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What Can Debunking Do for Us (Sceptics and Nihilists)?

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So-called debunking accounts of moral judgements aim to show that our moral judgements are upshots of processes that make them fail to track moral truths reliably. Debunking accounts are often presented as particularly challenging for non-naturalistic versions of moral realism, according to which moral truths, facts, and properties are metaphysically distinct from naturalistic truths, facts, and properties. In this paper, I have two main aims. The first is to explore how non-naturalists can respond to the debunking challenge. My suggested response overlaps in various ways with what some recent critics of debunking accounts have argued. Although sketchy in its details, I take this response to be satisfactory.

I do not believe, however, that this means that debunking arguments in metaethics are in the end entirely devoid of dialectical force. My second aim is to argue that debunking arguments have a limited and indirect role to play in the exchange between non-naturalists (who are non-nihilists and non-sceptics about morality) and moral error theorists (who are both sceptics and nihilists about morality).¹ The upshot of this discussion is that debunking arguments can do less for sceptics and nihilists than what is commonly thought, but not nothing.

1. Non-naturalistic Moral Realism and Debunking: What is the Challenge?

¹ I shall take moral error theory to entail nihilism about moral truth. I shall thus take it that moral error theorists are committed to scepticism about moral knowledge. It is quite possible to be a moral sceptic but not a moral nihilist, maintaining that moral truths are unknowable. Moral non-naturalists, in contrast, are non-nihilists about moral truths and virtually all of them are non-sceptics about moral knowledge.

Debunking accounts in metaethics offer aetiologies of moral judgement that purport to show that moral judgements are upshots of processes that make them fail to track moral truths reliably. While debunkers can appeal to various kinds of processes, the focus in recent metaethical debate on debunking has been almost exclusively on the evolutionary process of natural selection. Hence the debate has been heavily focused on evolutionary debunking arguments. Why are debunking accounts often thought to be particularly challenging for non-naturalistic versions of moral realism? Well, according to naturalistic versions of moral realism, moral truths are in some crucial sense naturalistic truths and there is thus nothing in principle that stops moral naturalists from arguing that our moral judgements are both upshots of naturalistic processes, such as natural selection, and reliably connected to moral truths.² Needless to say, however, it remains a challenge to work out the details of such a naturalist account.

It appears that non-naturalist realists cannot maintain that a naturalistic process such as natural selection connects our moral judgements in a reliable way to moral truths, since moral truths, according to these theorists, are metaphysically distinct from natural truths. As such, moral truths are causally inefficacious and they are not wholly constituted by naturalistic truths. Debunking accounts thus present non-naturalist moral realists with an epistemological challenge.

However, one might think that the non-naturalists' moral metaphysics already presents them with the challenge of explaining how our moral judgements can be reliably connected to moral truths and how we can come to know moral truths.³ So, what news do debunking accounts bring to the table? A common thought seems to be that if an evolutionary debunking

² Enoch 2011: 160; Vavova 2014: 78.

³ Justin Clarke-Doane has argued in a series of papers that debunking arguments against moral non-naturalism are analogous to the Benacerraf challenge to Platonism about mathematics (see, e.g., Clarke-Doane 2016). Similarly, Michael Klenk has argued that Street's evolutionary debunking argument against moral realism relies crucially on the so-called Benacerraf-Field challenge, applied to moral knowledge (Klenk 2017).

account is correct, our moral beliefs are explained by factors unrelated to putative moral truths. Therefore, if any of our moral beliefs are true, this is the result of mere coincidences. These coincidences are thought to be so improbable that the threat of moral scepticism looms large for non-naturalism.⁴

It is important not to overstate the challenge. Non-naturalists need not claim that our moral judgements are generally true or reliable. After all, it is open for non-naturalists who want to resist moral scepticism to hold that most of our moral beliefs are not true and that only a minority of them, which have been formed by reliable methods, are reliably true. In order to respond to evolutionary debunking arguments and resist moral scepticism, non-naturalists need only to explain how we can come to have reliably true moral beliefs and how we can come to know moral truths, although our moral beliefs are ultimately explained by the mechanism of natural selection, which is unrelated to moral truth.

A second point to notice at this stage and to be substantiated below is that ‘debunking arguments’ might be something of a misnomer in the present context. This is because to debunk something, such as a belief of some kind, is to expose it as false or unjustified. But on the understanding of debunking arguments that I have presented above, which I take to be in line with the common understanding in the debate, debunking arguments do not establish that our moral beliefs are false or that nihilism is true. I shall also argue that debunking arguments fail to establish that our moral beliefs are not—and still less that they cannot be—epistemically justified, contrary to what some debunkers have argued. That is why I used the locution ‘so-called debunking arguments’ in the beginning of this paper.⁵ (From now on, I will drop the caveat.) What debunking arguments do achieve is to present an epistemological challenge to moral non-naturalism: How can our true moral beliefs and judgements be reliable and

⁴ Street (2006: 122). See also Enoch’s instructive discussion of how to understand the epistemological challenge to moral non-naturalism, or robust moral realism, as he calls it (Enoch 2011: 158-60).

⁵ Olson 2014: 146.

justified, and not just true by coincidence, although they are ultimately explained by naturalistic processes, such as natural selection, that do not track moral truths?

2. Non-Naturalism's Best Response

To begin unpacking non-naturalism's best response, let us first note that the most plausible versions of non-naturalism take fundamental moral truths to be *necessary*.⁶ What precisely the fundamental moral truths are is not a metaethical question; it is a question for substantive normative inquiry and hence not one that non-naturalists *qua* non-naturalists are obliged to answer. Some candidates are that happiness is (perhaps uniquely) good as an end, that there is a *prima facie* duty to keep one's promises, that we have special obligations to our near and dear, and that cheaters and free-riders ought to be reproached or punished.

Turn now to our moral beliefs. We know that according to debunking accounts, they are the upshots of processes that are unrelated to moral truths, such as natural selection. I shall also assume that debunkers hold that at least some moral beliefs are not mere by-products of natural selection, but have been selected because of their evolutionary advantageousness, i.e., because they motivate patterns of behaviour that tend to promote reproductive success. Now consider the putative moral truths mentioned in the preceding paragraph. It is striking and undeniable that beliefs with roughly this content are widespread among human beings; that is, many people across different cultures believe that happiness is good as an end, that there is a general duty to keep promises, that we have special obligations to our near and dear, and that cheaters and free-riders ought to be reproached or punished. It is also a strikingly plausible conjecture that such beliefs are evolutionarily advantageous. Beliefs to the effect that

⁶ This claim is controversial. Some non-naturalists reject the view that fundamental moral truths are necessary (e.g., Hattiangadi 2018). But on the assumption that fundamental moral truths are not necessary, it could be that hedonistic utilitarianism is true in the actual world but false in some merely possible world which is just like the actual world in all non-moral respects. But how could there be such a fundamental moral difference between two worlds that are non-morally alike? Such a difference cries out for explanation.

happiness is good (as an end) probably bolster motivation and readiness to act so as to bring about human happiness, which is beneficial for reproductive success. The same goes for beliefs to the effect that we have special obligations to our near and dear, that there is a duty to keep promises, and that cheaters and free-riders ought to be reproached or punished. According to at least one recent natural history of human morality, beliefs related to cooperation and coordination, and to the human ability to empathize with others, have been extremely important ingredients in the evolution of human moral psychology and of human societies.⁷

This suggests that non-naturalists have a ready explanation of why at least some of our true moral beliefs are non-coincidentally, and hence reliably, true. First, it is no coincidence that the fundamental moral truths obtain, since they are necessary truths. Neither is it a coincidence that some non-fundamental moral truths obtain, since they follow from conjunctions of fundamental moral truths and non-moral truths about worlds like ours. Second, it is no coincidence that belief in some of the (fundamental and non-fundamental) moral truths is widespread, since believing these truths (or something close enough to them) tends to enhance evolutionary fitness. Admittedly, natural selection could have favoured other kinds of moral belief, but it is not a coincidence that it favoured the kinds of moral belief it did favour. It is thus not a coincidence that some of our moral beliefs are true; that is, it is not a coincidence that we have beliefs whose content are true moral propositions.⁸

There might be no selection for beliefs with precisely true moral content, but some beliefs that are selected for may be close enough to the moral truths. Close enough, that is, for

⁷ Tomasello 2016.

⁸ White 2010: 589; Olson 2014: 146. Justin Clarke-Doane argues in a similar way that our true fundamental moral beliefs are both safe and sensitive. They are safe, i.e., such that they could not easily have been false because they could not have been false. They are sensitive because it is trivially true that had the fundamental moral truths been different, our fundamental moral beliefs would have been different (Clarke-Doane 2016). This is because conditionals with necessarily false antecedents are trivially true. Notice, however, that for the same reason, it is also trivially true that had the fundamental moral truths been different, our fundamental moral beliefs would *not* have been different.

evolution not to put us completely on the wrong track in moral inquiry, and for natural selection not to be considered as an altogether distorting factor in the formation of our moral beliefs and in our endeavours to formulate normative theories. Systematic normative theorizing can take us from the intuitive but imprecise to the more abstract and philosophically sophisticated; e.g., from the judgement that happiness is good to the judgement that the general happiness is (uniquely) finally good, and from the judgement that there is a duty to keep promises to the deontological view that there is a *prima facie* duty to this effect, or to the utilitarian view that there is a non-fundamental duty to keep promises because there is a fundamental duty to promote happiness and keeping promises tend to be conducive to happiness, while breaking promises tends not to be.⁹

Are there any residual coincidences for the non-naturalist to explain? One pertinent question is of course how there can be necessary, non-naturalistic, moral truths in the first place. I myself am inclined to nihilism about such truths. But the worry can hardly be that these putative truths obtain by coincidence. Objections to non-naturalistic moral truths have a long and familiar history in metaethics and they are not logically connected to debunking accounts of moral judgements. (I will come back to such objections in the next section.)

Debunkers might object that it is question-begging to make assumptions about what the fundamental moral truths are, in the course of responding to the sceptical worry that if any of our moral beliefs is true, this is so because of highly improbable coincidences.¹⁰ But in order for non-naturalists to have a fair chance of explaining the reliable connection between moral truths and moral beliefs, they must be granted permission to make assumptions about what the

⁹ This is not to deny, of course, that there have likely also been evolutionary pressures in favour of moral beliefs that few non-naturalists take to line up with moral truths, such as xenophobic or sexist beliefs to the effect that people of a certain skin colour or gender are morally superior to others. It is important to keep in mind the modesty of the challenge to non-naturalism. Non-naturalists need to explain only why some of our true moral beliefs are reliably true and why the correlation between some of our true moral beliefs and the moral truths is not a highly improbable coincidence.

¹⁰ Street 2016: 315, 322.

moral truths are. The policy of denying such permissions opens the door for a philosophical scepticism of a much more general and problematic sort. For it is not easy to see how we could explain the reliability of our beliefs about, say, logic, metaphysics, and perception without relying on some of our beliefs in these areas, i.e., without assuming that some of our beliefs about logic, metaphysics, and perception are true.¹¹ Finally, if non-naturalists are not permitted to make assumptions about moral truths in responding to the debunking challenge, the relevance of debunking accounts as parts of the sceptical attack on non-naturalism can be questioned. For it seems already problematic enough to defend the reliability of moral beliefs if one is not permitted to make assumptions about what the moral truths are.¹²

Debunkers might next protest that it seems to be an astonishing coincidence that we humans evolved as a species for whom cooperation and trust turned out to be vital, and hence that natural selection favoured beliefs to the effect that we ought to keep promises and reproach cheaters, etc. We could have evolved more like chimpanzees, i.e., as a species less prone to cooperate with and trust conspecifics. In that case, there would probably not have been widespread beliefs to the effect that we ought to keep promises and reproach cheaters. We might instead have believed that we ought to lie, cheat, and violate others' confidence in us whenever doing so would suit our purposes. In such a scenario, natural selection would indeed have put us on the wrong track in moral inquiry.

But here it seems that the non-naturalist can rest content with pointing out the undeniable fact that in this respect humans evolved differently from chimpanzees. Why human evolution took this course is an interesting question for evolutionary biology to inquire into. One cannot

¹¹ See White 2010: 589-95; Vavova 2014: 83; Korman & Locke (ms).

¹² It might be objected that this response establishes only that it is not question-begging for the realist to make assumptions about what the fundamental moral truths are, whereas the non-naturalist holds the further view that moral truths (whether fundamental or non-fundamental) are irreducibly normative. In response, non-naturalists do not merely assume that moral truths are irreducibly normative; they have arguments to that effect. It is in the course of explaining how we can have knowledge about moral, irreducibly normative, truths that the non-naturalist makes substantive assumptions about moral truths.

plausibly demand that moral non-naturalism, or any other metaethical theory, provide the answer. Note also that it seems true of virtually any kind of belief, and not just of moral belief, that natural selection could have favoured false beliefs, and could to that extent have put us on the wrong track in these fields of inquiry.

The response I have offered on non-naturalists' behalf is similar to responses that have been offered by critics of debunking arguments, including card-carrying non-naturalists like David Enoch (2011) and Erik Wielenberg (2014). However, while Enoch's and Wielenberg's accounts appeal to a 'third factor' that supposedly explains both the moral truths and our moral beliefs, the account I have offered involves no such third factor. It takes fundamental moral truths to be necessary, and hence not in need of explanation. It takes non-fundamental moral truths to be explained by fundamental moral truths in conjunction with non-moral truths. It takes moral beliefs, finally, to be explained, at least in part, by natural selection, just as the debunkers claim. Moreover, Wielenberg's account involves commitment to the controversial normative view that human beings have special natural rights, and Enoch uses the somewhat nebulous assumption that survival is good to illustrate his case. The response I offer involves no commitment to a particular normative view and we need make no nebulous assumptions to illustrate it. It requires only that whatever the non-naturalist takes to be the fundamental moral truth(s), or non-fundamental moral truths in worlds like ours, she can also plausibly maintain that some of these truths are such that believing them, or something close enough to them, is evolutionarily advantageous and hence that natural selection has favoured these beliefs.

Richard Joyce has recently argued that while evolutionary debunking arguments do not suffice to establish nihilism or scepticism, they may be used to shift the burden of proof onto the realist or non-sceptic to explain how it is that moral beliefs can be epistemically

justified.¹³ But first, we already know that non-naturalists face a challenge of explaining epistemic justification of moral beliefs, since they hold that moral truths cannot cause anything, such as our moral beliefs, and since moral truths are not wholly constituted by causally efficacious naturalistic truths. It is therefore questionable whether debunking arguments achieve a shift of this kind, as non-naturalists seem to carry the burden of proof from the outset.

Second, when it comes to justifying agents' individual moral beliefs as opposed to explaining the reliability of moral beliefs widespread in a population, non-naturalists typically appeal to a combination of self-evidence and wide reflective equilibrium. On this view, whether an agent's moral belief is epistemically justified depends on whether it is based on the agent's adequate understanding of its content and on whether it coheres with the agent's other justified beliefs.¹⁴ This kind of account of epistemic justification of moral beliefs seem not different in kind from how other kinds of philosophical beliefs are commonly thought to be justifiable. Suppose for example, that there are abstract universals. Or suppose again that there are no abstract universals. Whichever of these propositions is true, it is plausibly necessarily true. Insofar as we can be justified in believing either one of them, it seems that we would have to be so by appeals to something like self-evidence and wide reflective equilibrium, or some other general methodological notion, which should be equally available to moral non-naturalists. Debunkers may of course accept that we are not justified in believing either that universals exist or that they do not exist, but then their argument would seem to overgeneralize to very many kinds of philosophical beliefs.¹⁵

¹³ Joyce 2016: 161, 174.

¹⁴ This kind of account of epistemic justification of moral beliefs goes back at least to Henry Sidgwick (1907). I shall discuss a related idea in the next section. Richard Joyce argues that an equilibrium that is wide enough will not vindicate our moral beliefs (Joyce 2001: 169-71). I agree with this, but this will be due to arguments that target directly moral facts and properties, and not (only) to arguments that aim to debunk moral beliefs by appeal to evolutionary origin. See the next section.

¹⁵ Olle Risberg and Folke Tersman (ms) have recently elaborated a novel defence of the debunking strategy, in which it is conjoined with an argument from disagreement, to yield moral scepticism. I cannot discuss their

Sharon Street insists that her argument against moral non-naturalism does not demand that the moral non-naturalist offer an epistemology of a particular type for the moral domain; the argument assumes merely ‘that there must be *an* epistemology, and that’s what the non-naturalist [moral] realist has so far utterly failed to provide.’¹⁶ In the light of our observations in the previous paragraph, non-naturalists can respond that insofar as there is an epistemology for *philosophy*, which there better be if Street’s philosophical argument is to be believed, there is also an epistemology for *ethics*.¹⁷

I conclude from this that debunking accounts of moral judgement do not present an insurmountable challenge to moral non-naturalism. As I stated in the introduction, however, I do not believe that this renders debunking accounts dialectically uninteresting as far as metaethics is concerned. For reasons not directly related to debunking accounts, I am inclined to believe that there are no moral truths and hence that moral non-naturalism is false.¹⁸ A powerful challenge to sceptical and nihilist views of the kind I favour are so-called Moorean arguments. I shall argue that debunking accounts provide an effective response to one kind of moral Moorean argument, but not to others.

3. Non-Naturalism and Error Theory: Moorean Arguments and Debunking Accounts

It is well-known that non-naturalists and error theorists agree on many issues. Proponents of each view typically maintain that moral truths and properties are, or would have to be, irreducibly normative.¹⁹ They differ on the crucial question of existence. Non-naturalists are

proposal in any detail here. Suffice it to say that it seems to face the same kind of worries about overgeneralization that I point to in the main text above.

¹⁶ Street 2016: 323-24 (Street’s emphasis).

¹⁷ By an ‘epistemology’ here I mean a principled way of distinguishing justified beliefs from beliefs that are not justified. Whether any of our philosophical beliefs, including our moral beliefs, are true is a further issue.

¹⁸ See Olson 2014.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Enoch 2011: 82; Mackie 1977: 31-32; Olson 2014: 80-83. It is not entirely obvious that it is impossible to give a naturalistic account of irreducible normativity. But in this paper, I bracket this possibility, since both non-naturalists and error theorists typically reject moral naturalism.

realists and thus maintain that there are moral truths and properties. A standard critique of non-naturalism is that irreducibly normative truths and properties are metaphysically queer, or mysterious. Error theorists are typically among those who press that kind of criticism. They also typically hold that non-naturalists are right about what moral truths and properties would have to be, and they consequently answer the existential question in the negative and defend nihilism about moral truths and (instantiated) moral properties.²⁰

In this way, the debate between non-naturalists and error theorists seem rather quickly to reach philosophical deadlock. Error theorists hold that moral truths and properties would have to be metaphysically queer or mysterious and that this creates at least a strong presumption against their existence.²¹ Non-naturalists respond by denying either that moral truths and properties are queer or mysterious in the first place, or that their *prima facie* queerness or mysteriousness licenses the conclusion that they do not exist.²² Intuitions clash and questions are begged in both directions. How are we to make dialectical progress?

A common move by non-naturalists is to invoke so-called Moorean arguments.²³ Adapting a line of reasoning from Michael Huemer, the non-naturalist can ask which of the following two propositions is more plausible:

Wrong It is morally wrong to inflict pain on random victims.

Impossible It is impossible for anything to have irreducibly normative properties.

²⁰ Moral error theorists can hold that there are moral properties, but maintain that they are all necessarily uninstantiated (Olson 2014: 12-13, fn. 17.) For ease of exposition, I mostly omit this qualification in what follows.

²¹ In previous work, I have argued that error theorists' arguments to the effect that moral truths and properties would have to be queer are best seen as only one part of the argument *from* queerness. See Olson 2014: Ch. 5.

²² See Olson 2014: ch. 5, and 2017 for further discussions.

²³ The label 'Moorean argument' is of course an allusion to G. E. Moore's famous defence of common sense against metaphysical idealism. For a critical discussion of the employment of Moorean argument in metaethics, see McPherson 2009.

Wrong and *Impossible* are incompatible propositions, given that non-naturalists and error theorists are right about what moral truths and propositions are or would have to be. The non-naturalist can insist that *Wrong* is obviously more plausible than *Impossible*, and point out that the falsity of moral error theory follows obviously from *Wrong*. Most people who consider *Wrong* understand it adequately and believe it on that basis. It is also fair to assume that for most people, the belief that *Wrong* is true and *Impossible* false coheres well with their other beliefs. This way of reasoning thus establishes that most people who believe that *Wrong* is true and *Impossible* false are epistemically justified in so believing.

However, this way of reasoning fails to advance the debate between non-naturalistic realism and error theory from its deadlock. That is because error theorists can accept that *Wrong* appears *prima facie* more plausible than *Impossible*, but deny that *Wrong* is *in the end* and *all things considered* more plausible. Error theorists can accept that most people are epistemically justified in believing that *Wrong* is true and *Impossible* false, although *Wrong* is in fact false and *Impossible* is in fact true. (It is a commonplace that false beliefs can epistemically be justified.)

Taking notice of this worry, Huemer claims that of two valid arguments, whose conclusions are mutually incompatible, the better argument is the one ‘whose premises are more initially plausible.’²⁴ Huemer goes on to report that propositions like *Wrong* seem far more obvious to him than propositions like *Impossible*, and he conjectures that his judgement on this point is not idiosyncratic.²⁵ On one interpretation, which is not fair to Huemer but still relevant to discuss, the non-naturalist can attempt to break the deadlock by appealing to what *seems* pre-theoretically more obvious to *most people*. It might be thought that the fact that certain moral propositions, such as *Wrong*, are widely endorsed is indicative of the truth of

²⁴ Huemer 2005: 116.

²⁵ Huemer 2005: 116.

such propositions, since it seems *prima facie* unlikely that the general consensus on moral matters is fundamentally mistaken. More generally, realists could appeal to the following principle about the connection between consensus and truth

Consensus If there is general consensus that p, it is unlikely that not-p

This might be a plausible principle in many cases, but it is not plausible in cases in which there are explanations of the general consensus that p, that do not entail or indicate that p is true. Moral error theorists can argue that this is the case concerning propositions like *Wrong*. This is where they can deploy debunking accounts of moral judgements and argue along the following lines: Since cooperation and trust have been vital factors in human evolution, it is no surprise that natural selection has tended to favour beliefs to the effect that it is wrong to inflict pain on random victims and that cheaters and free-riders ought to be punished or reproached, to take just two examples of beliefs that tend to motivate evolutionarily advantageous patterns of behaviour. Moreover, plausible evolutionary debunking explanations will predict that people tend to believe such propositions with great confidence. This is because refraining from inflicting pain on random victims is among the prerequisites for creating cooperation and trust between individuals, and because punishing and reproaching cheaters and free-riders generally help sustain cooperation and trust. Evolutionary debunking arguments thus enable error theorists to predict that most people hold certain moral beliefs with great confidence and also to explain why they seem, pre-theoretically, much more plausible than any argument to the effect that error theory is true. This undermines the thought that widespread and confident endorsement of moral propositions such as *Wrong* is indicative of the truth of such propositions and of the falsity of nihilism. Debunking arguments are thus effective indirectly, as defensive responses to the

kind of challenge to moral error theory that appeals to what most people confidently believe and invokes principles like *Consensus*.

As I indicated, however, this is probably not the kind of argument Huemer has in mind. His argument rests on the principle of *phenomenal conservatism* (PC), which is Moorean in spirit, and which states:

PC If it seems to one that p, then one has at least *prima facie* justification for believing that p.²⁶

One way for it to seem to one that p is for one to have an intuition, or ‘intellectual appearance’, that p.²⁷ Non-naturalists can claim that we have an intellectual appearance whose content is *Wrong*, and also that we have many other intellectual appearances with moral content, e.g., that murder is wrong, that we ought to keep promises, etc. In the absence of defeaters, these states of intellectual appearance make us epistemically justified in believing their content and thus in rejecting *Impossible* and, along with it, moral error theory.

Debunkers may object that there are evolutionary explanations of why certain moral propositions appear true to most of us and why we tend to base some of our moral beliefs on such appearances, and that this undermines any epistemic justification that intellectual appearances with moral content are supposed to provide. But it is one thing to give an explanation—e.g., an evolutionary explanation—of why certain propositions appear true to most of us and why we tend to base some of our beliefs on such appearances; it is quite another thing to undermine the relation of *prima facie* epistemic justification between an individual’s appearance that p and her belief that p. It is not clear how and why the former

²⁶ Huemer 2005: 232.

²⁷ Huemer 2005: 99-102.

achieves the latter, *if* an individual's intellectual appearance that p suffices to make that individual *prima facie* epistemically justified in believing that p.²⁸ This is one illustration of how debunking accounts do not establish moral scepticism and of how 'debunking accounts' might consequently be considered a misnomer, as I adverted in section 1.

Critics of non-naturalism may try to respond by appealing to a principle like the following:

Best Explanation If the best explanation of an individual's belief that p does not appeal ultimately to the fact that p, or to some other fact that is relevantly connected to the fact that p, the belief that p is epistemically unjustified.

This principle faces the worry of self-defeat. Applied to itself, Best Explanation entails that one is justified in believing it only if this belief is ultimately best explained by the fact that Best Explanation, or some relevantly connected principle, is true. But it is far from clear how such an explanation would go.²⁹

At this point error theorists might turn their critical eyes to phenomenal conservatism (PC). Here is not the place to scrutinize PC, however. It is not obvious anyway that error theorists need to take this route. I have already noted that it is a commonplace that false beliefs can be epistemically justified, and according to PC, the epistemic justification that intellectual appearances provide can be defeated by counterevidence.³⁰ Such counterevidence can take the form of philosophical arguments and conflicting intellectual appearances. This enables error theorists to concede that they have several intellectual appearances with moral content, e.g.,

²⁸ See White 2010 for variations on this point.

²⁹ White 2010: 582-83.

³⁰ Huemer 2005: 146.

that it is wrong to inflict pain on random victims.³¹ But they will insist that any epistemic justification that such appearances provide is defeated by reflection on philosophical arguments; not by reflection on debunking arguments, but by reflection on arguments that target moral facts and properties directly, such as the well-known queerness arguments.³²

As we know, non-naturalists and error theorists agree that philosophical reflection reveals that moral facts and properties are, or would have to be, irreducibly normative. Error theorists can maintain that when account has been taken of the nature of moral properties and facts and of the queerness arguments, they have an intellectual appearance whose content is that it is impossible for anything to have irreducibly normative properties, on which they base their belief that nihilism is true. Non-naturalists will of course deny that there is any such intellectual appearance that provides epistemic justification of any such belief. This is to say that we are back in the familiar philosophical deadlock in which the respective intuitions of non-naturalists and error theorists clash and questions are begged in both directions.

We have seen that debunking arguments cannot break the deadlock. We have also seen that debunking arguments can do one important thing for us sceptics and nihilists, namely help us respond to a kind of Moorean argument that appeals to the general consensus on moral matters. Beyond this, non-naturalists have nothing to fear from debunking arguments.³³

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³¹ Another alternative for error theorists is to argue that philosophical reflection reveals that what we take to be intellectual appearances of rightness and wrongness are in fact mental states of a different kind, such as attitudes of approbation and disapprobation which we project onto the world.

³² See Mackie 1977: Ch. 1; Olson 2014: Ch. 5-6. Alternatively, error theorists may argue that philosophical reflection reveals that what we take to be intellectual appearances of rightness and wrongness are in fact mental states of a different kind, such as attitudes of approbation and disapprobation which we project onto the world.

³³ A previous version of this paper was presented at a conference on Evolution and Moral Epistemology at the University of Utrecht in April 2018. I thank the participants for useful comments. Special thanks to Conrad Bakka, Krister Bykvist, François Jaquet, Olle Risberg, and Folke Tersman for very helpful comments and discussions. Finally, I am very grateful to an anonymous referee for incisive comments that helped improve the paper.

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