



Moral Explanation and Evolutionary Explanation of Morality

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ELEONORA SEVERINI

ABSTRACT: The aim of the paper is to assess two alternative explanations of morality in metaethics: the realist explanation of morality and the one provided by evolutionary theory. According to a traditional argument for moral realism, moral facts are part of the *fabric of the world* to the extent that postulating such entities is required in our best explanatory picture of what people think and do. In other terms, if moral facts figure in the best explanatory account for human moral thinking and behavior, they earn ontological rights and moral realism is secured. It will be analyzed how this issue might be renewed by taking into account evolutionary considerations and assessing their consequences in metaethics. I will consider the realist explanation of morality and compare it with the evolutionary explanation of morality. Finally, I will show how the realist attempts to reconcile the realist explanation of morality and the evolutionary explanation of morality can be undermined by connecting this discussion to the one about moral disagreement.

KEYWORDS: Moral Realism, Moral Explanation, Evolutionism, Moral Disagreement, Metaethics

ABSTRACT: Il presente saggio intende valutare due spiegazioni alternative della morale: la spiegazione realista e quella fornita dall'evoluzionismo. Secondo un argomento tradizionale a favore del realismo morale, ci sono fatti morali nella misura in cui è necessario postulare l'esistenza di tali fatti nella migliore spiegazione di ciò che gli esseri umani pensano e fanno quando pensano e agiscono moralmente. In altri termini, se per spiegare perché ragioniamo in termini morali e perché ci comportiamo moralmente, dobbiamo fare riferimento all'esistenza di fatti morali, allora tali fatti esistono e il realismo morale è al sicuro. La tenuta di questo argomento, tuttavia, può essere messa in discussione alla luce di considerazioni evoluzionistiche. Nel saggio, dopo aver presentato la spiegazione realista della morale, la si confronterà con la spiegazione evoluzionistica della morale. Infine, si mostrerà come i tentativi di tenere insieme la spiegazione realista

della morale con la spiegazione evuzionistica della morale, siano messi in seria difficoltà dal disaccordo morale.

KEYWORDS: realismo morale, spiegazione morale, evuzionismo, disaccordo morale, metaetica

1. Introduction

Moral philosophers are involved, among other things, in constructing moral models. And moral models are intended, among other things, to explain moral beliefs¹. The present paper aims to test two alternative explanations in metaethics: the realist explanation of morality, i.e., the so-called moral explanation, and the explanation provided by evolutionary theory. Starting with the former, moral realism is the view that there are moral facts or properties which are *stance-independent*, i.e., they would exist independently of any perspective². Although realists disagree about the very nature of these facts³, they all agree that such facts are real or *genuine*⁴ since they are somehow part of the *fabric of the world*⁵. The basic idea of such a view is that if moral beliefs are responses to recognized features of the world, then it will be fair to suppose that moral features are part of the world. Moreover, according to a popular realist argument, there are moral

¹ Cfr. U. D. Leibowitz, *Scientific Explanation and Moral Explanation*, «Noûs» 45/3 (2011), pp. 472-503, p. 473.

² Cfr. R. Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003; T. Cuneo-R. Shafer-Landau, *The Moral Fixed Points: New Directions for Moral Nonnaturalism*, «Philosophical Studies» 171/3 (2014), pp. 399-443.

³ The main disagreement on this issue is between those maintaining that moral facts are themselves natural facts (moral naturalism) and those maintaining that moral facts are neither identical with nor reducible to any natural fact (moral non-naturalism). The former position is endorsed by, e.g., P. Railton, *Moral realism*, «Philosophical Review» 95/2 (1986), pp. 163-207; D. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989; R. Boyd, *How to Be a Moral Realist*, in G. Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1988, pp. 181-228. For the latter view, see, e.g., R. Shafer-Landau, *op. cit.*; D. Parfit, Derek, *On What Matters*, Vol. 2, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011; and T. Scanlon, *Being Realistic About Reasons*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

⁴ Cfr. N. Sinclair, *The Explanationist Argument for Moral Realism*, «Canadian Journal of Philosophy», 41/1 (2011), pp. 1-24.

⁵ Cfr. J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1977.

facts to the extent that postulating such entities is required in our best explanatory picture of what people think and do⁶. In other terms, if moral facts necessarily figure – as they do according to the advocates of moral realism – in the best explanatory account of human moral thinking and behavior, they will earn ontological rights⁷. This is the explanationist argument for moral realism (hereafter EXP). This way of arguing for realism through an inference to the best explanation, has been widely employed in philosophy of science more than metaethics⁸, and it consists in choosing among alternative theories the one which explains better than the others a given phenomenon, and claiming that that theory is (at least very probably) true. When applied to the moral domain to support a realist view on morality, the core claim of the argument is that moral facts do figure in the best explanatory account of our moral beliefs and actions, insofar as ruling out moral facts would entail an explanatory lack. By contrast, this claim has been traditionally criticized by Harman arguing that moral facts, unlike scientific facts, cannot be charged with such an explanatory role⁹. In the Harman's wake, if we eschew any reference to moral facts, we will not suffer any explanatory lack.

The present paper adopts a different strategy. It will be shown that this issue can be renewed by taking into account evolutionary considerations and assessing their consequences in metaethics. We will examine precisely the case that EXP requires, i.e., that moral facts do figure in the *best* explanatory picture of moral beliefs and behavior, comparing it with the evolutionary explanation of morality. Thus, the

⁶ Cfr. N. Sturgeon, *Harman on Moral Explanations of Natural Facts*, «Southern Journal of Philosophy» 24/S1 (1986), pp. 69-78; P. Railton, *art. cit.*; D. Brink 1989, *art. cit.*; R. Boyd, *art. cit.*

⁷ B. Leiter, *Moral Facts and Best Explanations*, «Social Philosophy and Policy» 18/2 (2001), pp. 79-101.

⁸ On the inference to the best explanation, see, e.g., P. Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation*, Routledge, London 2004. The idea that one should be realist about what figures in one's best explanations can be traced back to Quine (cfr. W. V. O. Quine, *On What There Is*, «The Review of Metaphysics», 2/5 (1948), pp. 21-38) and Putnam "indispensability argument", developed to defend a realist view on mathematical entities (cfr. H. Putnam, *Mathematics Matter and Method*, «Philosophical Papers», Vol. I, 2nd edition, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1979). Indispensability arguments are deeply related to the inference to the best explanation. Indeed, it is usually assumed that the best explanation of why D-facts necessarily figure in our best explanation of a given domain D is that D-facts are real facts.

⁹ Cfr. G. Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, Oxford University Press, New York 1977.

question is not whether moral facts may have an explanatory role, but which explanation of moral beliefs and behavior is the best one.

According to the evolutionary account of morality, our moral beliefs have indeed been promoted by natural selection because they were advantageous, i.e., they emerged through natural selection because this way of thinking provided our ancestors with some sort of survival and reproductive advantage¹⁰. The point is that, in order to explain moral phenomena (e.g., moral beliefs and moral behavior), evolutionary theory does not need to presuppose any moral fact. Contrary to the realist explanation of morality, the evolutionary explanation of morality makes moral facts redundant and on this basis some authors maintain that the realist claim, according to which there are moral facts, is unjustified¹¹. In this respect, it should be noted that whether there are other ways than EXP to maintain that there are moral facts, they will not be addressed here. Indeed, the rejection of EXP does not rule out that moral realism can be established on other grounds.

The plan is as follows. In sections 1.1-1.2, I illustrate respectively the realist explanation of morality and the (standard) evolutionary explanation of morality in relevant detail. In section 2, I proceed by discussing a common objection that can be raised against the possibility that moral facts have some explanatory power. In section 3, I present the evolutionary challenge for the realist explanation of morality. In section 4, I introduce a complication in the argument presented in section 3. This complication provides the background of my suggestion that we should refer to moral disagreement in order to strengthen the evolutionary view on morality (section 5). In section 6, some concluding remarks are made.

¹⁰ Cfr. M. Ruse-E. O. Wilson, *Moral Philosophy as Applied Science*, «Philosophy» 61/236 (1986), pp. 173-192.

¹¹ This way of arguing characterizes so-called evolutionary debunking arguments (cfr. G. Kahane, *Evolutionary Debunking Arguments*, «Noûs» 45/1 (2011), pp. 103-125). These arguments aim to undermine the justificatory status of a belief, either by showing that the belief was formed by an epistemically defective process (i.e., process debunking) or by showing that the best explanation of the belief does not presuppose its truth (i.e., best-explanation debunking) (on this characterization, see S. Nichols, *Process Debunking and Ethics*, «Ethics» 124/4 (2014), pp. 727-749). The strategy pursued here is of the latter sort.

1.1. Moral Explanation

The possibility of moral explanation, i.e., the possibility of explaining moral phenomena in moral terms, is a core claim of moral realism, whereas «the alleged impossibility of moral explanation is a key weapon in certain naturalistic attacks on moral realism»¹². Moral realism, roughly, is the metaethical view according to which our «moral claims do purport to report facts and are true if they get the facts right»¹³. While moral realists are all united on that point, they disagree about which moral claims are true and about what in the world makes them true, i.e., which is the very nature of moral facts. Among moral realists, the possibility of moral explanation will be of fundamental importance to those who wish to defend the existence of natural moral facts, i.e., those who wish to be moral realist *and* naturalist¹⁴. In this sense, the claim that moral facts are natural will be plausible only if moral facts figure in our best explanation of observable phenomena on a par with those of empirical science. On this line of thought, to offer a moral explanation consists in referring to the moral facts or properties entering a situation or characterizing an action, in order to explain why a moral belief has been formed, or why a moral action has been made, by looking at that situation or agent.

Consider this case. Jane observes Albert torturing a cat for fun. On the basis of this observation, she forms the belief that what Albert is doing is wrong. A moral realist may support a moral explanation of Jane's formation of this belief by affirming that «it is sometimes legitimate (...) to explain Jane's formation of this belief by citing the fact that the action is actually wrong»¹⁵. In other terms, according to the realist view of moral explanation, it is the actual wrongness of Albert's action that helps us to explain Jane's disapproval of it. If moral facts (e.g., the wrongness of Albert's action) have an explanatory role in the best account of any moral belief (e.g., Jane's disapproval

¹² B. Major, *Moral Explanation*, «Philosophy Compass» 2/1 (2007), pp. 1-15, p. 2.

¹³ G. Sayre-McCord, *Moral Realism*, in E. N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2015, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/moral-realism/> [21.07.2022].

¹⁴ Here, I will not consider non-naturalist versions of moral realism. After all, implementing explanation in metaethics contributes to the project of moral naturalism which, briefly, aims at making ethics more akin to science (cfr. O. Flanagan-H. Sarkissian-D. Wong, *Naturalizing Ethics*, in K. J. Clark (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Naturalism*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 2016, pp. 16-33.

¹⁵ A. Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, Polity, Cambridge 2003, p. 147.

of Albert's action), then it seems that we may conclude that there are moral facts. In a similar way, a physicist sees a track in a cloud chamber and then concludes that «[there] goes a proton»¹⁶. In this case, in order to explain the physicist's observation, we need to suppose that there is a proton in the cloud chamber, in the same way in which, the argument goes, in Jane's case we need to suppose that there is a moral fact in order to explain Jane's moral reaction.

This is the reason why it is so important for a moral realist to support the availability of moral explanation, i.e., because through moral explanation she may assert the existence of moral facts¹⁷. To sum up, EXP runs as follows:

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| Premise 1. | Only those facts that figure in the best explanation of some phenomena exist; |
| Premise 2. | The moral explanation of moral phenomena is the best explanation of moral phenomena. |
| Premise 3. | Moral facts figure in the moral explanation of moral phenomena. |
| | Therefore,
moral facts exist. |

Now, we are going to focus on Premise 2, that is the pivotal claim of EXP. That moral facts figure in the *best* explanation of moral phenomena can indeed be questioned. More precisely, what needs to be examined is not whether moral facts figure in whatsoever explanation of moral phenomena, but whether they figure in the *best* one. So, the question is whether there is an explanatory account of morality that is better than the realist one and, in that case, whether moral facts may figure in that account. In this regard, another explanation of moral phenomena is actually available, i.e., the so-called evolutionary explanation of morality (EEM), and it will be analyzed whether moral facts may figure in it.

¹⁶ This is a very famous and discussed example put forward by Harman (G. Harman, *op. cit.*, p. 6). However, it is important to stress that Harman denies the applicability of that argument to ethics since, he argues, moral facts, unlike protons, cannot be empirically tested and confirmed.

¹⁷ Whether the availability of moral explanations suffices to secure that moral facts exist, is a distinct issue. On this, see N. Sturgeon, *art. cit.*; G. Harman, *op. cit.*

1.2. Evolutionary Explanation of Morality

A remarkable amount of the current debate in metaethics is devoted to assess the consequences of the EEM. The EEM generally says that natural selection is the most important process in shaping our tendency to produce moral beliefs, i.e., that our moral way of thinking is a biological adaptation. Whether morality is an adaptation is still an open question in the ongoing debate involving both evolutionary biologists and moral philosophers¹⁸. Nevertheless, it is largely shared that there is an evolutionary explanation of some sort for our moral beliefs, i.e., it is largely shared that our moral beliefs are an outcome of some sort of the evolutionary process¹⁹. Although the details of the process through which morality evolved are still debated, the most relevant point is that, in order to explain moral phenomena, the EEM does not need to presuppose any moral fact. Along this line, «we do not need normative facts to explain our making the normative judgments we do», and then «[to] suppose that there are normative facts is gratuitous»²⁰. Therefore, evolutionary explanation makes moral facts redundant: «for even if external ethical premises did not exist, we would go on thinking about right and wrong in the way that we do»²¹.

Consider again the aforementioned case. Jane observes Albert torturing a cat for fun. On the basis of this observation, she forms the belief that what Albert is doing is wrong. In order to explain Jane's belief, we can refer to our evolutionary history: «Jane is a human and humans have evolved to form moral judgments when they observe certain acts performed by other humans because forming such

¹⁸ Cfr. C. Van Shaik et al., *Morality as a Biological Adaptation - An Evolutionary Model Based on the Lifestyle of Human Foragers*, in M. Christen et al. (eds.), *Empirically Informed Ethics: Morality between Facts and Norms*, Dordrecht, Springer 2014, pp. 65-84.

¹⁹ The question about which kind of evolutionary product morality is does not affect our argument. Kahane underlines that: «It's important to see that it does not matter here whether any particular evolutionary explanation is true. What matters is that some such story is likely to be true (...). If some evaluative disposition is explained not by adaptation but by the even more random evolutionary mechanisms of genetic drift or exaptation, this would make things worse, not better, with respect to truth tracking. It would make the process even more similar to flipping a coin» (G. Kahane, *art. cit.*, pp. III-III2). Thus, this question will be sidestepped, and, for ease of reading, we will refer to morality as an adaptation in the rest of the paper.

²⁰ A. Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. 1990, p. 108.

²¹ M. Ruse-E. O. Wilson, *art. cit.*, p. 186.

beliefs was evolutionarily advantageous to human population in the past (e.g., because they promote successful social behavior)»²². So, Jane has the background belief that torturing animals for fun is morally wrong; she observes Albert torturing a cat and then she forms the belief that what she has observed is wrong. The point is: Where does the background belief that torturing animals for fun is morally wrong come from? Jane's background belief can be explained in evolutionary terms. This does not mean that natural selection has promoted the specific content that torturing cats for fun is wrong. If our general capacity to form a moral belief (e.g., some actions are wrong) is an evolutionary outcome, it is still possible that the content of such a belief (e.g., gratuitous harmful actions are wrong) may vary and takes a different shape depending on the context (e.g., torturing a cat for fun is wrong). The main evolutionary function of a belief of the form «gratuitous harmful actions are wrong» is to produce a stable pattern of coordination where people tend to disapprove, for instance, those who do gratuitous harmful actions. Furthermore, this account does not require each moral belief (e.g., torturing cat for fun is wrong) to have an evolutionary explanation of its own. But each belief has an evolutionary explanation insofar as it is the product of our moral psychology whose main function is to produce patterns of coordination. From an evolutionary point of view, thinking that Albert's action is wrong is evolutionarily advantageous because human beings (or, at least, the majority of them) generally think that it is wrong when they observe it.

Now, the main difference between realist, moral explanation and EEM is that the latter does not refer to any external moral facts (e.g., the wrongness of Albert's action) but just to our shared and evolved moral psychology. Thus, we can develop a counterargument to EXP, call it EXP*, by referring to EEM:

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| Premise 1. | Only those facts that figure in the best explanation of some phenomena exist; |
| Premise 2. | The EEM is the best explanation of moral phenomena. |
| Premise 3. | Moral facts do not figure in the EEM. |

²² A. Lyon, *Mathematical Explanations Of Empirical Facts, And Mathematical Realism*, «Australasian Journal of Philosophy», 90/3 (2012), pp. 559-578, p. 576.

Therefore,
moral facts do not exist.

Thus, the explanation of morality provided by evolutionary theory seems to be able to undermine EXP. However, in order to hold up this argument, namely EXP*, we have to justify its second premise, i.e., that EEM is the best explanation of why we have the moral experience we have or, at least, that EEM is better than realist, moral explanation. In other terms, the question is the following: Does either realist, moral explanation or EEM explain moral phenomena better than the other? Before assessing this question, however, it is important to take into consideration an objection that may undermine the possibility itself of moral explanation.

2. The Explanatory Challenge for Moral Realism

It has been argued that some moral realists contend that moral facts are explanatory useful as those of empirical science. Now, given that scientific explanations are usually regarded as causal explanations²³, to resolve the dispute on the existence of moral facts, the question is not only whether there are moral explanations of moral phenomena, but also whether there is *moral causation*. Along this line of thought, an obvious objection to the possibility of moral explanation would be to ask how moral facts are able to explain our having moral beliefs insofar as it is not clear at all how moral facts can play a causal role in the formation of moral beliefs²⁴. Moreover, even if moral realism were true, moral facts could be explanatory inert, or, more precisely, *causally* inert. In the aforementioned example, indeed, the physicist postulates the presence of a proton to make sense of what he has seen, i.e., the track in the cloud chamber; in other terms, he postulates that the proton has *causally* provoked the track. Then, what may be contested to the advocates of moral explanation is that it is not clear at all how moral explanations might be causal explanations²⁵.

²³ See, for instance, J. Woodward, *Scientific Explanation*, in E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/scientific-explanation/> [21.07.2022]

²⁴ Cfr. D. Loeb, *Moral Explanations of Moral Beliefs*, «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research» 70/1 (2005), pp. 193-208.

²⁵ It is important to notice that some moral realists agree with this objection and

In this regard, Jackson and Pettit seem to offer a solution presenting an account of the causal relevance according to which a property can be *causally relevant* without being *causally efficacious*²⁶. More precisely, they argue that those properties which are not directly efficacious in bringing about an effect, may still be relevant thanks to their programming for the availability of other properties to bring about that effect.

Jackson and Pettit distinguish two kinds of causal explanation: process and program explanations. A process explanation refers to a property that is directly efficacious in bringing about an effect, that is a property in virtue of whose instantiation, at least in part, the effect occurs. A program explanation, on the other hand, refers to a property that, although not directly causally efficacious in bringing about an effect, ensures the instantiation of a property which is causally efficacious in bringing about the effect.

The example they give is the one of a glass container that has water at boiling temperature in it and cracks. The question is: Why did it crack? «First answer: because of the temperature of the water. Second answer, in simplified form: because of the momentum of such and such a molecule (group of molecules) in striking such and such a molecular bond in the container surface»²⁷. In this sense, the program explanation – given in terms of temperature – conveys some information that the process explanation – given in terms of the momentum of specific molecules – lacks.

In an analogous way, a realist may hold up that moral explanations are program explanations²⁸. So, adapting the program account

argue that moral facts are not causally efficacious. They indeed maintain that moral facts exist but are not natural facts, thus embracing a non-naturalist position. See, e.g., R. Dworkin, *Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It*, «Philosophy and Public Affairs» 25/2 (1996), pp. 87-139; C. McGinn, *Ethics, Evil and Fiction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997; R. Audi, *Ethical Naturalism and the Explanatory Power of Moral Concepts*, in R. Audi (ed.), *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997; J. J. Thomson, Judith, *Epistemological Arguments for Moral Scepticism*, in G. Harman-J. J. Thomson (eds.), *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, Blackwell, Oxford 1996, pp. 69-94.

²⁶ Cfr. F. Jackson-P. Pettit, *Program Explanation: A General Perspective*, «Analysis» 50/2 (1990), pp. 107-117.

²⁷ F. Jackson-P. Pettit, *art. cit.*, p. 110.

²⁸ See, e.g., A. Miller, *Moral Realism and Program Explanation: A Very Short Symposium I: Reply to Nelson*, «Australasian Journal of Philosophy», 87/2 (2009), pp. 337-341; M. Nelson, *Moral realism and program explanation*, «Australasian Journal of Philosophy»

of explanation to the moral domain might allow one to defend the possibility of moral explanation by arguing that moral wrongness, like the temperature in the case above, although not causally efficacious, might still be causally relevant. This would make moral explanation as genuinely explanatory as scientific explanations, provided that one assumes that genuine explanations have to be causal.

In this perspective, moral explanation (program explanation) provides us with piece of information that non-moral explanation²⁹ (process explanation) does not provide³⁰. Recall the case of Albert torturing a cat for fun and suppose that Albert has beaten the cat and Jane forms the belief that she has observed something morally wrong. Now, suppose that the cat *property* of being beaten is replaced by other non-moral properties, such as being burned: Jane would still have formed the belief that Albert's action was morally wrong. According to Miller, this will prove that the program explanation of Jane's belief, i.e., the explanation in terms of the wrongness of Albert's action, adds something to the process explanation, i.e., the explanation in terms of what Albert has physically done (e.g., beating the cat or burning it). Thus, program explanation and process explanation are not entirely overlapping, and in particular the unavailability of the former would produce an explanatory lack.

Whether the program account of explanation might be sufficient to justify the claim that moral facts are explanatory useful, is still an open question³¹. However, the program account of explanation does not seem to be manifestly flawed, and rather it looks promising. Although this point is not the main focus of the paper, it needs to be addressed, even if briefly, because the claim that moral explanation is not really an explanation after all risks undermining the legitimacy of the idea of extending an argument based on an inference to the best explanation to the moral domain, which is the core move of the paper. After having addressed the problem and proposed a possible solution in terms of the distinction between program and process explanations, I will focus on the very aim of this work, i.e., whether

84/3 (2006), pp. 417-428.

²⁹ By "non-moral explanation", we intend here those explanations which do not refer to moral facts or properties to explain a given phenomenon.

³⁰ Cfr. A. Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, cit., pp. 153-154.

³¹ Cfr. M. Nelson, *art. cit.*; A. Miller, *Moral Realism and Program Explanation*, cit.; P. Bloomfield, *Moral Realism And Program Explanation: A Very Short Symposium 2: Reply To Miller*, «Australasian Journal of Philosophy» 87/2 (2009), pp. 343-344.

the realist, moral explanation can explain moral phenomena better than the EEM.

3. *The Evolutionary Challenge for Moral Explanation*

In the previous sections, we have introduced and discussed two competing explanations of moral phenomena: realist, moral explanation and EEM. And we have also stressed the different relation they respectively establish with moral facts. To understand whether moral facts do figure in the best explanation of moral phenomena, we need to understand which one, between realist, moral explanation and EEM, is the best explanation of moral phenomena. Thus, we need to answer the following question: What makes one explanation better than another? In order to compare the explanatory power of realist, moral explanation and EEM, we will follow the proposal put forward by Leiter³². Leiter borrows from Thagard two criteria for theory-choice on which the majority of philosophers agrees: consilience and simplicity³³. As regard the former, Thagard states that: «Consilience is intended to serve as a measure of how much a theory explains (...). Roughly, a theory is said to be consilient if it explains at least two classes of facts. Then one theory is more consilient than another if it explains more classes of facts than the other does»³⁴.

In this respect, it seems quite obvious that EEM is more consilient than realist, moral explanation. While realist, moral explanation will be able to explain only moral phenomena, the evolutionary theory is employed far beyond the moral domain. More exactly, the application of the evolutionary theory to moral phenomena is a recent topic if compared to other employments of it in, e.g., biology, philosophy of science or philosophy of mind.

The second criterion is simplicity. As regard this, Thagard states that: «simplicity puts a constraint on consilience: a simple consilient theory not only must explain a range of facts; it must explain a set of facts without making a host of assumptions with narrow applica-

³² B. Leiter, *art. cit.*

³³ P. Thagard, *The Best Explanation: Criteria for Theory Choice*, «Journal of Philosophy» 75/2 (1978), pp. 76-92.

³⁴ P. Thagard, *art. cit.*, p. 79.

tion»³⁵. Even in this respect, realist, moral explanation presents some problems since it postulates the existence of an ontological extra, i.e., moral facts, which EEM does not need. Furthermore, realist, moral explanation is not able to justify that extra in the light of a more consilient account since, as Leiter states, moral «properties (...) are too neatly tailored to only one sort of explanandum – that which I am calling the moral phenomena – for us to think that moral properties are real (explanatory) properties»³⁶. Therefore, according to Thagard's criteria for theory-choice, EEM explains moral experience better than realist, moral explanation, since it is more consilient and simple. Thus, according to the evolutionary counterargument to EXP, i.e., EXP*, it seems possible to conclude that we do not need to assume that moral facts exist.

However, once accepted that EEM is better than realist, moral explanation, another point should be discussed in order to maintain that the existence of moral facts cannot be justified on explanatory grounds. There are indeed some recent attempts to reconcile EEM with the existence of moral facts. Those attempts deserve some attention. Recognizing that EEM is better than realist, moral explanation might be not enough to undermine EXP.

4. *Varieties of Evolutionary Explanations of Morality*

Recall EXP*, i.e., the evolutionary argument against EXP:

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| Premise 1. | Only those facts that figure in the best explanation of some phenomena are real facts; |
| Premise 2. | The EEM is the best explanation of moral phenomena. |
| Premise 3. | Moral facts do not figure in the EEM. |
| | Therefore,
moral facts are not real facts. |

In previous sections, I supported Premise (2) by arguing that EEM is

³⁵ Ivi, p. 87.

³⁶ B. Leiter, *art. cit.*, p. 88.

the best explanation of moral phenomena. Now, in order to conclude that moral facts are not real facts, also Premise (3) has to be shored up. Once accepted that EEM is better than realist, moral explanation, a possible strategy for the moral realist is to make EEM consistent with the existence of moral facts. A moral realist, indeed, may argue that the evolutionary explanation of moral beliefs is correct, but this does not undermine moral realism, because the evolutionary process is not entirely insensitive to moral facts³⁷. More precisely, the moral realist can try to reconcile her view with an evolutionary account by invoking another version of the evolutionary explanation of morality, namely the version according to which our moral beliefs are fitness-enhancing because they are (at least very often) true. Thus, she may support an alternative evolutionary view, according to which natural selection does care about moral truth, i.e., moral beliefs are reproductively advantageous because they are true, and they are true because they tend to track moral facts. This argument is committed to a controversial evolutionary view according to which the evolutionary process is somehow sensitive to truth, i.e., beliefs are reproductively advantageous because they correspond to some external facts. Although debated, this view is legitimate, insofar as evolutionary considerations have been used to both justify and debunk a variety of beliefs³⁸. Moreover, this evolutionary conception is far from new, as Quine's words show: «Creatures inveterately wrong in their inductions have a pathetic but praiseworthy tendency to die before reproducing their kind»³⁹. In this sense, we can recognize more than one kind of EEM, and so the claim made in Premise 3 of EXP*, i.e., that moral facts do not figure in EEM, can be called into question.

³⁷ Cfr. M. Artiga, *Rescuing Tracking Theories of Morality*, «Philosophical Studies» 172/12 (2015), pp. 3357-3374

³⁸ On the relation between natural selection and truth, for a supportive view see H. De Cruz *et al.*, *Evolutionary Approaches to Epistemic Justification*, «Dialectica» 65/4 (2011), pp. 517-535; M. Boudry-M. Vlerick, *Natural Selection Does Care about Truth*, «International Studies in the Philosophy of Science» 1/28 (2014), pp. 65-77; and for a critique see S. Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason: Preface to a Pragmatic Theory of Cognitive Evaluation*, Bradford Books, Cambridge Mass. 1990. According to Street, that the evolutionary process might track moral truths is implausible on scientific grounds. Here, we will not enter this debate, and, for the sake of the argument, we will assume that this alternative evolutionary explanation of morality is plausible (cfr. S. Street, *A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value*, «Philosophical Studies» 127/1 (2006), pp. 109-166.

³⁹ W.V.O. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and other Essays*, Columbia University Press, New York-Londra 1969, p. 126.

According to the standard evolutionary account, having moral beliefs contributed to reproductive success not because they were true, but because they were adaptive, in the sense they motivated our ancestors to act in a way that promoted reproductive success. Following Street, call this evolutionary account, the adaptive link account (ALA)⁴⁰. According to the alternative evolutionary account, on the other hand, there is an alignment between the evolutionary process and moral facts, insofar as natural selection would have favored those ancestors who were able to grasp moral facts⁴¹. Following Street, call this alternative evolutionary account, the tracking account (TA). TA represents a tempting way for the moral realist to make EEM consistent with the existence of moral facts and then escape the evolutionary challenge. Thus, once argued that EEM is better than moral explanation (see, *supra*, § 3.), we cannot yet rule out that any moral fact may intervene in the evolutionary explanation of our moral beliefs. Indeed, at least two kinds of EEM are available: ALA-based EEM and TA-based EEM. Now, we can posit TA-based EEM and ALA-based EEM as competitive explanations of the same phenomena and compare the explanatory power of the two by employing the same strategy adopted for comparing realist, moral explanation and EEM. Then the question is: Does either TA-based EEM or ALA-based EEM explain moral beliefs better than the other?

If we refer again to the criteria of consilience and simplicity, it seems that TA-based EEM «posits something extra that the [ALA-based EEM] does not, namely independent evaluative truths»⁴². The ALA-based EEM, in contrast, «explains (...) the widespread presence of certain values in the human population more parsimoniously»⁴³. From this point of view, ALA-based EEM seems to be better than TA-based EEM, since it is ontologically more parsimonious.

⁴⁰ S. Street, *art. cit.*

⁴¹ To illustrate how it might be possible that the evolutionary process favored those ancestors who were able to grasp moral facts, consider the following non-moral example: «False mathematical beliefs just aren't going to be very useful. Suppose you are being chased by three lions, you observe two quit the chase, and you conclude that it is now safe to slow down» (R. Joyce, *The evolution of morality*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. 2006, p. 182). In that case, it is quite evident that having false mathematical beliefs (such as that « $3 - 2 = 0$ ») might be fatal. Therefore, it can be argued that true mathematical beliefs are fitness-enhancing.

⁴² S. Street, *art. cit.*, p. 129.

⁴³ *Ibidem.*

Nevertheless, it is important to notice that ontological or theoretical economy is not necessarily *a virtue* but «ontologies and theories can be complex as long as they contribute to consilience. On this account, one explanation will be better than another if it explains more and does so with comparable or greater simplicity»⁴⁴. A moral realist may object that: «[some] will accept a modest increase in ontological extravagance in return for proportionally greater explanatory strength»⁴⁵. And this may be the case of moral facts. Thus, moral realists would be allowed to commit their position to an ontological extra, if they gained a greater explanatory power in this way.

But the problem is that TA-based EEM just *posits* something extra that ALA-based EEM does not and, moreover, does not explain more things than ALA-based EEM; on the other hand, ALA-based EEM precisely *explains why* we have moral beliefs, and does this more parsimoniously than TA-based EEM. More precisely, the explanation provided by ALA-based EEM is of the following sort: «the evolutionists point out that there are good (biological) reasons why it is part of our nature to objectify morality. If we did not regard it as binding, we would ignore it. It is precisely because we think that morality is more than mere subjective desires, that we are led to obey it»⁴⁶. Along this line of thought, not only moral beliefs but also their sense of commitment are the product of our evolved moral psychology. In other terms, the authority of morality would be grounded on our evolved psychology rather than on some external moral facts, and we do not need to postulate any ontological extra to account for that authority. On the contrary TA-based EEM is not able to justify such an extra in the light of a more consilient account.

Therefore, we can conclude that the evolutionary explanation supplied by ALA-based EEM is better than TA-based EEM since it explains more things (i.e., why we have moral beliefs and our commitment to them) without postulating the existence of any moral fact. In light of this, i.e., once showed that ALA-based EEM is the best EEM among those available, we can conclude that EXP fails to show that moral facts are real facts.

⁴⁴ B. Leiter, *art. cit.*, p. 81.

⁴⁵ R. Joyce, *Does Either Moral Realism or Moral Anti-Realism Explain the Phenomena Better Than the Other?*, E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2009, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/moral-anti-realism/> [22.07.2022].

⁴⁶ M. Ruse, *Evolutionary Ethics: A Phoenix Arisen*, «Zygon» 21/1 (1986), pp. 95-112, p. 103.

5. The Argument from Disagreement

5.1. Disagreement and Evolutionary Explanation(s)

The statement that the explanation of morality supplied by ALA-based EEM is better than the one provided by TA-based EEM can be strengthened by referring to moral disagreement. Moral disagreement is «a truth of descriptive morality, a fact of anthropology»⁴⁷ and, moreover, moral disagreement is often held to undermine moral realism. According to a traditional argument against moral realism, indeed, the existence of moral facts is hard to reconcile with the existence of deep and widespread disagreement over moral issues. This argument has been traditionally supported by Mackie⁴⁸. Here, it is interesting to stress that Mackie understands the argument from disagreement as an inference to the best explanation. According to Mackie, the best explanation for the widespread presence of disagreement about moral issues is that there are no moral facts for people to agree about. More precisely, Mackie's argument from disagreement starts with an empirical observation: the tremendous amount of variation in moral views⁴⁹; the best explanation of this phenomenon, according to Mackie, is that moral beliefs «reflect adherence to and participation in different ways of life»⁵⁰. Consider, for instance, the different moral views across cultures about monogamy: How are we to explain that some cultures approve of monogamy and some others do not? According to Mackie, the fact is that «it is that people

⁴⁷ J. L. Mackie, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁴⁸ Ivi, pp. 36-38.

⁴⁹ This observation is debated. Indeed, it has been argued that moral disagreement is not really as widespread as it is often supposed to be, or that much of the widespread disagreement conceals a deeper agreement on some fundamental moral principles (Cfr., e.g., M. Klenk, *Third Factor Explanations and Disagreement in Metaethics*, «Synthese» 197 (2020), pp. 427-446). This is an interesting issue, but it cannot be fully addressed in this paper. However, what is indisputable is that it is implausible that there is no disagreement at all (i.e., no one ever disagrees with anyone else about any moral issue) or that there is global disagreement (i.e., everyone always disagrees with everyone else about all moral issues). Here, it will be assumed that a certain degree of moral disagreement takes place and this degree is what we need so that both parties (realist and non-realist) agree that moral realism is in danger (Cfr. H. Sauer, *The Argument from Agreement: How Universal Values Undermine Moral Realism*, «Ratio» 32/4 (2019), pp. 339-352).

⁵⁰ J. L. Mackie, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

approve of monogamy because they participate in a monogamous way of life rather than that they participate in a monogamous way of life because they approve of monogamy»⁵¹. In other terms, people in one culture happened to develop monogamy and, as a result, a corresponding moral view emerged. The crucial point is that Mackie's way of life explanation provides a better explanation of the different views about monogamy than competing explanations that refer to the existence of moral facts. That is, Mackie's *way of life explanation* is able to account for moral disagreement. Arguably, moral disagreement could be an upshot of the existence of different ways of life⁵². By contrast, according to moral realism, moral disputes have correct answers, and correct answers are made true by moral facts; thus, to solve moral disputes, we have to discover such moral facts⁵³. But many moral disputes are intractable, and many moral disagreements are faultless⁵⁴. Moreover, the widespread presence of faultless moral disagreement seems to provide reasons to think that moral disputes cannot admit of correct answers. Thus, to explain why many moral disagreements are so hard to resolve, it may be argued (*contra* moral realism) that there are no moral facts to discover.

In this respect, it has to be noted that while moral disagreement remains a peril for moral realism, evolutionism, as well as Mackie's way of life explanation, is able to account for it. As we have argued above, natural selection cannot determine the specific content of a (moral) belief (e.g., torturing a cat for fun is wrong), but can just enabling us to develop the capacity to form beliefs of some sort (e.g., some actions are wrong). That is, the evolutionary factors are not sufficient to explain which specific moral beliefs we have ended up with, but they only define the space in which the optional ones have

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² As Mackie sees moral beliefs as consequences of the ways of life in which people are involved, this allows us to explain why people have the moral beliefs they have without any need to assume that there are moral facts. And this, in turn, undermines the justification we have for believing that such facts exist. This move makes Mackie's argument a straightforward version of the best-explanation debunking strategy (see footnote n. 11). Along this line of reasoning, Mackie concludes that there are no moral facts and that all our moral beliefs are false (i.e. the main claim of his well-known *error theory*).

⁵³ Cfr. M. Smith, *The Moral Problem*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 1994.

⁵⁴ Cfr. M. Kölbel, *Faultless Disagreement*, «Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society», 104/1 (2004), pp. 53-73; A. Hills, *Faultless Moral Disagreement*, «Ratio» 26/4 (2013), pp. 410-427.

arisen. Once it is argued that the evolutionary explanation of moral beliefs doesn't determine a specific content, but only sets constraints on content, this allows some degree of variability in the content of moral beliefs⁵⁵. After all, what Darwinian evolution requires, beyond natural selection, is precisely variation. In the case of morality, metaphorically speaking, variation can take the form of competing moral beliefs, which naturally give rise to disagreement. If the content of those beliefs may vary, then we should expect that there is going to be some divergence in people's moral beliefs. In other terms, evolutionary considerations allow us to explain why people disagree so often about moral questions.

Along these lines of thought, moral disagreement can contribute to shed some light on the choice between ALA-based EEM and TA-based EEM. As we have seen, advocates of ALA-based EEM maintain that we are not justified in believing that there are moral facts, whereas advocates of TA-based EEM maintain that evolutionism does not undermine moral realism since the evolutionary process is not entirely insensitive to moral facts. Thus, advocates of TA-based EEM support an alternative evolutionary view, according to which moral beliefs are advantageous because they are true, and they are true because they tend to track moral facts. In this respect, a problem can be raised: If we embrace a truth-tracking account of the evolutionary process for our disposition to form moral beliefs (i.e., TA-based EEM), how are we to explain the widespread presence of moral disagreement? If the evolutionary process has selected those of our ancestors able to grasp moral facts, how can we explain the persistent deep disagreement about moral issues? By contrast, consider the idea that the disposition to form moral beliefs has evolved not to track moral facts, but to respond in adaptive ways to certain circumstances (i.e., ALA-based EEM) and, more precisely, to handle social problems⁵⁶. In this view, it seems plausible that different sets of beliefs could serve that function, i.e., social coordination, so that natural selection could allow a variety of contents of moral beliefs. It might be objected that variation in moral beliefs within a social

⁵⁵ Cfr. W. Harms, *Cultural Evolution and the Variable Phenotype*, «Biology and Philosophy», 11/3 (1996), pp. 357-375.

⁵⁶ Cfr. A. Gibbard, *op. cit.*; P. Kitcher, *The ethical project*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2011; E. J. Wielenberg, *Ethics and evolutionary theory*, «Analysis», 76/4 (2016), pp. 502-515; S. Street, *art. cit.*; R. Joyce, *The evolution of morality*, *cit.*

group is in contrast with its supposed adaptive function, i.e., social coordination. But variation in moral beliefs is not in contrast with the social coordination function of moral beliefs in the same way variation in other traits is not in contrast with the adaptive function of those traits. Indeed, since circumstances may vary, the persistence of a certain amount of variation in the moral beliefs within a social group may favor an adaptive response to changing circumstances, provided that variation is not so huge to disrupt social coordination. This helps to explain why, from an evolutionary point of view, we should not expect a basic agreement on some moral issues within and among different groups.

Therefore, while moral disagreement poses a significant challenge to TA-based EEM, it can be accounted for within the frame of ALA-based EEM. If this is indeed so, then, according to the standard criteria for theory choice⁵⁷, the evolutionary explanation of morality supplied by ALA-based EEM is better than the realist one, since it plausibly explains more (in particular, moral disagreement) and does so parsimoniously. Thus, moral disagreement can provide a support to ALA-based EEM, and an indirect counterargument to TA-based EEM and, then, to EXP.

5.2. *Disagreement and Third-Factor Explanation*

In recent years, precisely in the attempt to handle the evolutionary challenge, a new version of the realist explanation of morality has been developed, i.e., the third-factor explanation⁵⁸. The third-factor explanation of morality can be understood as an improvement of the TA-based EEM discussed above. Consider the version of this explanation that has been put forward by Enoch. Enoch points out that the realist, in order to secure the truth of our moral beliefs, needs to establish a correlation between the alleged moral facts and our evolved moral beliefs. And, more precisely, this correlation needs to be explained. Suppose that the factors to be correlated are A and

⁵⁷ P. Thagard, *art. cit.*

⁵⁸ Cfr. D. Enoch, *The Epistemological Challenge to Metanormative Realism: How Best to Understand It, and How to Cope with It*, «Philosophical Studies» 148/3 (2010), pp. 413-238; K. Brosnan, *Do the Evolutionary Origins of Our Moral Beliefs Undermine Moral Knowledge?*, «Biology and Philosophy» 26 (2011), pp. 51-64; K. O. Skarsaune, *Darwin and Moral Realism: Survival of the Iffiest*, «Philosophical Studies» 152/2 (2011), pp. 229-243.

B, the obvious strategy would be to show either that the A-facts are somehow responsible for the B-facts, or that the B-facts are somehow responsible for the A-facts. The problem is that in our case, i.e., the realist effort to explain the correlation between moral facts and our evolved moral beliefs, this explanatory strategy is not available⁵⁹. So, the realist has to seek for another explanatory strategy. According to Enoch, «[the] thing to look for is a third-factor explanation. For it is possible that the explanation of a correlation between the two factors A and B is in terms of a factor, C, that is (roughly speaking) responsible both for A-facts and B-facts»⁶⁰. So, third-factor explanations appeal to *bridge principles* that «posit a relation between the facts in virtue of which our moral beliefs are true and the (non-moral) facts to which the evolutionary account attributes them»⁶¹. In other terms, the third factor is an external factor that links moral facts with our evolved moral beliefs. For instance, Enoch's third factor is that *survival is at least somewhat good*. Evolutionary considerations can certainly explain why human beings tend to believe that survival is good: organisms acting according to this belief prosper, whereas organisms that do not act according to this belief perish. Thus, Enoch's third factor is fitness-enhancing. The crucial point is that, at the same time, that *survival is good* explains why such belief is also true, insofar as, as Enoch states, «survival (or whatever) is actually by-and-large *better* than the alternative»⁶². Thus, if evolutionary considerations explain why our ancestor performed action promoting survival, the third factor also explains why survival is good. So far, third-factor explanations seem to be the most promising realist answer to the evolutionary challenge.

However, Tersman has recently contested the legitimacy of third-factor explanations via moral disagreement⁶³. Crudely, the problem, according to Tersman, is that the realist relies on a substantive moral claim to develop a third-factor explanation, and moral disagreement might undermine the realist possibility of maintaining such a substantive moral claim. Tersman's main tenet is the following: «[A] third-factor account is plausible only if it generates the conclu-

⁵⁹ S. Street, *art. cit.*

⁶⁰ D. Enoch, *art. cit.*, pp. 429-30.

⁶¹ F. Tersman, *Debunking and disagreement*, «Noûs» 51/4 (2017), pp. 754-774, p. 765.

⁶² D. Enoch, *art. cit.*, p. 430, emphasis mine.

⁶³ F. Tersman, *art. cit.*

sion that there is a sufficiently varied and rich set of moral claims about which there is no radical disagreement»⁶⁴. Along this line of reasoning, in case of disagreement between people who endorse moral beliefs that are explained by a third-factor account, Tersman requires that the third factor allows us to explain away the disagreement as a cognitive shortcoming due to, e.g., fallacious reasoning or lack of information. To illustrate Tersman's argument, suppose that you have the belief that «drinking alcoholic beverages is morally wrong». Suppose that there is an evolutionary explanation as to why you have a sense of revulsion for alcoholic beverages and that it is true that «alcoholic beverages are noxious». Now, if I believe that «drinking alcoholic beverages is not morally wrong» and there is an evolutionary explanation as to why I do not have a sense of revulsion for alcoholic beverages, then we have to explain how I came to hold such a *wrong* belief. But if we cannot find anything that went wrong in my belief, then we should conclude that we are in a radical disagreement about whether or not drinking alcoholic beverages is morally wrong. In light of this radical disagreement, the truth of the third factor that «alcoholic beverages are noxious» is undermined⁶⁵.

Thus, according to Tersman, if there are radical moral disagreements, i.e., moral disagreements in which no shortcoming is involved, third-factor explanations are not available and cannot bridge the gap between alleged moral facts and our evolved moral beliefs.

However, this observation cannot be understood as conclusive and the debate on the third-factor explanation is still open. What I have tried to show is how appeals to disagreement might play a crucial role in counteracting third-factor explanations and, thus, in strengthening the evolutionary challenge for moral explanation.

⁶⁴ F. Tersman, *art. cit.*, p. 769.

⁶⁵ In recent discussion of epistemological questions concerning disagreement, one central theoretical divide is whether or not learning that a peer disagrees with you about *p* gives you a reason to reduce your confidence in your view about *p*. Conciliationists think it does, non-conciliationists argue that some cases of disagreement between peers allow at least one of them to retain confidence. In this respect, note that Tersman relies on a conciliatory view of disagreement, according to which it is rational to reduce our confidence in beliefs on which we disagree with an epistemic peer (cfr. A. Elga, *Reflection and disagreement*, «Noûs» 41/3 (2007), pp. 478-502).

6. Conclusion

The paper aimed at improving the explanationist debate in metaethics by taking into account evolutionary considerations on morality and assessing their implications especially for moral realism. Contrary to the traditional approaches focusing mainly on the availability of moral explanation, we focused on the following question: Do moral facts figure in the *best* explanatory account of moral phenomena? At first, we took into account two available options, i.e., realist, moral explanation and EEM, and, referring to Thagard's criteria for theory-choice, we showed that EEM explains moral phenomena better than realist, moral explanation. Then, we introduced the realist attempt to reconcile EEM with the existence of moral facts. We argued that this realist attempt fails by showing that the best EEM (i.e., ALA-based EEM) does not need to posit any moral fact. In the last part, I improved my argument by referring to moral disagreement. In particular, moral disagreement plays a crucial role to counteract a compelling realist strategy, i.e., to develop a third-factor explanation of morality. Therefore, we can provisionally conclude that referring to moral explanation is not a promising track to secure moral realism.

Università di Pavia
eleonora.severini@unipv.it

