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The objectivity of ethics and the unity of practical reason

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Abstract
This article revisits the evolutionary debunking arguments advanced by Katarzyna Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer. It evaluates their implications for the objectivity of ethics and the unity of practical reason. Building on Sidgwickian rational intuitionism, the paper contrasts the stability of utilitarian reasons with the vulnerability of egoistic justification once evolutionary and metaphysical assumptions about personal identity are examined. It further incorporates revised views on free will, moral epistemology, and peer disagreement, arguing for a more sceptical and collaborative philosophical method. The conclusion advocates prioritizing ethical epistemology and moral psychology over continued disputes between major normative theories.

Keywords: utilitarianism, egoism, evolutionary debunking, rational intuitionism, personal identity, moral epistemology

In 2012, Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer (LRS) published in *Ethics* an important and widely discussed paper (de Lazari-Radek & Singer, 2012, pp. 9–31)[2] on the metaethical implications of evolutionary theory, arguing that utilitarianism, unlike egoism, could withstand so-called 'debunking' objections, according to which justification for certain moral beliefs is undermined once their evolutionary origin is understood. (A standard example is the belief that incest is wrong, which may have arisen because relationships between rather than within families advance social stability and decrease the probability of genetic disorders). I was fortunate enough to be asked by the editors of the *PEASoup* blog to introduce the lively discussion of LRS's paper that followed. In this paper, I shall return briefly to LRS's arguments and my responses, before noting several issues on which my views have changed: on the so-called 'dualism of practical reason' as defended in my *Reasons and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), where I now have doubts about the rationality of self-interest, as well as on free will (an idea which I have come to believe to be incoherent) and on the implications of peer-disagreement in ethical theory, which I see as requiring suspension of judgement.

The background of LRS's discussion is Sidgwickian. LRS accept Sidgwick's arguments for an intuitionally grounded utilitarianism, but deny his so-called 'dualism of practical reason', according to which the egoistic principle (that our only reason to do anything is to maximize our own good) is as credible as, and in practical conflict with, the utilitarian principle (that our only reason is to maximize welfare or well-being overall) (Parfit, 2017, p. 122). LRS explicitly agree with Sidgwick's rational intuitionism, accepting that, even if there is a causal account of a fundamental moral belief (such as a belief in utilitarianism), this does not demonstrate it to be non-rational. Further, a debunking argument here would end up defeating itself, since any belief in the premises of that argument would itself have ultimately to be grounded in some self-evident, non-inferential principle.

LRS approach their discussion of general debunking arguments in ethics through the argument of Sharon Street. According to Street, moral realists, once they have recognized that our evaluative beliefs have evolved, must accept *either* that evolution cannot be expected to select beings with objectively correct such beliefs (and so most of our evaluative beliefs lack justification), *or* that evolution does indeed favour objectively true moral beliefs, which of

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[2] A revised version appeared in their *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), Chapter 7.

course on its own seems implausible without an account of the survival value of these beliefs.[3] LRS then note Sidgwick's response to Darwin's suggestion that, had we resembled bees, we would think a mother ought to kill her fertile daughter: that this suggestion, even if it throws doubt on substantive, common-sense moral principles, does not undermine the abstract, non-common-sense principle of utilitarianism. Further, if utilitarianism is true, Street's claim that this would be remarkable fluke can be dealt with by pointing out, that if the utilitarian principle is true, a priori, we should expect rational beings, other things equal, to converge on it. As LRS point out, rationality in general itself has clear survival value, so there is nothing mysterious – metaphysically or epistemologically – in our capacity to grasp necessary truths such as the utilitarian principle, even if our grasping that principle in itself has no survival value.

It is worth noting at this point that the rational egoist principle is in at least as strong a position as the principle of impartial benevolence to avoid these forms of debunking argument , since what we might expect to be selected for social life are, broadly speaking, kin altruistic principles, with some degree of bias towards the agent, not either pure utilitarianism or pure egoism. In other words, because evolution tends to favour partial concern for oneself and for one's kin, it will not select for either pure rational egoism or pure impartiality. If it is objected that a bias towards one's own interests is likely to have survival value, and that this fact undermines philosophical egoism, a defender of egoism might reply that this objection has no more force than the claim that the evolutionary usefulness of mathematical abilities, by itself, undermines our justification for believing elementary arithmetical truths such as that 7 + 5 = 12.

Further, given the availability to all of the notion of self-evidence, even kin altruism can resist debunking arguments. LRS cite – without questioning it – Sidgwick's somewhat remarkable claim that it is '*certainly* not' [my italics; LRS paraphrase as 'not at all'] 'self-evident that we owe more to our own children than to others whose happiness equally depends on our exertions'. I strongly suspect that the vast majority of rational human beings would reject such extreme impartiality. LRS claim: 'This is not to say that the judgment that we have greater obligation to help our own children than to help strangers cannot be justified, but rather that if it is to be justified, it needs a form of justification that does not start from the idea that because we strongly feel that it is right it must be true'. This is very plausible; but it is a point that applies as much to universal benevolence, and indeed egoism, as it does to kin altruism. (I shall return to the issue of rational acceptance below.)

Note here how wide LRS spread their net, in the hope of suggesting widespread convergence on universal benevolence. They appeal to leading thinkers in many major traditions, including Judaism, Christianity, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. But the principles of beneficence in these role- or reciprocity-based traditions are, on the whole, very distant from the abstractly impersonal utilitarian principle. Further, an egoist might adopt the same strategy, pointing to the widespread position in these traditions that *some* level of self-love is reasonable or even required.

This brings us to moral epistemology. I entirely accept LRS's bracing rejection of the idea of 'reflective equilibrium' in ethics (something I remember as a graduate student hearing Joseph Raz describe as 'unreflective equilibrium'), especially when that equilibrium involves ignoring the evolutionary and cultural histories of many of the key principles of the varied 'common-sense' moralities that have emerged since morality as a social practice began to emerge, probably around 250,000 years ago. What matters is rational intuition, not parochial evidence from the morality of our time.

As I mentioned above, since first reading and commenting on LRS's paper, my views have changed in several ways. First, despite defending something like Sidgwick's dualism in my

[3] LRS rightly point out that rationality *in general* clearly has survival value.

Reasons and the Good (2006), I am now more inclined to accept LRS's bipartite contrast between egoism and utilitarianism. Let me elucidate this by taking both principles as pro tanto, rather than overall. The principle that, *other things being equal*, there is a reason to produce the greatest overall happiness strikes me as incontrovertible. Some may object to it, but this will almost certainly be because they have not taken properly into account the 'other things being equal' clause, which signals that the principle in play here is *pro tanto*, and so allows for other principles based, for example, on rights, desert, or the value of partiality to certain others, such as one's relatives or friends, to outweigh the happiness-maximizing principle in certain cases. So if someone suggests, for example, that producing the greatest happiness might result in an injustice, we merely have to ask them to imagine a case in which they have to choose between doing A, which will produce that injustice *and* the greatest happiness, and doing B, which will produce that injustice and *less than* the greatest happiness, emphasizing that these are the only options and the only salient differences between them. Here the utilitarian principle is undeniable by any reasonable person. But if I now consider a case in which I have to choose between two outcomes, the only difference between them being that in one outcome I do better, while another (innocent) person does worse, and in the other I do worse, and the other person better, and all other things are equal, I find myself more inclined towards a debunking argument than in the utilitarian case.

It is true that evolution, biological and cultural, has produced human beings inclined both to some degree of benevolence, and to some degree of self-interest. But what tips the balance in the choice between utilitarianism and non-utilitarianism in the first case is *value* (how *could* it be rational just to waste value, for no reason?), whereas in the second case, what matters is *identity*, which strikes me as a less secure basis for rational judgement. Imagine that we become able to visit distant planets. On one planet, we find rational beings who are prepared to sacrifice value, for no reason. On another, we meet rational beings who are entirely unselfish, and prepared to sacrifice their own good for the sake of others, putting no weight on identity. It now seems to me that the rationality of those on the first planet is more open to doubt than that of those on the second.

Further, egoism depends on a common-sense view of personal identity, and this also seems to me to make it less stable under reflection than utilitarianism. This was of course noted in Derek Parfit's seminal *Reasons and Persons*. Parfit's doubts about the common-sense view and its relation to the rationality of self-interest led to passages such as the following, which is perhaps the most famous in the book:

> When I believed my existence was... a further fact, I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel through which I was moving faster and faster, and at the end of which was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less (Parfit, 1984, p. 281).

On the face of it, however, there is no obvious reason why a philosophical egoist should be moved to alter their position if they adopt a broadly Humean position on personal identity – that what makes each of us the same person over time is not anything like our having a soul, but the continuity and connectedness of our experiences. Those experiences, through their continuity and connectedness, form a series, and the egoist might claim that rationality requires us to act so as to make that series as good as possible for ourselves. Parfit argued, using cases such that of the Russian nobleman, or the young smoker, that the Humean view implied that a younger individual might rationally discount the interests of their future 'selves' (i.e. parts of their lives in the future). But there is nothing to prevent a Humean egoist's advocating temporal neutrality, or indeed a Cartesian's holding a temporally relative conception of interests.

As Parfit recognized (see his appendix J), the Humean view is heading in the direction of something more radical, such as a Buddhist position in which the idea of a cross-temporal self disappears from view. At least since *Reasons and Persons*, I have found the Humean view more plausible than the view that each of us has a soul. But I now find this Buddhist view at least more plausible than I did. Once we have described a world consisting of moments of consciousness, it may be unparsimonious to think that there must be some further entity – the self – which underpins these states. The claim that often one state (such as memory, or intention) involves reference to another state, a reference which could itself be explained biologically, does not require reference to what Parfit calls 'a further fact' (he tends to be thinking of the soul, but the point carries across to the self). Again egoism seems, on the face of it, more immediately vulnerable here than utilitarianism. If there are only moments of consciousness, notions such as action and reasons are liable to give way to happenings and evaluations (such as 'It would be better overall if the world contained more than less well-being'). In a world without selves, or actions, the view of the good taken by utilitarianism remains, though shorn of any connection to a theory of reasons for action, whereas the egoist view of the good (or 'goodness-for') is harder to make sense of, unless we in effect allow a notion of the self which exists only momentarily (so that some momentary experience can be good or bad for its momentary subject).

A move away from reasons and actions towards events also seems to resonate better with another view that I have come to accept since the publication of LRS's paper: hard incompatibilism. Many hard incompatibilists, or hard determinists, continue to speak of actions and reasons, but neither is necessary if we can offer a full description of the world using only the notions of events and values. So rather than claiming, for example, 'You have a reason to free this person from prison, since they could not have done otherwise than they did, and so any notion of desert is incoherent', we might claim: 'It would be better if this person were no longer suffering through being in prison'.

I have mentioned some ways in which my views have changed over the last one-and-a-half decades. Let me end with a view towards which I was inclined in 2012, but did not mention in my discussion of LRS's paper: Pyrrhonian scepticism. Disagreement among epistemic peers is, and always has been, rife in philosophy. On the face of it, the rational response to such disagreement, when one recognizes (as one should) broad epistemic parity with at least many other philosophers, is to suspend judgement on one's own position. In my experience, and I expect that of most people, it is impossible really to give up on one's own positions, in the sense that they still *appear* true to one. But what one can and should give up is the belief that this appearance, rather than some other, represents the way things are, when one knows that there is no good reason to think oneself epistemically superior. This should change the nature of philosophical dialectic. Rather than focusing on trying to persuade LRS of my position, I should attend more to theirs, and they to mine, in the hope that through collaborative discussion we can make progress together, even though the world appears quite differently to each of us.

Nor of course should we think that the options available are merely egoism, utilitarianism, or dualism. There are many forms of non-consequentialist deontology which must also be given the most serious consideration. It is perhaps to be regretted that moral philosophy in the mid-twentieth-century tilted so much in the direction of metaethics. Sidgwick had seen that the main question in philosophical ethics concerns which of rational egoism, deontology, or consequentialist utilitarianism is the most plausible. Sidgwick himself did not give deontology the credit it is due. W. D. Ross of course did, while also recognizing the plausibility of utilitarianism. Everything was in place for their successors to seek convergence in normative ethics, but this looks as distant now as it did a century ago. I suggest that first-order ethics, along with moral metaphysics, might be put on hold, enabling us to focus more on the nature of morality and its evolutionary origins, on ethical epistemology, and on the origins of ethical

disagreement and how to respond to it. Without this, moral philosophy is not unlikely to continue travelling in the same loops around utilitarianism and deontology which have occupied it since the emergence of utilitarianism at the end of the seventeenth century.[4]

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