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A Sociocultural Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value

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Introduction

Realist theories of value assert that evaluative truths exist independently of human minds. At the same time, the content and formation of evaluative judgements are affected by sociocultural forces. This thesis critically analyzes the compatibility of realist theories of value with the influence of sociocultural forces on evaluative judgments. Realists must explain how this culturally shaped evaluative content relates to the mind-independent evaluative truths they posit. I argue that moral realists encounter a dilemma in reconciling the existence of mind-independent evaluative truths with the influence of sociocultural forces on evaluative judgements.

The dilemma presented in this thesis consists of two problematic pathways for realism. The first option claims no relation between sociocultural influences and independent evaluative truths. This leads to our evaluative judgments likely being distorted, and a skeptical view about the ability to access true moral knowledge. On the other hand, realists can posit that sociocultural evaluative judgments are aligned with independent truths. In that case, they must account for how these judgments, which are shaped by diverse and often conflicting cultural influences, reliably track objective moral facts. I conclude that they are not able to do so, leaving the realist with no satisfactory account explaining the relation between socioculturally shaped evaluative attitudes and mind-independent evaluative truth.

To explore these issues, the thesis begins by presenting and defining realist theories of values to clarify which metaethical positions are affected by the dilemma. Subsequently, Street's influential paper covering the Darwinian Dilemma and its implications for moral realism will be discussed, focusing on the challenge posed by evolutionary influences on evaluative attitudes. Her framework will be adopted, as such interdisciplinary research is covered to illustrate how sociocultural contexts shape evaluative judgments. Subsequently, the realist dilemma is extensively covered, and responses from moral realists are critically assessed, including the role of rational reflection in potentially overcoming sociocultural contamination. Finally, the potential of metaethical constructivism to offer a superior account of the relationship between sociocultural evaluative judgments and moral truths will be explored. It is argued that it successfully captures the evolutionary as well as the sociocultural forces, thus filling in a gap created by Street’s work.

The Darwinian Dilemma for Moral Realism

Sharon Street's paper "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value" has been widely discussed in academic literature. The central claim is that evolutionary forces have significantly shaped human evaluative attitudes, which must be accounted for by theories of value. Problematically moral realists are forced into a dilemma when trying to account for that evolutionary influence. (Street, 2006) Street's work is highly relevant to this thesis, as the framework of the dilemma will be adopted. It makes a compelling case for shared evaluative attitudes but leaves something to be desired in terms of accounting for the vast differences found in value sets of different people. The later presented sociocultural influence, whilst leading to the dilemma at the heart of the thesis, also is useful to fill in the gap created by Street's paper. The evolutionary influence on evaluative attitudes, combined with the sociocultural influence, are essential components of the alternative anti-realist account which is presented in the last chapter.

The target of the argument: Moral Realism

It is essential to clarify how "moral realist/realism" is used in this thesis. According to Street, the main difference between realists and anti-realists is the answer to Plato's famous question if things are valuable because they are so independent of us (Realism) or only because we find them to be valuable (Anti-Realism). It is a question of mind-dependence, with realism positing mind independence from normativity. Importantly, realists only need to hold that there are some evaluative facts/truths which are mind/evaluative attitude independent. Evaluative facts or truths are statements indicating that X provides a normative reason to Y. One should or ought to X, that X possesses goodness, value, or worth, or that X is morally right or wrong, and similar formulations. Evaluative attitudes on the other hand include both consciously and unconsciously held evaluative judgments, such as those regarding what constitutes a reason for action, what one should or ought to do, and similar formulations. Additionally, they encompass attitudes of approval and disapproval, unreflective tendencies to see X as supporting or requiring, and states like desires. (Street, 2006)

To illustrate the difference between realism and anti-realism, imagine the ideally coherent Caligula. He, in consistency with his evaluative attitudes and non-normative fact set, values torturing others for fun. An anti-realist wouldn't say he is making a mistake from his perspective, as there are no mind independent normative truths. (Street, 2006) They probably will not agree with Caligula that he is doing something good, but they won't point to some moral fact that proves him wrong. They acknowledge that he isn't making any normative mistake from his point of view.

Nevertheless, they could point to some evaluative judgements that our modern societies have fought hard for, such as humanitarian values, and try to make him consider those in his set of evaluative attitudes. Importantly, this does not mean that the anti-realist thinks that humanitarian values are mind-independent, he might just think that their arguments could lead to Caligula's set to align with his point of view. At the same time, Caligula might try the same with the humanitarian anti-realist, none of them must think of their values as mind-independent to engage in such a way.

Moral realists on the other hand deny that, even if completely coherent and consistent with his evaluative attitudes, Caligula is failing to recognize an evaluative fact that stands independent of his point of view. (Street, 2010) This evaluative truth might be "It is wrong to torture others for fun". Whilst the realist, like the humanitarian anti-realist, does not approve of Caligula's evaluative judgement, they go a step further. They argue that their evaluative judgement "It is wrong to torture others for fun" is superior. It equals an evaluative truth, which makes everybody not acknowledging it mistaken. (Street, 2010)

But there is another conception of the divide between realists and anti-realists which draws the line at a different spot. In this view, moral realists are those who claim that (1) moral claims aim at facts and thus can be true or false, and at least some of those claims are true (2). The first claim relates to the debate between cognitivists (normative claims are capable of being true or false) and non-cognitivists. (Sayre-McCord, 2023) At first, this seems like a very similar conception of realism to Street's. But, in that understanding, there is no mention of mind independence. It allows for moral realists that believe that whatever is entailed from the evaluative attitudes and non-normative fact set is an evaluative fact. So, Caligula has a true evaluative judgement, in the context of his point of view. But, importantly for someone with different evaluative attitudes, it could be false. Thus, there could be a moral realist who believes in mind-dependent evaluative facts.

Moral Realism in Streets taxonomy is understood more narrowly than in the standard conception of the Stanford Encyclopedia. This is problematic, as the dilemma is set out as a dilemma for Moral Realists, whilst a lot of views typically associated with that term are not addressed under the narrow conception. Nevertheless, I will still go with Street's understanding, whilst clearly remarking that I am not addressing Realist positions that don't subscribe to mind independent evaluative facts.

Street's Darwinian Dilemma

After clarifying the key terminology, the Darwinian Dilemma by Sharon Street will finally be presented. Before covering the response of realists to the evolutionary forces shaping evaluative attitudes, it is essential to establish the claim of the influence of natural selection pressures. As such, the cost and benefits of having some evaluative attitudes over others are theorized. Considering survival and reproduction advantages, it is argued that some proto judgements were heavily favored by evolution. Street names a few, namely related to self- and kin preservation, reciprocity, and harm avoidance. Furthermore, there are supposed to be visible patterns of human evaluative judgements across time and cultures, apparently serving as evidence for her claim. (Street, 2006)

But evaluative judgements, like the ones mentioned in moral discourse, are typically not seen as genetically heritable, so how does natural selection influence them? The distinction between fully-fledged evaluative judgements and basic evaluative attitudes is helpful when trying to understand the transmission process. The former is a reflective, linguistic ability to judge that X counts in favor of Y with a given specific content. An example would be "One ought to help those who help you". The latter on the other hand is an unreflective motivational tendency which is experienced as something being "called for". The protective instinct for children serves as an example. Street argues that those proto-evaluative attitudes, whilst not fully lining up, serve as a foundation for fully-fledged evaluative judgements. She

holds that a variety of other influences, such as sociocultural ones, can still make them deviate quite strongly. Still, there is a certain correlation between the two notions. As proto attitudes are assumed to be directly influenced, fully-fledged judgements are indirectly affected by natural selection pressure. (Street, 2006)

The Darwinian influence on evaluative judgements is troubling for a Realist and leaves them with two options, coined the two-horn dilemma. For one, they could argue that there is no relation between evolutionarily shaped evaluative judgements and independent evaluative truths. This is problematic, as that would mean that evolutionary forces acted as a push factor on our evaluative attitudes, guiding us to fitness-enhancing judgments that are unrelated to evaluative truths. As the Realist wants to claim no alignment, it follows that the Darwinian forces acted as a distortion of truth. For example, while kin selection might explain altruistic behaviors towards relatives, it could distort broader ethical truths about impartiality and justice. (Street, 2006)

Introducing the notion of rational reflection, which also can shape evaluative judgments, the Realist might argue that such distortions can be corrected. This, although sensible, is a challenging task. Whatever reflection one engages in, necessarily some evaluative judgments must be assessed in terms of some evaluative substance. Without accepting any evaluative premises, it is impossible to conduct an analysis, it is not possible to "step out" completely of one's evaluative set. The evaluative premises we use to rationally reflect upon a specific stance stand in some relation to proto-evaluative attitudes and, thus also are not safe from Darwinian influence. One is forced to evaluate judgments from within one's existing evaluative framework, making it impossible to attain an objective standpoint free of evolutionary influence. Rational reflection is not a neutral tool existing in a vacuum, it is inherently linked to our evaluative attitudes. (Street, 2006) The discussion on rational reflection is more sophisticated than that, a more nuanced picture will be covered when presenting the sociocultural dilemma.

Accordingly, rational reflection is as contaminated by evolutionary forces, as evaluative judgements themselves. This limitation forces one to essentially guess at truths randomly, as all other options are impure. Given the arbitrarily big number of potential normative judgements it seems highly improbable to encounter independent evaluative truths by chance. Consequently, this leaves the Realist who denies the relation with a skeptical outlook, questioning the possibility of accessing true moral knowledge. (Street, 2006)

The second option is to accept that there is a relation, which must be preferred if one thinks that a good portion of our evaluative judgements is true. A possible Realist notion could be the "tracking account", which posits that we have the capacity to find evaluative truths, and said ability was evolutionarily advantageous. For example, recognizing the moral truth that helping others is good might have helped our ancestors form cooperative societies, which in turn increased their chances of survival. Whilst this account is reasonable in theory, its weakness is highlighted when comparing it to Streets' counterproposal. (Street, 2006)

She suggests that certain evaluative judgements linked circumstances and responses in a fitness-enhancing manner, called the adaptive-link account. It explains moral beliefs as evolutionary adaptations without requiring additional mechanisms. This makes it more straightforward than the complex indirect process of acquiring true moral beliefs in the

tracking account. For example, in the adaptive-link account, the evaluative judgement that helping others is good increases fitness, thus getting directly selected. Furthermore, it can easily explain why certain moral beliefs are prevalent. For example, beliefs that promote cooperation, altruism, and care for offspring are explained as adaptations that increase reproductive success. The additional layer needed in the tracking- account, combined with the difficulty of explaining certain moral trends makes the adaptive-link account more parsimonious whilst having superior explanatory power.(Street, 2006)

For the context of this thesis, those are the most important arguments included in Street's paper. Whilst multiple of her assumptions can be questioned, I would like to accept her proposal. Evolutionary forces influence our evaluative judgements, and Realists are forced into one of the two horns of the Darwinian Dilemma, facing a severe problem. They must either acknowledge the distortion of evolutionary forces on evaluative judgements or struggle to explain the mysterious alignment of those forces with moral truths.

The established Darwinian influence translates into an evaluative attitude that all humans share. Still, there seems to be great deviation within value sets, Street acknowledges that and states that there are multiple forces shaping our fully-fledged evaluative judgements. Social, cultural, historical, rational reflection, evolution, and many more. Those are all, to some extent, part of the evaluative attitudes. (Street, 2006) The focus of this thesis lies in sociocultural influence. Analogous to the Darwinian dilemma I will explore the dilemma that Realists face, under the assumption that they accept said shaping force on evaluative judgements.

The Sociocultural Dilemma for Moral Realism

Sociocultural Influences on Evaluative Judgements

To strengthen the claim that there is a sociocultural influence on evaluative judgements, interdisciplinary findings will be presented. Importantly, the data, its interpretation, and any following assertions are not free from critique. Proving such a link is only feasible to an extent, and cross-cultural research currently is not equipped to provide a fully convincing picture. A preference is made for accounts that are theoretically sound and backed up by empirical data.

Much off what we learn we do not figure out ourselves, but instead is learned from other people. This process of gaining knowledge is phrased as "Socially constructed knowledge" by cognitive anthropologist D'Andrade. Typically, we do this via informally guided discovery. Conversations, interactions, games, and many more everyday situations supply us with suggestions, corrections, and affirmations for a wide variety of learning. (D'Andrade, 1981)

The cultural environment a child grows up in is filled with implicit messages related to evaluative judgments. Questions about appropriate behavior with other children, where personal space begins, whom to give respect to, and many more all affect a given value set. (Shweder, 1982) Especially children in (Pre)school settings experience constant and intense verbal socialization pressures. A systematic analysis furthermore showed strong signs that the verbal exchanges between teachers in this socio-cultural influenced setting influenced the evaluative judgement of the pupils. (Much, 1982)

Shweder follows up on this research and theorizes a distinction between self-constructed and socially constructed evaluative judgements. The former might be attained autonomously through introspection, reflection, or individual reasoning. Importantly, the latter might also be reached through similar methods, but influenced by the socialization pressures of a given cultural setting. They reflect, at least partially, the already prevailing and endorsed shared evaluative judgements. It is suggested that child-adult interactions are a powerful transmitter of cultural evaluative judgements. (Shweder et al., 1987)

Tomasello and Vaish demonstrate that by the age of three, children begin to enforce social norms on others, indicating an early internalization of the cultural norms they observe and participate in. Additionally, they show that even very young children help others and share resources more readily in collaborative contexts, reflecting the social and cultural environment in which they are raised. This suggests that children's prosocial behaviors are influenced by their participation in culturally organized activities that emphasize cooperation and fairness. This perfectly aligns with Shweder's theory that child-adult interactions serve as powerful transmitters of cultural evaluative judgments (Tomasello & Vaish, 2013; Vaish et al., 2011; Warneken & Tomasello, 2007)

Around the globe there is a multitude of cultural environments, thus it can be expected that each has a unique influence on evaluative judgments through socialization pressures. Accordingly, when performing a cross-cultural analysis of moral views, one should find differences through that variable. This seems to be the case when contrasting findings from two culturally diverse countries India and USA. In general, a more collectivist moral framework can be found in the latter, whilst the former is characterized by its individualistic ethos. Americans are found to stress the similarity of people, whilst Indians recognize hierarchical differences. Basic moral notions like justice are found in both societies. Importantly, when confronted with concrete questions about the nature of persons or social transactions significant cross-cultural differences are found.(Kakar, 2012; Shweder & Bourne, 1982) In line with his prior research, Shweder argues that these deviations are socially constructed, transmitted through child-adult interaction, and represent clear representations of the given cultural context. (Shweder, 1982)

Whilst previously introducing findings from child psychology, Behavioral Economics is a further field that is interested in cultural differences. In a study by various interdisciplinary academics, different games have been performed to discover cross-cultural moral differences. When analyzing 15 small-scale societies, they found statistically significant views on fairness, which is a key component of evaluative judgements. (Henrich et al., 2005) Not only does this strengthen the proposed socio-cultural influence on evaluative judgements, but also supports the moderate anti-realist claim that there are cases of fundamental moral disagreement. (Edouard et al., 2005)

Socially constructed evaluative judgements, as theorized by Shweder, give a credible account of how informally guided discovery leads to a socio-cultural influence on children's moral understanding. Adult-child interactions have empirically been found as a significant transmitter of established cultural norms. The expected deviations in evaluative judgment have been confirmed by a variety of interdisciplinary cross-cultural research, strengthening the case. Accordingly, whilst there still is plenty of research needed, those results strongly

support the claim that evaluative judgements are influenced by the socio-cultural environment.

Realist Responses to the Sociocultural Dilemma

If a Moral Realist accepts my premise, they enter the sociocultural dilemma. They need to establish if there is a relation between the sociocultural forces that shape our evaluative judgements and independent evaluative truths. Accordingly, the two pathways are to either claim no relation or to establish some link between the two. They are forced to do so, as Moral Realists claim that there are evaluative facts, which hold mind-independently. As our evaluative judgements are influenced by the cultural environment, it must be clarified how that sociocultural influence relates to evaluative truth.

Denying the Connection: The Problem of Distortion

Now let's assume that a Realist claims no relation, what would the consequences be? There is an established influence of sociocultural forces on evaluative attitudes, but that influence is not connected to evaluative truths. As such, whatever judgements they are drawing us to, their force is not leading to moral facts. They might guide us to socioculturally established norms which are important for social cohesion and successfully navigating a cultural environment. This nuanced type of evaluative judgment is useful but unrelated to evaluative truths. For example, a specific cultural environment might promote a social role of women that limits their freedom of expression. A person growing up in such a place will be subject to the influence of this attitude through socialization pressure. Whilst such evaluative judgements might be useful to thrive in that society, they could distort evaluative truths, such that men and women should have the same rights. As such, if there is no relation between sociocultural evaluative attitudes and evaluative facts, they act as a distortion of truth.

But, even if there is no inherent connection between them, couldn't they just align through pure chance? Whilst that would sidestep the problem, it is unreasonable to assume, as there is an arbitrarily big number of potential evaluative judgements. The likelihood of such a scenario thus must be deemed incredibly low. One could additionally posit that the number of coherent and consistent evaluative sets is lower than the number of possible judgements, but it nevertheless is big enough to make it highly improbable. Problematically, this would mean that our evaluative judgements are most likely distorted.

Rational Reflection as a Solution

If the Realist argues that rational reflection overcomes this distortion, Street's objection to the Darwinian Dilemma is relevant again. We can only assess evaluative judgements in the face of some other evaluative premises. Those premises are contaminated by evolutionary forces, thus rendering reflection equally impure. The sociocultural influence translates into our evaluative premises additionally being contaminated by sociocultural forces. Granted, the evolutionary forces are inescapable as we are encoded with them. On the other hand, socialization pressures and adult-child learning are a more active and aware process. Whilst that might mean a "stepping out" reflection is possible it is not clear how to get rid of our sociocultural learnings.

If an agent grows up in a Western European country, with his parents, teachers, and peers transmitting the local cultural norms, they will influence the agent's evaluative attitudes as well as judgements. If said agent engages in rational reflection on a search for moral truths, in the face of what will he critically assess his evaluative set? The argument goes that this is only possible by appealing to evaluative premises that are influenced by Western European values, thus not escaping the contamination.

This view is not free from critique, as some Realists such as Nagel & Fitzpatrick argue that the recent millennia of collective as well as individual moral inquiry/reflection enabled autonomous moral thinking. By abiding by carefully established standards of inquiry unwanted contamination can and has been eliminated. (Nagel, 1979) This argument is directed against evolutionary contamination but is highly relevant to sociocultural contamination, as they are appealing to it as a manifestation of a long history of reflection. (FitzPatrick, 2014)

An analogy is drawn to sciences, mathematics, and philosophy, where they argue that we can engage in intellectual and uncontaminated thought to find truths. This systematic, reflective, and informed scientific approach allowed us to be ridden from unreflected influence on moral beliefs. If we form the accurate belief that water is necessarily H20, we don't do this because evolution pushed for our brains to track metaphysical modal facts or by pure chance. Quite the opposite, reading the sound arguments of philosophers like Kripke led us to conclude that those beliefs are correct, and water necessarily is H20. Similarly, despite evolutionary influences that may have shaped some of our beliefs, it is entirely plausible that we have come to understand the moral fact that slavery is wrong by recognizing the reasons why it is wrong. We grasp its wrong-making features—such as how it violates human dignity, thus understanding the good reasons for holding this belief. (FitzPatrick, 2014)

This argument is designed to counter the evolutionary influence on rational reflection but can also be extended to sociocultural influence. Importantly, Nagel is referring to cultural moral learnings, through moral inquiry abiding by standards, as a display of autonomous moral thinking. It enabled us to produce and grasp sound arguments for moral facts, which might be contrary to what would be suggested by our evaluative attitudes. (Nagel, 1979) Whilst a reasonable objection for the evolutionary influence on rational reflection, it fails a Realist who claims no relation between sociocultural evaluative judgements and independent evaluative truths.

When adjusting the argument, it might still be appropriate for such a Moral Realist. The systematic, reflective, and informed approach of rational reflection can be a method of avoiding sociocultural contamination. Through this endeavor, reasons for moral facts crystallize, which are graspable and apprehensible. This is a possible account for defending rationalization, but Street's point still seems to hold. Even when employing this elaborate, systematic, and "scientific" form of reflection, some evaluative judgements must be evaluated in the light of others, which are contaminated by the sociocultural environment. To go back to our Western agent on his journey to evaluative truth. Through systematic, reflective, and informed rational reflection they could try to discover evaluative facts. But is recognizing the argumentative structure behind an evaluative judgement and understanding its "truth" really a neutral process? It seems reasonable that this process of truth-recognition is contaminated by cultural learnings, introducing a kind of circularity. The reasons that lead us to understand

a moral fact, the wrong or right-making features, might just align in some way with the cultural values, which is why they seem to be true.

Even assuming one could eliminate all sociocultural learnings from their reasoning and evaluative capacity, what would serve as the basis for the evaluative premises? Stripping evaluative attitudes of every sociocultural influence would leave one without a solid framework to assess evaluative judgments that are based on social context. Consider the judgment "Justice requires equitable distribution of resources." Without sociocultural learnings, evaluating this judgment becomes challenging, as concepts of justice and equity are deeply informed by social context. One needs to refer to their social experience, such as specific cases where resources were/were not distributed equally, to form a nuanced evaluative premise. Rational reflection itself is not conducted in a vacuum, but it is inevitably colored by the evaluative frameworks that arise from one's sociocultural environment. Whilst the contamination of reflection is not as engrained as the evolutionary one, it might be inescapable in the context of the evaluative premise for some moral questions.

Nevertheless, this approach could allow for a stronger deviation from sociocultural attitudes, and it is not fully clear if contamination could be avoided. Furthermore, Moral Realists defending that sort of reflection typically want to say that our sociocultural evaluative attitudes are connected to independent evaluative truths. They argue that exactly this rational and systematic approach is reflected in our cultural learnings.

Claiming a Connection: The Interplay Between Sociocultural Attitudes and Moral Facts

The second option for the Moral Realist would be to claim a relation between the socio-culturally influenced evaluative judgements and the independent evaluative truths. They must present an account where sociocultural values point towards/represent those objective facts. There are multiple approaches to establish such a connection. The previously mentioned autonomous moral thinking can be seen as being reflected by cultural evolution. Millennia of increasingly sophisticated moral inquiry, reflection, and discussion are embodied and represented by sociocultural evaluative judgements. As they are the product of this standard-adhering inquiry, they are free from contamination and were instead guided by the apprehension of the moral facts. Thus, this independent way of thinking, which was strengthened by the already persistent cultural autonomous thought, slowly approaches moral truths. (Nagel, 1979)

But problematically it is not clear which culture possesses those evaluative truths. Typically, Western philosophers refer to "Western" values, but even within those cultures, evaluative judgements don't always align. When looking at geographically distant cultures, it seems to be a fact that there are plenty of cross-cultural cases of fundamental moral disagreement. (Henrich et al., 2005; Kakar, 2012; Shweder & Bourne, 1982) If reasons for moral facts are graspable and apprehensible, and lead to an acceptance of the related moral belief how can that be explained? There seem to be at least three options for a Realist, first, there are some cultures not capable of that intellectual feat, the same as some people might not "see" that water necessarily is H20. Second, some cultures have simply not yet been exposed to the arguments behind evaluative truths and thus were not yet able to apprehend them. Third, there are only a few moral facts, which are accepted by any human who can grasp the reasoning behind such facts.

The first option is unattractive, as there shouldn't be any missing capability of people from different cultures explaining that failure of understanding. However, the failure to grasp moral truths may not stem from intellectual incapacity but rather from the unique complexity of moral reasoning. Moral truths often involve normative claims that do not have direct empirical counterparts and require deliberation about values, duties, and the nature of the good life, which are highly abstract concepts. As such, an extensive inquiry might be necessary to achieve the feat of grasping a moral truth. The second option is only valid for cultures that haven't participated in cross-cultural dialogue which typically are small-scale societies. The third option is in line with Moral Realism, most Realists have no problem accepting that there is only a small number of objective moral truths. Accordingly, the third position, which is a more moderate Realist position, seems to fare best against the fundamental moral disagreement argument. Additionally, the complexity and abstract nature of moral truths can be highlighted by a moral realist to explain intense moral debates about apparently graspable truths.

Another challenge for the Moral Realist who claims a connection relates to how we can say that this millennia-long inquiry and reflection process, guided by the apprehension of moral facts, has reached them. How can we confirm that this process has led us to apprehend the true moral facts?

There is a possible account for answering that question, given by Peter Railton. Societal progress does not happen automatically; instead, it requires continuous historical refinement and fine-tuning. Over time, societies have seen significant moral advancements, such as the abolition of slavery, the recognition of women's rights, and the fight against racial discrimination. Thus, through societal progress, the sociocultural evaluative judgments are gradually approaching the independent evaluative truths. (Railton, 1986)

This alignment is achieved through cumulative moral inquiry. Each generation builds upon the moral framework inherited from previous generations, correcting past errors and refining their understanding of moral truths. (Nagel, 1979) This iterative process is crucial for making progress in moral reasoning. Moreover, social feedback mechanisms play a vital role in this alignment. Social unrest and dissatisfaction arise when there are significant deviations from rational social norms. This, under the right historical context, leads to unrest and a following normative approximation to social rationality. (Railton, 1986)

Social rationality involves the rational approval of social norms that consider the interests of all affected individuals. Multiple historical examples, such as the civil rights movement, demonstrate how societal dissatisfaction with existing norms can drive significant moral progress. In that view, the evaluative judgements which satisfy those social rationality standards are moral facts. (Railton, 1986)

The goal is a moral equilibrium where no group feels the need to seek moral change because the social norms are fully rational. However, achieving moral equilibrium is challenging due to the interplay of various economic, political, and other external factors. Moral progress is contingent not only on those factors but also on the willingness of society to engage in rational reflection and the presence of mechanisms to address dissatisfaction. There is no guarantee that every society will follow a linear path towards moral equilibrium. (Railton, 1986)

Even if difficult to reach, this moral equilibrium in the face of social rationality could mark the successful completion of apprehension of moral facts. In such a society, the socioculturally influenced evaluative judgements align with the stance independent evaluative truths. Whilst they would be stance independent, they would be contingent on factors shaping societies. Social rationality is just one of many society-shaping forces, it operates in an open system. (Railton, 1986)

When performing a historical analysis, it is hard to assert a clear trend to social rationality through human history since the first societies were formed. This, according to Railton, is due to plentiful exogenous factors in play. They prohibit a straightforward approximation to social rationality. The specific material conditions, which consist of the economic structures, resources, and technologies they have at their disposal are an example of such a factor. They actively shape how social rationality plays out. (Railton, 1986) For example, a society with abundant resources and advanced technology might find it easier to embrace inclusive practices that align with social rationality. In contrast, a society facing economic hardships might struggle and resort to more exclusionary practices.

Even if we were to accept the empirically dubious claim that there is a trend toward a moral equilibrium, it is difficult to see how this represents a proper realist stance. According to Sharon Street's taxonomy, a realist must hold that evaluative truth is independent of evaluative attitudes. However, the notion of social rationality seems to depend on an agent's stance, suggesting an anti-realist position. Peter Railton attempts to navigate this tension by grounding moral truths in natural facts, particularly those related to human well-being and social cooperation.

Railton argues that moral truths are objective because they are grounded in facts about what promotes the flourishing of individuals and societies under ideal conditions of knowledge and rational deliberation. In this unique approach, moral norms are emergent properties of social systems, shaped by the interplay of human interests, environmental constraints, and social dynamics. In the ideal conditions, evaluative judgments would converge on truths that reflect the objective conditions for human flourishing. (Railton, 1986)

Moral truth depends, at least to some degree, on the evaluative attitudes of a society's members. Railton acknowledges that the inclusion-generating mechanisms for social rationality operate through individual behaviors. However, he argues that these mechanisms are influenced by interpersonal dynamics, which means the criteria selected for social rationality are not reducible to the criteria of disaggregated individual rationality. (Railton, 1986) Whilst there might be no straightforward translation of aggregated individual evaluative attitudes to socially rational evaluative judgements, there still is an indirect connection. If the attitude towards fairness would change drastically on a collective level, so would the optimal societal normative structure. It is hard to see how the naturalistic approach can be mind-independent and objectively grounded in human flourishing at the same time. Depending on the understanding of flourishing it seems that it is connected to subjective experiences and sociocultural contexts of agents. This dependency suggests that even within Railton's naturalistic framework, the independence of moral truths from evaluative attitudes is unclear, raising the question if it counts as a realist stance in Street's taxonomy.

Furthermore, the fact that social rationality is contingent on exogenous factors, like material conditions, makes the moral equilibrium a temporal one. If there are extreme weather condition changes through climate change that could change the normative equilibrium. Social dissatisfaction could follow from the agreements made under different circumstances. Thus, even if social rationality would lead to truly stance independent moral truths, they are at best temporal ones. Furthermore, the fact that there are societies composed of agents with varying evaluative attitudes concerning fairness (Henrich et al., 2005), implies that different societies can have different moral equilibria. Thus, not only would the independent moral truths have a temporal character, they also would not necessarily extend to other societies. Only if the exogenous factors were fixed and social rationality operated in a closed system, whilst there only being one big world society, this wouldn't be a problem.

Comprehensive Analysis of the Sociocultural Dilemma

Moral Realists assert that there are mind-independent evaluative truths. At the same time, there is convincing evidence of sociocultural influence on evaluative judgments. This gives rise to the sociocultural dilemma for moral realists. If sociocultural forces shape our moral beliefs, then realists must address how these beliefs align with, or diverge from, objective moral truths. There are two main pathways, realists must either deny any relation between socioculturally influenced judgments and independent evaluative truths, or they must establish a meaningful connection between the two. Both options present substantial difficulties.

If there is no connection, it seems that sociocultural forces draw us away from evaluative truth, they act as a contamination in the search for facts. It is unreasonable to assume an alignment by chance, as there is an arbitrarily high number of potential coherent evaluative judgements and attitudes. If sociocultural influence leads us away from evaluative truth and there is no random alignment, it leads to a skeptical picture where our evaluative judgments are distorted. A popular argument by moral realists is that rational reflection can correct for contamination. Through systematic, critical, and informed reflection an agent can transcend biases and grasp evaluative truths. Problematically, it is only possible to evaluate a potential moral fact in the light of something else, some kind of evaluative premise. Even when applying such a systematic and scientific approach it is not fully clear how to avoid sociocultural influence on the premise. This is problematic, as there would be a certain circularity when evaluating a sociocultural judgement through a sociocultural evaluative premise. Even assuming it is possible to avoid any bias in the reflection process, it is hard to see how to evaluate any evaluative judgements in an interpersonal/social context without drawing upon their sociocultural learnings. Thus, whilst rational reflection may allow for some deviation from cultural norms, its success in achieving complete independence from detrimental sociocultural influences remains uncertain.

The second pathway, claiming a connection, must be preferred by moral realists that want to establish that at least some of the sociocultural evaluative judgements (such as humanitarian values) are indeed objective facts. Under one such view, millennia of increasingly sophisticated moral inquiry are reflected in sociocultural evaluative learning. This systematic reflection and refinement are guided by the apprehension of moral truth. Whilst there certainly has been a substantial amount of moral inquiry in history, there still

are cases of fundamental moral disagreement to be found between different cultures. This challenges the claim that sociocultural judgments reliably reflect objective truths. There are multiple answers available to a Realist, but the most solid is to have a moderate view of evaluative truths. There might only be a handful of objective evaluative facts, which are abstract in nature and thus not as easily graspable as empiric truths. However, this approach is unsatisfying because it rests on the vague notion that moral facts are grasped after inquiry, offering little clarity on how such discernment occurs and failing to provide a concrete explanation.

There is another Realist account describing when sociocultural influence aligns with truth. If there is a moral imbalance in society, feedback mechanisms like social unrest lead to a normative approximation of social rationality. In that framework, moral truths are grounded in natural facts related to human flourishing, and social rationality reflects the rational approval of norms that consider the interests of all affected individuals. In an ideal society, evaluative judgments would converge on truths that reflect the conditions for human flourishing. Problematically, the concept of social rationality depends, at least partially, on the evaluative attitudes of society's members, introducing some sort of mind-dependence. Moreover, exogenous factors like resource availability, technological advances, and climate lead to a contingent and context-dependent nature of those truths.

Metaethical constructivism as an alternative

The sociocultural influence on evaluative judgements presents a complex dilemma for moral realists. It is, in some respects, similar to the dilemma arising from the Darwinian influence established by Sharon Street. There are several metaethical accounts that avoid the same problems, naturally, they are considered anti-realist and claim mind-dependence. One such view, metaethical constructivism, is Sharon Street’s position. There are two main characterizations, which have great implications on its legitimacy as a metaethical position. One view is that normative truth is determined by the outcome of a procedure. For example, Rawls' procedural constructivism suggests principles of justice are valid if chosen by rational agents from behind a veil of ignorance. Street argues the procedure is secondary to the agent's practical standpoint: what is right is what follows from within this standpoint. (Darwall et al., 1992; Street, 2010)

This practical point of view is occupied by any agent when said agent values something, thus accepting some normative judgement. It is the standpoint of any being that judges, reflective or unreflective. For humans, entailment from a given set of evaluative judgements is argued to be intuitive. When presented with a hypothetical value and non-normative fact set, we can follow which action one has reason to do. If Ann highly values having a tidy garden with perfectly trimmed bushes, and currently the bushes are slightly overgrown we can say that it follows from her evaluative point of view that she should trim the bushes. This is entailed even if Ann, for some reason, doesn’t realize what follows from her practical standpoint. (Street, 2010)

Importantly, there need not be any presupposed normative notion or (dis)approval of said hypothetical value set for us to argue what they ought to do. If seen like this, constructivism establishes that normative truth is constituted by what follows from within the practical

standpoint. For something to be valuable, is nothing more than said thing's value being entailed in the view of an agent who values things. (Street, 2010)

In Street's understanding of metaethical constructivism evaluative judgements are based upon an agent's particular set, if said set changes, so do the "correct" conclusions. In other words, without any evaluative substance, there can't be any values, and those values depend on the specific attitudes, which can differ between agents. (Street, 2010)

Tackling some of Realism's problems

Within the framework of metaethical constructivism, normative truth is mind-dependent and follows from an evaluative set and non-normative fact set. Sociocultural influence gets accounted for automatically, it is part of the evaluative attitudes and thus affects the entailed judgements. The entailed values equal moral truth, but only on an agent-specific level, not on an objective level. Accordingly, a metaethical constructivist doesn't enter the sociocultural dilemma.

One of the problems realists are facing is the cases of fundamental cross-cultural moral disagreement. Those differences in evaluative attitudes are mainly brought by sociocultural influence. The Realist's best response was to claim a moderately small set of moral truths, whilst highlighting the abstract nature of them, which makes grasping them a difficult task. Nevertheless, that type of moral disagreement is explained better through a constructivist framework.

It has already been stated that there is a subset of shared evaluative substances, explaining some alignment in human evaluative judgements. One part of that subset is at the base level of evaluative attitudes, the "proto-judgements" instilled in us through evolutionary forces. They, according to Street, are related to mainly self- and kin preservation, reciprocity, and harm avoidance. (Street, 2006) Those evaluative attitudes relate to our human nature and are to some degree reflected in our sociocultural evaluative judgements.

All the things that make us human, our evaluative proto-attitudes, cognitive abilities, language, ability to navigate social contexts, and much more enable us to operate within complex human societies. Even more, competitive pressures act on those societies, forcing us to create efficiently organized structures. Efficiency and flourishing typically benefit when all the members can and are willing to, participate in joint goals. This collective willingness is positively correlated with normative satisfaction of members/groups of members. In cases of moral equilibrium, social cohesion, and goal alignment are thriving. Whilst this "social rationality" force is not the only driving force of a society's efficiency/competitiveness, it is deemed an important factor.

Granted that there is a relation between the content of evaluative judgements and a society's competitiveness, one must suspect that such evaluative attitudes are found in sociocultural evaluative judgements. Accordingly, evolutionary evaluative attitudes and competitive-sociocultural evaluative attitudes are part of any agents' evaluative attitudes and thus influence their evaluative judgments. Whilst it is not enough to have a shared subset for the same normative truth to be entailed, some key moral concepts are understood by most agents. So, within the framework of metaethical constructivism, we come close to a notion of

a few stance-dependent moral truths for humanity. Therefore, the Realist must confront the possibility that what appears to be objective moral truths are, in fact, deeply rooted in our evolution and sociocultural contexts, thus challenging the notion of truly stance-independent moral facts. The cases of cross-cultural moral disagreement on the other hand arise when the cultural environment is sufficiently different regarding the conveyed evaluative attitudes.

A Realist still has the option to appeal to his systematic moral inquiry eliminating contamination, and the intellectual ability to understand reasoning for moral facts leading to a small number of stance-independent moral truths. However, there are the beforementioned problems about the feasibility of eliminating contamination in reflection processes when analyzing evaluative judgements. In the metaethical constructivism account just presented, that flaw doesn't exist. It furthermore has more explanatory power, as it clearly specifies not only why there are shared human values, but also what exactly they are. It specifies a clear methodology, through the practical view of an agent, which entails those "moral truths". For a moral realist, it is harder to specify which values exactly are moral facts, as this continues to be an area of disagreement.

Relationism of evaluative judgements

There is a way to utilize the common themes previously highlighted. When seeing normative judgements as relational, there is a way of establishing a notion of "moral good", in a specific sense. Gilbert Harman, an anti-realist, argues that all moral judgments are inherently relational, depending on the implicit agreements or understandings within a group. This view supports the idea that when someone states, "I think doing x is good," they imply that "x is good because it helps achieve y". Moral judgments, similar to judgments about size, make sense only in relation to a specific comparison class. For example, calling a dog large only makes sense relative to other dogs of a certain type. (Harman, 1975)

According to the constructivist framework, there is no strict normative truth outside of an agent's point of view. Nevertheless, utilizing relational statements concerning evaluative judgements makes implicit evaluative attitudes visible. This is useful in establishing an evaluative common ground. Additionally, even if not entailed from an agent's point of view, some evaluative judgement could be seen as "good" / "correct" in relation to the shared evaluative subset of humans. Importantly, it is not good intrinsically, it is no stance-independent normative truth, it is instrumentally good when relating it to our human nature and flourishment in societal structures.

The implicit premise is not that this shared human evaluative substance is the "good". On the other hand, it is an attempt to make explicit what we as humans share. It is a descriptive claim, not a normative claim. Just because we share it, doesn't mean we should act as such. Nevertheless, for the sake of being able to have fruitful discussions about evaluative judgements, we can refer to this common ground and at least say "In relation to what we have in common, this can be seen as good".

It is not my goal to create an extensive list of our shared values, but rather claim that they do exist and that it can make sense to relate to them. This is important for a metaethical constructivist, as otherwise moral discourse is limited. As normative truth is only entailed for

a specific agent and there is no stance-independence, there is no sensible discussion possible if agent x or y possesses objective evaluative facts.

Conclusion

The exploration of the interplay between sociocultural influences and realist theories of value reveals a profound dilemma that challenges the notion of mind-independent evaluative truths. By extending Sharon Street's framework of the Darwinian Dilemma to an argument for a sociocultural parallel, this thesis has critically analyzed the compatibility of moral realism with socioculturally shaped evaluative attitudes. The two possible pathways for realists each present their unique challenges. Insisting that there is no relation between sociocultural influence and evaluative truths implies that our evaluative judgements are biased and distorted by cultural forces. That influence essentially leads us away from the truth, it misguides us on our journey to moral knowledge, leading to a skeptical picture where our judgements are distorted.

Rational reflection is seen as a way out, through systematic, critical, and informed reflection an agent can transcend sociocultural biases and grasp evaluative truths. But one must evaluate an evaluative judgement in the light of an evaluative premise, which respectively also possibly is distorted. Even assuming it is possible to avoid sociocultural contamination on the premise, it is not clear how one would evaluate any evaluative judgements in an interpersonal/social context without drawing upon one's sociocultural learnings. As such, eliminating the sociocultural distortion through rational reflection to reach evaluative truth is a flawed process, and the skeptic picture returns.

A moral realist that wants to claim that at least some of the evaluative judgements engrained in our cultures are true naturally will insist there is a relation between the sociocultural influence and evaluative truths. Perhaps the systematic and sophisticated centuries of moral inquiry were guided by the apprehension of moral truth. Problematically, multiple coexisting cultural evaluative judgements contradict each other. Nevertheless, when only positing a few objective evaluative facts, which are abstract in nature and thus hard to grasp, cultural moral disagreement is compatible with realism. In this picture the reasons behind evaluative facts, although complex to understand, are graspable. Upon understanding the arguments behind them, one sees a judgement as true. This process is incredibly vague and doesn't provide a concrete explanation of how to distinguish a moral fact, obscuring the connection between sociocultural influence and evaluative truth.

That relation is clearer in Railton's account where moral truth is grounded in natural facts related to human flourishing. In that framework, social rationality reflects the rational approval of norms that consider the interests of all affected individuals. Thus, when there is a moral equilibrium in society, norms align with truth. Whilst an elegant approach, there is a partial mind-dependence of evaluative truth in that account, which makes it unsatisfactory for a realist.

Sharon Street's metaethical position, metaethical constructivism, is presented as an alternative account that avoids the dilemma whilst making sense of the relationship between sociocultural evaluative judgments and moral truths. It naturally is an anti-realist view, as

there is clear mind-dependence. By focusing on the practical point of view, the challenges of the evolutionary and sociocultural influence are answered innovatively. The metaethical framework can sketch a compelling picture emerging out of an interplay of human nature and societies. It adopts the learnings of the Darwinian and sociocultural dilemma to posit a shared evaluative attitude between humans which convincingly explains similarities as well as differences in evaluative judgements.

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