critique formulated by the most prominent polymath of the 17th Century, Spinoza's Ontological Argument stands logically uncontested. However, one century later Spinoza's system faced

a truly worthy adversary, Immanuel Kant. I shall next elaborate on the connection between essence and existence in Spinoza's Ontological Argument given the Kantian critique of the Ontological Argument.

Explication and Defense of Essence

In its simplest form, Spinoza's Ontological Argument is, "there is an essence whose existence follows necessarily from that essence."¹¹ Thus far I have shown how Spinoza's version of the Ontological Argument evades the substitution problem common to earlier forms of the argument—which allowed for virtually any concept to be defined into existence. Spinoza's version of the argument is also distinguished from the standard versions of the Ontological Argument by its inbuilt defense against the critique raised by Immanuel Kant.

Immanuel Kant famously raised doubt over the procession of existence from essence, stating that "existence is not a predicate or a determination of a thing."¹² However, Kant's understanding of essence differs from Spinoza, who does not understand it to be a "purely logical term" nor "the mere object of any definable sign."¹³ First, existence is not a property added to God, because the essence of God is identical to God's existence. Second, essences are not mind-dependent ideas; all things are expressions of substance since there is nothing outside or apart from substance. Given this, ideas are particular positive instantiations of the power of substance possessing objective existence and not mere mind-dependent linguistic properties. To further elaborate on Spinoza's conception of essence, since every thing (object or idea) is a modification of infinite substance, modes can differ with respect to the force or vivacity with which substance is

11. William A Earle. "The Ontological Argument in Spinoza." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 11, no. 4 (Jun 1951): 549.

12. Immanuel Kant, and David Walford. "The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant Theoretical Philosophy: 1755-1770." (UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 117.

13. Earle. "The Ontological Argument." 550.

expressed. So, modes have varying degrees of positive reality, given that substance is the ultimate reality that grounds all things. Essences are thus positive instantiations of substance—the only reality—and from this it follows that no essence is inherently detached from substance. However distinct Spinoza's conception of essence is, why might this matter? The idea of essence as positivity, being inextricably linked with substance, is still bound to the realm in which it is posited. Kant claimed that meaningful philosophical language must necessarily posit something existent which matches a certain set of properties. Spinoza's idea of essence has yet to escape the conceptual realm, or has it?

Spinoza distinguishes between *idea* and *ideatum*.¹⁴ The former is a "psychological state" and is mind-dependent, while the latter refers to a physically extended object independent of the mind. *Idea* is "a mode of thought," and *ideatum* is a "determinate mode of extension."¹⁵ In "The Ontological Argument in Spinoza," William A. Earle uses the example of a circle to demonstrate this dual aspect relationship between *idea* and *ideatum*:

"The idea of a circle would therefore have two aspects: it is, to be sure, an idea, a mode of thought; but it is the idea of a circle which is not a mode of thought, but a determinate mode of extension. The circle is round, and all its radii are equal, whereas it would be absurd to speak of an idea as being round or having radii. Thought and extension have distinct properties, and neither is to be understood in terms of the other."¹⁶

This distinction between *idea* and *ideatum* certainly helps Spinoza's argument against the criticism that his concept of essence is an idea in the psychological sense, for the idea of something does not necessitate a relation of dependence to a positing mind—one can conceive of ideas that are not derived from the act of conception but instead discovered through conception, such as mathematical objects or theorems.

14. Spinoza. "The Ethics." 39, Ia6.

15. Earle. "The Ontological Argument." 550.

16. Earle. "The Ontological Argument." 550.

The idea and ideatum distinction is also unique with respect to the two standard theories of Universals, Conceptualism and Nominalism. While Conceptualism affirms a limited mind-dependent existence to ideas, Spinoza's distinction does not reduce all the objects of the understanding to be dependent upon the very act of positing. Moreover, while the Nominalist position denies any actual existence to ideas, the Spinozist position evades the problem with the denial of universals. For instance, the Nominalist denial of the universally accepted notion of extension entails that the discoveries of physics and geometry are illusory since there are no such things as existing mind-independent facts about objects—such as the properties of triangles or circles. Both Conceptualism and Nominalism contradict much of our existing knowledge about the world and do little to clarify it, unlike Spinoza's perspective, in which the

“...distinguishability of idea and ideatum is essential to the objective and independent validity of thought. A geometer resolves the circle into its proper elements, planes, lines, and the central point; at no point need he mention the thought which is thinking all this. No geometry will be found to posit among its principles ideas as such or anything else psychological. Geometry and logic are sciences independent of psychology, studying objective relations among the things posited.”¹⁷

If Spinoza is justified in distinguishing between idea and ideatum, it still remains to be seen how essence can be considered to be mind-dependent. If this issue is left unresolved, the Ontological Argument collapses. Fortunately, this concern is not difficult to clarify.

To reiterate an earlier point, since all exists through substance, mind-independent ideas, ideatum, are particular positive instantiations of the power of substance. However, no idea is “conceived through itself” nor “is in itself,” except substance.¹⁸ For instance, “The essence of circle depends, among other things, on the essence of plane, of line, etc.”¹⁹

17. Earle. "The Ontological Argument." 550–501.

18. Spinoza. "The Ethics." 39, Ia3.

19. Earle. "The Ontological Argument." 551.

Since the essence of any given mode of substance depends upon other essences for its adequate conception, it follows that existing instantiations of essence likewise depend upon existing instantiations of other essences included within its nature. Put simply, the modifications of substance are existentially dependent “upon precisely those things on which their essences will essentially depend.”²⁰ From this, it follows that an essence “conceived through itself” and “is in itself” will exist through no thing other than itself, which is to say that its independent existence follows from its independent essence. The reason for the validity of Spinoza’s Ontological Argument, as argued thus far, can be succinctly put as follows:

“the existence of God...is nothing but his essence: they are one and the same thing. To assert God's existence, therefore, is to frame an analytic proposition. One is not adding an extrinsic property to an essence; ultimately the argument is simply the reaffirmation of the absolute independence of God's essence. It is analytic, and therefore requires no additional grounds.”²¹

Since Spinoza’s Ontological Argument evades the biggest critique facing all Ontological Arguments due to the distinction between idea and ideatum, it is certainly convincing given its conceptual immunity against both the Leibnizian and Kantian critiques. However, there remains one crucial issue with the Spinozist argument that has yet been explored, and it has deterred many from accepting it as a result. I shall next defend the necessity of Spinoza’s Necessitarianism, the position that denies any contingency in things whatsoever.

Defense of Necessitarianism

Any proper argument for the existence of God must at least be accepted among theists, but Spinoza’s Ontological Argument has

20. Earle. "The Ontological Argument." 552.

21. Earle. "The Ontological Argument." 552.

little support among theists and atheists alike in large part due to its Necessitarianism—a necessary consequence of Spinoza's reliance upon the PSR. This proves worrisome because the convictions of atheists are such that theistic arguments would have little weight, but if a proof of the existence of God is rejected by theists, who are predisposed to accepting theistic proofs, then that could reflect poorly on the argument itself. However, Spinoza was able to arrive at a proof for the existence of God through the PSR, and what follows from its utilization is logically necessary. To reject Necessitarianism without understanding its necessity is to destroy the argument entirely. Though the PSR is not named directly, Spinoza did utilize it in stating that "For every thing a cause or reason must be assigned either for its existence or for its non-existence."²² Why might necessitarianism follow from the PSR? Consider the following argument:

1. Suppose for a *reductio ad absurdum* that there is a big conjunction of all contingent facts (BCCF) (and so the BCCF is itself a contingent fact). [reductio premise]
2. Every fact has an explanation. [PSR]
3. Therefore, the BCCF has an explanation. [from 1 and 2]
4. If the BCCF has an explanation, then the explanation of the BCCF is either contingent or necessary. [premise]
5. Therefore, the explanation of the BCCF is either contingent or necessary. [from 3 and 4]
6. If the explanation of the BCCF is contingent, then the BCCF explains itself. [premise]
7. But no contingent fact explains itself. [premise]
8. Therefore, the explanation of the BCCF is not contingent. [from 6 and 7]
9. Therefore, the explanation of the BCCF is necessary. [from 5 and 8]

22. Spinoza. "The Ethics." 44, Ip11d.

10. If the explanation of the BCCF is necessary, then the BCCF is necessary. [premise]
11. Therefore, the BCCF is necessary. [from 9 and 10]
12. Therefore, the BCCF is both contingent and necessary-i.e., both contingent and not contingent-which is absurd. [from 1 and 11]
13. Therefore, our supposition for reductio, premise (1), is false: there is no BCCF. [from 1 through 12]
14. Therefore, there are no contingent facts, i.e., there are only necessary facts. [from 13]" (Unknown, 2021).²³²⁴

The argument above proves that contingency cannot be held alongside the PSR (when unrestricted). If each fact of this universe is contingent, then the universe can be expressed as a totality of contingent facts (BCCF), and this totality must have an explanation (per the PSR). If the explanation for the totality is contingent, then the totality explains itself, being nothing more than a mere totality of contingent facts. However, "no contingent fact explains itself," so the explanation for the totality must be necessary. According to the Modal Transfer Principle, the totality (BCCF) is necessary by consequence of its necessary cause. However, Strong Necessitarianism—the position that conceives of everything as being of the exact same strong necessity—is not implied, as the necessary cause is in itself necessary, while the BCCF is necessary by consequence. Therefore, an unrestricted PSR directly entails Weak Necessitarianism, in which everything is *contingently necessary* in virtue of the first cause, while the first cause is *necessarily necessary* due to its necessary presupposition. Put differently,

23. The concept of the BCCF originates in pages 202-204 of Peter Van Inwagen 1983, was later commented upon and used in an argument for the existence of God by Alexander Pruss in the second chapter of "The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology" (William Lane Craig and James Porter Moreland 2009), and finally the argument shown in this paper originated in a blog post comment on Alexander Pruss' blog by an anonymous poster, whose citation appears below.

24. Unknown. 2021. Re: Alexander Pruss's Blog: "Why I Can't Believe in a God Other than of Classical Theism." [Blog comment]

the necessarily necessary first cause grounds that which is contingently necessary. The above clarification over Weak Necessitarianism best coincides with Spinoza's system as he had laid it out. This clarification of the necessity of Necessitarianism should dispel the doubts theists might harbor over the validity of Spinoza's Ontological Argument, but is it compelling to atheists? I shall next critically evaluate the limitations of Spinoza's Ontological Argument.

Limitations of The Ontological Argument

Though Spinoza purports to have successfully given an *a priori* argument for the existence of God, there is uncertainty as to whether the argument is even *a priori*. First, Spinoza's Ontological Argument lacks justification for using the concept of substance. It is not the case that the conception of substance is necessary at all considering the many frameworks that do without it, like the anti-realism of David Hume. The Humean position over the metaphysics of causation is one that denies the necessity of past conjunctions between events from being repeated into the future, since such a notion could only ever be inferred from observed conjunctions and is thus conceivably false.²⁵ Even if the distinction between idea and ideatum is valid, there is no *a priori* reason to accept the concept of substance as existing independently of the mind. The only people that might be convinced of Spinoza's Ontological Argument must both presuppose the validity of the concept of substance and must assume the concept to correspond to something existent—which requires *a posteriori* justification. Moreover, Spinoza's indirect usage of the PSR is problematic because he takes its truth for granted. Therein lies the second issue, as the PSR requires *a posteriori* justification; how can it be known that, logically, everything requires an antecedent cause without phenomenal experience of causal processes? The Humean skeptic can argue that

25. William Edward Morris, and Charlotte R. Brown. "David Hume." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (USA: Stanford University, 2021).

our sense-impressions give us no reason to infer future repetitions of past phenomenal patterns because such a repetition of the past is logically unnecessary. If it is logically unnecessary that the patterns of the past repeat into the future, why might it be logically necessary that everything requires an antecedent cause? Such a claim seems inductive, and if this is the case, then the argument required to justify the PSR would be *a posteriori*.²⁶

Since Spinoza's Ontological Argument is reliant upon the PSR, and since the PSR likely requires some *a posteriori* justification, a complete version of Spinoza's argument for the existence of God would not be completely *a priori*. Additionally, one cannot accept the argument without first accepting the validity of the concept of substance, which demands *a posteriori* support. Given these criticisms, a revised version of Spinoza's argument would not be Ontological, but would instead resemble the Cosmological Argument. As it stands, it is incomplete. Even if it follows from the antecedent premises that the existence of an infinite substance is necessary, such an existence is of a conceptual nature. The only thing achieved by the argument is that the concept devised by Spinoza must exist necessarily if it exists, but its actual existence is uncertain and unproven (having neglected to justify the concept of substance). Spinoza's proof for the existence of God would have fared better had it not been an Ontological Argument.

Conclusion

Spinoza's Ontological Argument was a huge deviation from the better-known versions of the Ontological Argument. Though the strategy to identify God's essence with existence was admirable, the argument was doomed to failure in neglecting to give *a posteriori* justification to the concept of substance. Moreover, Spinoza's logical refinement of the concept

26. Leah Henderson. "The Problem of Induction." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (USA: Stanford University, 2018).

of substance, through the many propositions that built upon each other, failed to evade the conceptual realm from which such concepts were spun. Without positing an existent substance (with *a posteriori* justification), the Ontological Argument could not possibly prove anything about existing things. Had Spinoza abandoned the pursuit of a purely *a priori* argument for the existence of God, the end product would have been far more compelling. As it stands, the argument is but a landmark in the history of philosophy—one that much can be learned from.

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