

Duality Unresolved and Darwinian Dilemmas

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Abstract: By using Sharon Street's Darwinian Dilemma, Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer attempt to show that Sidgwick's duality of practical reason, whereby an agent has equal reason to act in their own interests or act impartially for the benefit of all, is not actually a duality; rather, reasons for action are solely impartial due to the unreliability of intuitions favoring self-interested behavior. I argue that Lazari-Radek and Singer fail to accomplish their goal. I argue that Singer has previously provided an account of impartiality that makes it just as unreliable on the same grounds as self-interested tendencies. Sidgwick's duality remains unresolved.

In this paper, I argue that Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer's attempt to discredit rational self-interest while defending utilitarianism fails.¹ The authors set out to reanalyze Henry Sidgwick's duality of practical reason in light of Sharon Street's Darwinian Dilemma for Moral Realists.² The authors' conclusion is that, due to the obvious evolutionary explanation for self-interested behavior, intuitions for rational self-interest are unreliable. They then argue that impartiality, the rational basis of utilitarianism, has no evolutionary explanation that can cast intuitions for utilitarianism into doubt and that these intuitions are reliable.

In part one, I provide a brief outline of the general evolutionary debunking argument. I then outline Street's Darwinian Dilemma in particular, and I finish with Lazari-Radek and Singer's strategy in "The Objectivity." In part two, I review the claims Peter Singer makes about the origins of impartial reasoning and moral development in his book *The Expanding Circle* [TEC].³ In part three, I argue that the account in TEC contradicts the claims in "The Objectivity," and parity of reasoning provides as much reason to be skeptical of the principle of utilitarianism as for rational self-interest. Sidgwick's duality remains a duality. Lastly, I make suggestions for future use of debunking arguments, hopefully limiting certain unwieldy uses.

¹ Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer, "The Objectivity of Ethics," *Ethics* 123, no. 1 (2012): 9-31.

² Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 127 (2006): 109-166.

³ Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics, Evolution, and Moral Progress*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).



Establishing the Foundation

Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer highlight the seemingly intractable conflict of Sidgwick's duality by saying this:

In searching for rational axioms that would give us guidance about what we ought to do, Sidgwick arrived at two that are, at least potentially, in conflict. The axiom of rational egoism says that each of us ought to aim at her or his own good on the whole, and the axiom of benevolence or utilitarianism tells us to aim at the good of all.⁴

Lazari-Radek and Singer go on to point out that Sidgwick's dilemma has not been resolved. They quote Derek Parfit:

...when one of our two possible acts would make things go in some way that would be impartially better, but the other act would make things go better either for ourselves or for those to whom we have close ties, we often have sufficient reasons to act in either of these ways....⁵

Although it is admitted that sometimes acting impartially entails acting in our own interests, there are inevitably circumstances whereby setting out to pursue our own ends and acting impartially, for the benefit of all, will result in conflict. By resolving Sidgwick's dilemma, it is hoped that the apparent inconsistency of our normative tendencies can also be resolved.

Lazari-Radek and Singer attempt to resolve the duality by testing Sidgwick's principle of rational self-interest and principle of utilitarianism against Sharon Street's Darwinian Dilemma for Moral Realists.⁶ Street's dilemma is a version of the evolutionary debunking argument and is explicitly posed against the meta-ethical position of moral realism, specifically the sort characterized by the position of stance independence: "the defining claim of realism... [is] that there are at least some evaluative facts or truths that hold

⁴ Lazari-Radek and Singer, "The Objectivity of Ethics," 10.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma," 109-166.

independently of all our evaluative attitudes."⁷ Non-cognitivist and constructivist meta-ethical positions as well as some "realists" who do not adopt the rigorous position of stance independence are expressly left out of the clutches of Street's dilemma. Street's dilemma is directed at a very specific meta-ethical theory and many meta-ethicists who claim some degree of objectivity in their models but who reject stance independence will not feel the effect of Street's conclusions.

In general, debunking arguments attempt to show that, if some moral belief is held to be true because of an intuition that is formed by a non-truth tracking process, then the belief itself is unjustified. If the belief is formed and held due to cultural, historical, or evolutionary influences that have nothing to do with recognizing actual truth, then we are unjustified in our belief. It is essential to notice that debunking arguments do not test for the truth of a belief; they only test whether one is justified in holding the belief. At most, debunking arguments can show that a belief is unjustifiably held. Should some belief withstand debunking, this provides no positive justification or reason to think the belief corresponds with truth. The effects of debunking are only directly negative.⁸

If one were to ask an average first-century Roman citizen whether she believes that executing prisoners via gladiatorial combat is permissible, she may respond that she does in fact have that belief. Because her belief was formed due to an intuition that itself was very likely caused by the historical and cultural conditions she found herself in, and since the development of Roman culture was not a truth tracking process with respect to stance-independent moral realism, her belief is unjustified. The contrast between our culture and first-century Roman culture is stark, but it should not be difficult to see that Roman influence has very likely affected the beliefs of the Roman citizen in ways that have nothing to do with a realist moral truth. However, a couple of details could change things for the debunker. If this Roman citizen had put careful thought into the ethics of capital punishment, then the cause of her belief may be more than cultural. In such a case, the cultural debunking argument would be insufficient to fully debunk her belief. A debunker needs to show that these other reasons are insufficient to justify her belief as well. In either case, however,

⁷ Ibid., 110-112. Cf. Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 13-18.

⁸ Guy Kahane, "Evolution and Impartiality," *Ethics* 124, no. 2 (2014): 327-341 and "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments," *Nous* 45, no. 1 (2011): 103-125.



debunking the justification of belief holding does not demonstrate that execution by combat is *truly* wrong or permissible.

The evolutionary form of the debunking argument is a specific form of the more general debunking argument, and, rather than identify the more proximal causes of our beliefs as in historical or cultural debunking arguments, the evolutionary form probes the more distal origins of our moral intuitions and beliefs. Street's dilemma begins with the assumption, accepted by Lazari-Radek and Singer, that "evolutionary forces have played a tremendous role in shaping the content of human evaluative attitudes."⁹ This, Street claims, creates a challenge for meta-ethical realists in explaining moral truths and the impact of evolutionary forces on the evaluative content we do have. According to the best theories accessible to us, evolution functions via natural selection, whereby reproductive success from one generation to the next determines the characteristics of eventual generations. Reproductive success depends largely on the circumstances of life for an individual: in other words, the environment, broadly understood. Traits that provide a competitive edge in reproduction, generation after generation, become more widely distributed in the population as time goes on, and traits that inhibit reproductive success, one way or another, tend to get weeded out of the population.

The tension of Street's dilemma resides in the space between moral truth and reproductive success. Unless the recognition of moral truth generation after generation improves the likelihood of reproductive success, it is highly unlikely that humans evolved a capacity or tendency to recognize a realist's stance-independent moral truth. Rather, it seems likely that at least many of our evaluative beliefs or intuitions were formed because they provided reproductive value in the circumstances in which early humans and their ancestors found themselves.

Street states that, considering the great influence evolutionary forces have had on shaping human values, realists can either assert or deny a significant relationship between the evaluative attitudes we do have and moral truth.¹⁰ If we take Street's first horn and claim that there is no relationship between moral truth and our evaluative attitudes—that reproductive pressures did not incline us to intuit stance-independent truth—we must conclude that many or most of these attitudes are likely off-track, that we are unjustified in believing that our evaluative attitudes reflect truth. This is like trying to sail

⁹ Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma," 109.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

to Bermuda by relying merely on the winds and tides. Lacking any navigation equipment (our truth-tracking processes) it would be a bewildering coincidence if we actually arrived on Bermuda's beaches as opposed to any other place the wind could possibly blow us. If we claim there is a relationship, Street argues, we are making a substantive scientific claim that conflicts with modern scientific theories. As such, should one take the second horn, any theory of relationship would be subject to scientific scrutiny.¹¹ In taking the second horn, one moves from mere philosophy to speculative science.

Lazari-Radek and Singer subject the principle of rational self-interest and the principle of utilitarianism to Street's Dilemma individually. They argue that the principle of rational self-interest is a reasoned extension of egoism.¹² Egoism, they claim, has an obvious evolutionary explanation: those who valued and worked towards their own ends survived and had successful offspring. Thus, the intuition survives in the current population. The authors take the first horn of Street's dilemma and claim that a tendency to value one's own well-being and ends has no relationship to moral truth.

For the principle of utilitarianism, which advocates promoting the good of all, Lazari-Radek and Singer take the second of Street's horns.¹³ They argue that utilitarianism is not a reasoned extension of a more limited altruism but that it is known intuitively, even self-evidently, through reason. They argue that rationality has reproductive value and that it is part of a cluster of inseparable elements, some of which are neutral or even negative with regard to reproductive advantageousness. One of these neutral or negative components is the ability to intuit actual moral truth. Pursuing the second horn of Street's dilemma, Lazari-Radek and Singer claim that utilitarianism is a reliable principle, unsullied by evolutionary influences.

Having attempted to defend the principle of utilitarianism from debunking, Lazari-Radek and Singer conclude by proposing three criteria for determining which intuitions are the most reliable.

1. Careful reflection leading to a conviction of self-evidence;
2. Independent agreement of other careful thinkers; and
3. The absence of a plausible explanation of the intuition as the outcome of an evolutionary or other non-truth-tracking process.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lazari-Radek and Singer, "The Objectivity of Ethics," 28.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 26.



They claim that the principle of rational self-interest fails to meet the third criterion and is thus unreliable. They also argue that the principle of utilitarianism withstands debunking, for no plausible explanation can show that acting impartially, for the benefit of all, would confer reproductive success over some degree of partiality.

Expanding Circle, Expanded Doubt

In *The Expanding Circle*, Peter Singer has more to say about the evolutionary origins of morality; he presents a biological history of morality. The account in *TEC* traces our modern day morality to its initial foundations in evolutionary history. By outlining the evolutionary advantages of kin and reciprocal altruism, Singer argues that genuine altruism, emotive concern for another's well-being, has genuine benefits that a feigned altruism would not afford. He argues that groups of genuinely altruistic individuals would collectively have benefits not accessible to groups of solely self-interested individuals.¹⁵ This capacity for genuine concern for others provides an emotive basis of morality.

Recall, however, that in "The Objectivity of Ethics" Lazari-Radek and Singer claim that the principle of utilitarianism is *not* a reasoned extension of a more limited altruism. They claim that it is a truth directly intuited via the capacity to reason.¹⁶ They claim that the principle of utilitarianism is fundamentally about impartiality. While it is deceptively easy to claim that the principle of utilitarianism is directly intuited by reason, this claim is not enough to prevent debunking attempts, for one can imagine a proponent of rational self-interest making a similar claim that rational self-interest, too, is intuited directly by reason despite its analogue in more fundamental intuitions. Still, if the principle of utilitarianism is a reasoned extension of a tendency towards some limited form of impartiality, one may fairly ask if our predisposition for reasoning impartially or trusting impartial modes of thinking has an evolutionary explanation.

Singer provides just such an account in *TEC*. Pre-linguistic humans likely engaged in the proto-moral activities that we can observe in modern apes. Kindness towards others creates the expectation of reciprocation in the future. Those who do not reciprocate are deemed "cheaters" and are often scorned. Before

¹⁵ Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, 37 & 49.

¹⁶ Lazari-Radek and Singer, "The Objectivity of Ethics," 23-4.

language, our distant ancestors may have responded with "a friendly lick or an intimidating growl when another member of the group does or does not repay favors."¹⁷ As proto-humans became more rational and developed more sophisticated communication, rudimentary praise and blame developed into actual ethical judgments. According to Singer, ethical judgments require some standard or reason that is acceptable to the group as a whole. When proposing a moral standard to the group, the reason itself must be disinterested, as opposed to a blatant appeal to self-interest, in order to be accepted. Singer says this:

If someone tells us that she may take the nuts another member of the tribe has gathered, but no one may take her nuts, she can be asked why the two cases are different. To answer, she must give a reason. Not just any reason either. In a dispute between members of a cohesive group of reasoning beings, the demand for a reason is a demand for a justification that can be accepted by the group as a whole. Thus the reason offered must be disinterested, at least to the extent of being equally acceptable to all...I may say for instance, that my prowess as a warrior entitles me to a bigger share of the nuts. This justification is impartial in the sense that it entails that anyone who equals my prowess as a warrior should get as many nuts.¹⁸

Here, Singer outlines how the ability to use impartial or disinterested reasons within a community is necessary for the development of moral rules and judgments. He suggests that early humans appealed to impartial modes of thinking because to do so enabled successful living within a relatively small, stable social group of the kind our ancestors had. The appeal to impartiality, however, was not about an appeal to truth in the robust sense required by realists; rather, it was an efficient and essential means of establishing long-term admittance into a group of fellow rational beings.

While neither Singer nor I suggest that early hominids roaming the savanna were in any sense utilitarian, there is a plausible evolutionary account for why humans would reason impartially without appealing to self-evident truths. This account does not

¹⁷ Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, 92.



place impartial modes of reasoning as a potentially disadvantageous sub-capacity of reason; rather it is an evolutionarily advantageous, and perhaps essential, part of social life for rational beings. Humans incapable of providing impartial justifications for their actions would likely have been pushed to the fringes of society. Such unfortunate humans or proto-humans would have been likely candidates for the title “cheater” and scorned as such. Reciprocal interactions with them would have been rejected because their modes of behavior would not have been acceptable to the community at large. It seems that an inability to reason impartially would have been highly reproductively disadvantageous.

Duality Unresolved

If Singer’s account in *TEC* is acceptable, we must reconsider the conclusions Lazari-Radek and Singer draw in “The Objectivity.” The authors reject the principle of rational self-interest because it fails to meet their three criteria for reliable moral intuitions. They conclude this because of the easily accessible evolutionary explanation for self-interested behavior. The authors go further to suggest the principle of utilitarianism lacks a plausible evolutionary explanation and is merely a product of rational inquiry, and thus it is very likely to reflect moral truth. However, the conclusions derived by the authors fail on a number of points.

First, as Guy Kahane notes, debunking arguments does not test for truth; it tests for justification.¹⁹ Further, principles are not tested by debunking arguments; rather justifications for holding intuitions, beliefs, or attitudes are what are debunked. If someone wants to show that some principle can be debunked, the closest such a person can do is show that the *belief* or *intuition* that the principle is true lacks justification because the belief or intuition’s source is in a non-truth tracking process.²⁰ As such, neither the principle of rational self-interest nor the principle of utilitarianism can properly be debunked, and neither can be shown to be false. At most we can show that our belief in either lacks justification.

If we accept Lazari-Radek and Singer’s criteria for reliable intuitions, specifically the third requiring the absence of a plausible explanation of the intuition as an outcome of an evolutionary process,

¹⁹ Kahane, “Evolution and Impartiality,” 327–341 and “Evolutionary Debunking Arguments,” 103–125.

²⁰ Kahane, “Evolution and Impartiality,” 330.

then neither self-interested nor impartial tendencies are *prima facie* justified. There seem to be evolutionary advantages to thinking or acting both partially and impartially. Should the authors again claim that the principle of utilitarianism is immune to debunking as it is product of reason, despite the evolutionary account given in *TEC*, parity requires that this option be open to the proponent of rational self-interest as well. It seems both are at least plausibly the rational extension of more basic evolved tendencies. In this case, belief in both principles is debunked, or neither is, and Sidgwick's duality is intact.

Second, perhaps it is impermissible to subject particular intuitions to Sharon Street's dilemma. She suggests that "many" or "most" of our evaluative attitudes have been influenced by selective pressures. Street does not suggest that we put particular beliefs or intuitions to her dilemma individually. Perhaps there is reproductive advantage in acting partially *and* impartially. Seemingly inconsistent evaluative tendencies can allow flexibility in how humans respond to changing circumstances. When resources are scarce, it may be advantageous to steal from others to feed oneself and one's offspring. When resources are abundant, social harmony and the need to be impartial may have great reproductive value. In separating one intuition from another, it may be that we are missing the overall point: a broad spectrum of evaluative attitudes has greater value than a select few.

Third, Lazari-Radek and Singer suggest that "if a starting point can be debunked, it cannot lend support to a more general or less arbitrary version of itself."²¹ When the principle of utilitarianism is debunked, it is the belief in the principle that is debunked. If Sidgwick's or Mill's arguments for utilitarianism are believed to be sound, it may not be enough to check whether there is an evolutionary explanation for our belief that the utilitarianism conclusion is true. Rather, we may need to consider whether any of the premises on which the conclusion depends have an evolutionary debunking explanation. Should we be able to show that our acceptance of some premise is due to a non-truth tracking influence, it must follow that the conclusion it at least partially unjustified as well, even if it seems unlikely that any evolutionary force, absent the use of reason, would compel us to believe in the derived conclusion, axiom, or principle.

²¹ Lazari-Radek and Singer, "The Objectivity of Ethics," 24.



Conclusion

If the previous arguments hold, Sidgwick's duality is left unresolved. Both rational self-interest and the principle of utilitarianism have footing in non-truth tracking processes, and, thus, our intuition that either is true lacks justification. However, this conclusion need not lead us to moral skepticism. Street's dilemma is posed against stance-independent meta-ethical realists. We might reject stance-independent meta-ethical realism and preserve the utilitarian doctrine. If a proponent of rational self-interest were not a realist and if Singer amends or rejects his account in *The Expanding Circle*, Lazari-Radek and Singer's conclusion would still have little significance for her.