

Reason and Values: Topics in Metaethics
Debunking Arguments and Avoiding Nihilism

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Introduction

- ***Allen W. Wood**, 'Attacking Morality: A Metaethical Project' in *Unsettling Obligations: Essays on Reason, Reality and the Ethics of Belief*, Stanford, Cal.: CSLI Publications, 2002
- ***Kelby Mason**, 'Debunking Arguments and the Genealogy of Religion and Morality', *Philosophy Compass*, vol.5 no.9, 2010, pp. 770-8

Part One: Debunking Arguments

Socio-historical Debunking Arguments

There is a pronounced history of debunking arguments which appeal to the *historical origins* of our moral concepts or intuitions. In Plato, Thrasymachus (in the *Republic*) and Callicles (in the *Gorgias*) suggest themes which Nietzsche and Marx will, in very different ways, take up the C19th.

Plato, *Republic*, Book 1

Nietzsche

- ***Friedrich Nietzsche**, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essays 1 and 2, in Walter Kaufmann (trans.), *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, New York: Random House, [1887] 1967
- Neil Sinhababu**, 'Vengeful Thinking and Moral Epistemology' in *Nietzsche and Morality*, eds. Brian Leiter & Neil Sinhababu, Oxford: OUP, 2007
- Friedrich Nietzsche**, *The Gay Science*, Walter Kaufman (trans.), New York: Vintage [1882/7] 1974, Preface and §§1-5ff
- Nadeem Hussain**, 'Honest Illusion: Valuing for Nietzsche's Free Spirits' in *Nietzsche and Morality*, eds. Brian Leiter & Neil Sinhababu, Oxford: OUP, 2007

Marx

- * **Steven Lukes**, *Marxism and Morality*, Oxford: OUP, 1987
- ***Allen W. Wood**, 'The Marxian Critique of Justice', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol.1 no.3, 1972, pp. 244-82
- Ziyad I. Husami**, 'Marx on Distributive Justice', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol.8 no.1, 1978, pp. 27-64
- Allen W. Wood**, 'Marx on Right and Justice: A Reply to Husami', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol.8 no.3, 1979, pp. 267-95

Evolutionary Debunking Arguments

Evolutionary debunking arguments appeal to supposed facts about evolutionary psychology to undermine various sorts of claims made by moral realists, and there is a great deal of lively debate about them in the current literature.

- ***Richard Joyce**, 'Metaethics and the Empirical Sciences', *Philosophical Explorations* 9, 2006

- ***Sharon Street**, 'A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value', *Philosophical Studies*, vol.27 no.1, 2006, pp. 109-66.
- * **Philip Kitcher**, 'Biology and Ethics' in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp, Oxford: OUP, 2006
- Hallvard Lillehammer**, 'Debunking Morality: Evolutionary Naturalism and Moral Error Theory', *Biology and Philosophy* 18, 2003, pp. 567-581
- Kevin Brosnan**, 'Do the Evolutionary Origins of Our Moral Beliefs Undermine Moral Knowledge?', *Biology and Philosophy* 26, 2011, pp. 51-64
- Erik J. Weilenberg**, 'On the Evolutionary Debunking of Morality', *Ethics*, vol.120 no.3, 2010, pp. 441-64
- Edouard Machery & Ron Mallon**, 'Evolution of Morality' in *The Moral Psychology Handbook*, ed. John M. Doris, Oxford: OUP, 2010
- Guy Kahane**, 'Evolutionary Debunking Argument', *Nous*, vol.45 no.1, 2011, pp. 103-25

Psychological Debunking Arguments

If our moral intuitions are determined in the way Freud suggests they might be, or if they are as Haidt and the 'social intuitionists' suggest, then various problems arise for any realist view which relies upon our moral intuitions, or so it would seem.

Freud

- ***Jennifer Church**, 'Morality and the Internalized Other' in *The Cambridge Companion to Freud*, Cambridge: CUP, 1991
- David H. Jones**, 'Freud's Theory of Moral Conscience', *Philosophy*, 1966, vol. 41 no.155, pp. 34-57
- J. David Velleman**, 'A Rational Superego', *Philosophical Review*, 1999, vol. 108 no.4, pp. 529-558

Contemporary Psychology

- Michael R. DePaul**, 'Intuitions in Moral Inquiry' in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp, Oxford: OUP, 2006
- Jonathan Haidt**, 'The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgement', *Psychological Review* 108, 2001, pp. 814-34
- ***Hanno Saur**, 'Social Intuitionism and the Psychology of Moral Reasoning', *Philosophy Compass*, vol.6 no.10, pp. 708-21
- Joshua D. Greene**, 'Beyond Point-and-Shoot Morality: Why Cognitive (Neuro)Science Matters for Ethics', forthcoming in *Ethics*, available at <http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/~jgreene/GreeneWJH/Greene-Ethics-PrePub-1-14-14.pdf>

Part Two: Avoiding Nihilism

Pragmatism

It might be that the notion of moral *truth* or of moral *justification* attacked by the debunking arguments is not the one which is independently most plausible, anyway. Perhaps a pragmatist understanding of these notions would be immune from the sceptical conclusions of even the most successful debunking arguments.

- ***Hilary Putnam**, 'How Not to Solve Ethical Problems' in *Realism with a Human Face*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990
- ***William James**, 'The Will to Believe', available reprinted in many places
- * **A. W. Price**, 'Ideology, Projection, and Cognition' in E. Harcourt (ed.), *Morality, Reflection, and Ideology*, Oxford: OUP, 2000
- John Dewey**, *Ethics*, 1932, ch.14 in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953. Volume 7: 1932, Ethics, Revised Edition*
- Gilbert Harman**, 'Pragmatism and Reasons for Belief' in *Reasoning, Meaning and Mind*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999

Fictionalism

Suppose the sceptical or anti-realist conclusions of the debunking arguments are true. We might still retain our interest in morality, even though all the claims of morality are false or *epistemically* unjustified. Fictionalism seems to offer all the advantages of pragmatism with none of the controversial ideas about truth and justification which pragmatists appeal to. But does it do enough?

- ***Richard Joyce**, 'Moral Fictionalism' in *Fictionalism in Metaphysics*, ed. Mark Eli Kalderon, Oxford: OUP, 2005
- Jonas Olson**, 'Getting Real About Moral Fictionalism' in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 6, Oxford: OUP, 2011
- Nadeem Hussain**, 'Honest Illusions: Valuing for Nietzsche's Free Spirits' in *Nietzsche and Morality*, eds. Brian Leiter & Neil Sinhababu, Oxford: OUP, 2007; reprinted in *The Philosopher's Annual*, vol. XXVII (2007)
- Simon Blackburn**, 'Perspectives, Fictions, Errors, Play' in *Nietzsche and Morality*, eds. Brian Leiter & Neil Sinhababu, Oxford: OUP, 2007
- ***David Enoch**, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism*, ch5, Oxford: OUP, 2011

Historicism

Two 'historicist' responses to the debunking arguments seem available: (i) we might attempt to show that the debunking arguments are prone to just the same debunking manoeuvres as they seek to employ against realism; and/or (ii) we might seek to show that the moral concepts we operate with and the sorts of justifications we accept are *necessarily* contingent on history and culture in the way the debunking arguments suggest, so that it is no *criticism* of them that they fail to show up in the 'view from nowhere'. Is pragmatism in fact a form of 'ahistoricist historicism'?

- Alisdair MacIntyre**, 'Precise of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol.51 no.1, 1991
- J. B. Schneewind**, 'MacIntyre and the Indispensability of Tradition', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol.51 no.1, 1991
- Alisdair MacIntyre**, *After Virtue*, ch18, London: Duckworth, 1981
- Gilbert Harman**, 'Rationality', in *Reasoning, Meaning and Mind*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999

Further Reading

- Philosophical Explorations*, vol.9 no.1 (2006)
- Edward Harcourt** (ed.), 2000. *Morality, Reflection, and Ideology*, Oxford: OUP
- Donovan Miyasaki**, 2010. 'Nietzsche Contra Freud on Bad Conscience', *Nietzsche-Studien* 39

- Joshua Greene**, 2013. *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason and the Gap Between Us and Them*, New York: Penguin
- Richard Joyce**, 2006. *The Evolution of Morality*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press
- Philip Kitcher**, 2011. *The Ethical Project*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press
- Mark Eli Kalderon**, 2005. *Moral Fictionalism*, Oxford: OUP
- Mark Sainsbury**, 2009. *Fiction and Fictionalism*, Oxford: Routledge
- Jürgen Habermas**, 'A Geneological Analysis of the Cognitive Content of Morality' in *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, eds. Ciaran Cronin & Pablo De Grieff, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1988