Two versions of the evolutionary debunking arguments and their challenges to moral realism

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Abstract: This paper assesses some challenges posed by evolutionary debunking arguments in Joyce's function and Street's contingency versions to moral realism, understood as the metaethical theory according to which there are moral facts that are absolute, universal and context-independent. Some argue that Copp's society centred realism is untenable given that it cannot support counterfactuals. Shafer-Landau and Huemer's arguments are also subject to debunking because they cannot persuasively show that human morality is unaffected by evolutionary forces. In Huemer's view, moral progress is proof of moral facts. It requires moral realism due to progress being context-dependent. From an evolutionary point of view, there are no previous standards and ideals concerning the direction of progress. Finally, a possible answer to the function version of the evolutionary debunking arguments is the possibility that the nature of human language (including moral language) is such that, in essence, it cannot be convincingly divided in language about facts and language about value.

Keywords: Evolution of morality. Moral realism. Moral progress. Richard Joyce. Sharon Street.

Duas versões do argumento evolucionário da moralidade e seus desafios ao realismo moral

Resumo: Este artigo avalia alguns desafios colocados pelos argumentos evolutivos da moralidade na versão de Joyce e Street ao realismo moral, entendido como a teoria metaética segundo a qual existem fatos morais que são absolutos, universais e independentes de contexto. Argumenta-se que o realismo centrado na sociedade de Copp é insustentável, pois não pode

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sustentar contrafactuais. Os argumentos de Shafer-Landau e Huemer também estão desacreditados, porque eles não podem mostrar de forma convincente que a moralidade humana não é afetada pelas forças evolutivas. No caso do argumento de Huemer, mostra-se que a existência de progresso moral não pode ser considerada como prova da existência de fatos morais, como exige o realismo moral, porque o progresso depende do contexto e também porque, do ponto de vista evolutivo, não há padrões e ideais anteriores para os quais o progresso é direcionado. Finalmente, uma possível resposta aos argumentos evolutivos da moralidade é a possibilidade de que a natureza da linguagem humana (incluindo a linguagem moral) seja tal que, em essência, ela não possa ser convincentemente dividida em linguagem sobre fatos e linguagem sobre valores.

Palavras-chave: Evolução da moral. Realismo moral. Progresso moral. Richard Joyce. Sharon Street.

1 INTRODUCTION (EVOLUTIONARY DEBUNKING ARGUMENTS IN BRIEF)

Darwin, regarding the moral consequences of the evolutionary theory, wrote:

> If, for instance, to take an extreme case, men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker-bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters; and no one would think of interfering. (Darwin [1886]1989, p. 99)

The quotation above shows the main tenet used by some moral evolutionary theorists to claim that if morality is the outcome of a natural evolutionary process, the existence of some universal, objective and absolute moral standards is not possible. According to which such standards or norms exist, the theory is known in Moral Philosophy as 'Moral Realism'; and the arguments according to which the evolutionary theory discredits those universal standards (posited by Moral realism) are known as Evolutionary Debunking Arguments (EDA's).[2] There are many versions of moral realism.[3] However,

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2 For a complete bibliography and an updated account about the evolutionary debunking arguments discussion, see: Leibowitz, 2020.

broadly understood, it consists of the metaethical thesis according to which moral facts are independent of any evaluative human attitude (Shafer-Landau, 2003, p. 15). So, from this view, if the moral judgment "it is wrong to torture an innocent person for amusement" is true, then there is a state of affairs depicted or described by the judgment. In virtue of its accurate depiction of this state, the judgment is true, no matter the perspective or view of the people stating it. The depicted state of affairs is, notwithstanding the particular desires or intentions of those people considering it true and independent of someone deeming it true. Moral realism believes that everyone who regards this moral judgment as false is wrong because moral facts are as they are, in virtue of depicting a universal, objective, and necessary state of affairs, independently of any perspective, and beforehand any human evaluative attitude.

Moral realism claims that there are moral facts according to which the moral judgments are true or false and that moral statements depict those facts. In this sense, moral realism is a form of cognitivism. In general, "the key thought for cognitivism is that the sentence [the moral statement] purports to describe how things are" (Bedke, 2017, p. 293). According to this commitment to cognitivism for moral realism, the truth or falsity of moral statements is independent of any human evaluative attitude.

However, there is no consensus among realists about what those facts are. Some realists hold that moral facts are just natural facts (Copp, 1995; Sturgeon, 1985; Collier & Stingl, 2019), while others are non-natural (Moore, 1903; Shafer-Landau 2003; Enoch 2011; Parfit 2011).

Some other realists hold that moral facts are dependent upon human nature or social practice (Copp, 2008). It is claimed that this belief does not undermine their realist pretension because the allegedly moral facts are objective, universal, and necessary. As it has been shown, the moral statements are supposed to depict how the world is, and it is to say, the moral statements under the view of moral realism are fully representational: they express beliefs, being fact-stating and truth-evaluable.

3 For a general account see: Sturgeon, 1985; Railton, 1986 and Boyd, 1988.

This kind of metaethical theory, known as "moral realism", is the target of evolutionary debunking arguments. This paper assesses the two main versions of evolutionary debunking arguments: the function and the contingency one. Joyce's function version is based on the claim that the evolutionary function of morality is not depicting any state of affairs but strengthening social cohesion. In contrast, Street's contingency version states that if human morality results from a contingent process such as the evolutionary process, it is highly improbable and explanatorily expensive to posit objective, necessary, and universal moral facts justification for human morality. In what follows, I will offer a brief account of each argument

Richard Joyce's argument (2006) is complex, and some of his most detailed points are irrelevant for this paper. His basic idea is that human morality (*i.e.*, our moral sense) has the function of encouraging prosocial behaviour through the practical clout of moral judgement. This practical clout (known as 'moral authority) is selected by natural selection, given its importance for promoting pro-sociality into human beings (Joyce, 2006, p. 57). Something as important as pro-sociality cannot be left to prudential calculus. An extra force is required to compel us to see moral judgements as having a special kind of authority. This is why moral imperatives present themselves as objective, independent of our particular wishes or intentions, and inescapable, in contrast with etiquette norms (Joyce, 2006, p. 62).

Considering the need for this evolutionary adaptation, Joyce asks us to think about the ineffectiveness prudential considerations have in changing some unhealthy habits: just think about how frequently our prudential calculations about the danger of consuming high quantities of sugar fail to stop us from drinking soda or other high-processed beverages (Joyce, 2006, p. 110). So, for this reason, evolution has crafted the human moral sense, with its moral authority, that needs no sort of prudential consideration in order to work.

Joyce's argument next step claims that as in the explanation of our moral beliefs, moral facts —as understood and characterized by the moral realists— do not play any role in our moral lives. Therefore, the alleged realist moral truths cannot be justified considering those facts, as he states. It is similar to discovering that we do not believe that 'Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo' because of the causal

connection between the historical fact and our belief, but because we took a pill that instilled into us the view mentioned above. Independently if this belief is true, the sole fact that we believe it as being true by another reason different to the causal connection between the belief and the very fact itself should leave us in a sceptical position about the truth of that belief (Joyce, 2006, p. 181).

It is possible to notice that this debunking is not ontological but epistemological. There is room for the possibility of moral facts existing and matching our moral beliefs even if we cannot justify them using any causal relation, as suggested in Joyce's analogy. However, the point is that in explaining the truth of our moral beliefs, moral facts are irrelevant. What does matter is that we have moral beliefs whose adaptive function is to promote human prosocial behaviour?

The contingency version of the evolutionary debunking argument by Sharon Street (2006) holds that if evolutionary forces strongly influence the content of our moral beliefs, then moral realism posits moral facts, which are independent of human evaluative attitudes, is untenable. This happens because it is the prey of a dead-end dilemma. Moral realists would have two options: first, claiming a connection between moral facts and the influence evolutionary forces exert over human morality, or second, denying that there is such a connection. If they choose the latter, the matching between contingently formed moral beliefs (created by a contingent and random process) and moral facts would be a miraculous coincidence:

> On this view, allowing our evaluative judgements to be shaped by evolutionary influences is analogous to setting out for Bermuda and letting the course of your boat be determined by the wind and tides: just as the push of the wind and tides on your boat has nothing to do with where you want to go, so the historical push of natural selection on the content of our evaluative judgements has nothing to do with evaluative truth. (Street, 2006, p. 121)

If the former, moral realists would have to explain the connection and, in doing so, they would have to claim that evolution favoured or selected those individuals who had beliefs that matched moral facts. The problem with this account is that it posits an extra entity (moral facts). Those facts contrast with the simpler explanation according to which our moral beliefs are explained by their adaptive character, *i.e.*,

showing how they increase our fitness through having prosocial behaviours and attitudes. According to the parsimony principle, holding the latter view is explanatorily cheaper than owning the former one (Street, 2006, p. 129).

After this brief account of evolutionary debunking arguments, it is necessary to assess how some realists answer those arguments. However, what is precisely the main challenge moral realists are facing? As recently seen, function and contingency arguments are based on a bedrock premise: Human morality is pervasively affected by evolutionary forces. Is the moral realist willing to accept this premise? In what follows, we can assess two kinds of moral realist arguments: assuming the premise as true or denying it. However, it will be argued that both of them fail to answer the evolutionary debunking arguments.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Copp's moral realism and the evolutionary debunking arguments

David Copp thinks that moral realists who accept the influence of evolutionary forces on our moral beliefs are not forced to admit their capacity to track moral facts selected moral beliefs. He argues that it is enough to accept the Darwinian forces indirect effect upon moral beliefs. By the cumulative effect of natural selection on our moral beliefs, they became moral truths through rational correction. This key idea in Copp's argument is known as the 'quasi-tracking thesis'. In his words:

> The quasi-tracking thesis is the thesis that Darwinian forces so affected our psychology that our moral beliefs tend to quasi-track the moral facts. (Copp, 2008, p. 194)

Copp starts arguing that, as the human ability to detect predators evolved because of its high adaptive value[4], so did the human ability

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4 Adaptive value represents the usefulness of a trait that can help a biological organism to survive in its environment. That trait is inheritable, and it can help offspring to cope with new surroundings.

for quasi-tracking moral truths (Copp, 2008, p. 195). His argument is twofold. The first part offers a metaethical explanation that specifies the truth conditions of our moral beliefs. The second one explains why natural and cultural evolution shaped those beliefs so that they were able to quasi-track the kind of moral facts posited by moral realists. Copp offers a 'society centred' metaethical explanation according to which morality has the function of helping society to fulfil its needs (Copp, 2008, p. 198). Those needs include their very bare existence, a system of cooperation between their members and the necessity of keeping peaceful and cooperative relationships with neighbouring societies (Copp, 2008, p. 200). This explanation deems a moral proposition to be true if the moral code that best helps satisfy society needs includes an implicit norm that is identical or very similar to the moral proposal. So, the claim 'torturing is wrong' will be true if the moral code that best helps society satisfy its needs includes a norm that condemns or forbids torturing (Copp, 2008, p. 199).

The second part of Copp's argument concurs with the typical evolutionary explanation. Our human ancestors tended to have altruist and cooperative attitudes at an early stage of evolution, given their adaptive value. Attached to this propensity, a capability to be guided by norms evolved. Eventually, those human ancestors having this skill would share norms that reinforced several prosocial attitudes. Finally, as an outcome of this process, humans tended to form moral beliefs that promoted social stability, peace and cooperation (Copp, 2008, p. 201).

According to Copp, moral beliefs will tend to be considered moral truths as they are slowly corrected by rational reflection and deliberation, ultimately matching with the set of norms that helps fulfil human needs of cooperation and well-being (Copp, 2008, p. 202).

A key remark about Copp's account is that he conceives this kind of moral realism as bearing counterfactuals, *i.e.*, ancestral environmental conditions were different from those displayed today, or the human psychology was different from that which evolved. Moral beliefs would become similar to those expressed in moral realist truths (Copp, 2008, pp. 197-198).

There are at least three main objections that could convincingly be raised against Copp's argument. The first objection is that there are

possible or conceivable scenarios where a different set-up of human psychology could result in different moral beliefs from that currently held. Some psychological studies, for example, have shown that human beings justify aggressions when perceived as an answer to a group threat (López, 2017, p. 20). This human psychological feature becomes apparent in cases as, for example, the justification of the United States of America invasion of Iraq in 2003. The debate held was focused on assessing if Iraq had the allegedly 'mass destruction weapons' or if it just was a smokescreen for pursuing particular economic interests related to the oil wells. In general, there is a consensus considering the justification of the self-defence-aggression. One could imagine a different human psychological setting, resulting in another moral assessment of the situation (see Darwin [1886]1989, p.99). However, Copp could argue that, despite this possibility, given the needs of society, and given the quasi-tracking thesis, a rational correction would change this initial moral view making it more adaptive, matching it with the moral truth. However, here comes the second and stronger objection. Copp suggests that this 'rational correction' is not independent or detached from the evolutionary process of forming moral beliefs.

Notwithstanding, there is no independent way of determining the direction of the correctness other than relying on the evaluative attitudes that evolution has selected for human beings. Applying this reasoning to the previous example would mean that justifying aggression if the group faces a threat is not an objective moral standard existing independently of human evolved nature and psychology. On the contrary, it is the expression of that evolved contingent nature. So, Copp's assessment and determination of 'morally correct' are guided and directed by evolutionary forces; he cannot escape from them. In other words, Copp's ideal of what is morally correct is an evolutionary product, and as such, it is contingent. As Street argues, if moral beliefs track society needs of cooperation and if the fulfilment of those social needs is what moral facts are made of, those "facts" are contingent on human evolved nature and the authoritative moral force they allegedly exert over human actions is not something 'objective' independent of the human nature (Street, 2008, p. 213).

In this way, Copp had two options: To deny that 'rational moral correction' is an evolutionary product, or to argue that, given the needs of society, those needs constitute the guiding principles that determine what is morally correct because they are 'objective', 'de-contextualized' and 'independent' from any contingent evolutionary issue. As it was said above, Copp's moral realism accepts the bedrock premise of evolutionary debunking arguments according to which human morality is affected by evolutionary forces what eliminates the first option. However, taking society needs as the guiding principles has a price that Copp's moral realism cannot afford, which raises the third objection and the strongest one.

Copp's 'society centred' metaethical explanation assumes that morality has the function of helping society to fulfil its needs, which include its very basic existence, a system of cooperation between its members and the necessity of keeping peaceful and cooperative relationships with neighbouring societies (Copp, 2008, p. 200). These 'objective' needs deem the guiding principles that determine the direction that evolutionary forces exert on human morality. However, Copp ignores that those needs can be fulfilled in different —even contradictory— ways.

According to David Wong, who agrees with Copp, the function of morality is to keep social cohesion and promote individual flourishment. This function is appropriately accomplished by fulfilling human interests and needs (Wong, 2006, pp. 39-40; 69). However, according to Wong, those needs can be satisfied in at least two different ways, which correspond to the big ethical systems of the Western and Eastern society, *i.e.*, a utilitarian, communitarian, conservative ethical system, characteristic of Eastern society, in which the group's well-being is more important than the individual one, and a deontological ethical system, distinctive of Western society, in which individual rights and well-being are more prominent than communitarian ones. So, if Wong is right, moral realism faces a tough obstacle: it would have to admit that, in some cases, there are some different facts, which, despite being different —even contradictory—, are simultaneously true if they succeed in fulfilling society's needs. This position contradicts the very nature of the kind of moral realism Copp is prone to defend. In showing this point, it would be helpful to turn

back to the example of the morality of torturing. A radical communitarian ethical system would justify torture in cases where the community's welfare is at risk. An individualist deontological ethical system would ban torture regardless of its possible benefits to society. So, Copp's realism should admit that both are useful for getting social cohesion, two different moral facts are simultaneously true, one claiming that torturing is wrong at any cost and the other one denying it.

After examining the realists' option of accepting the premise of the pervasive influence of evolution on human morality, it is necessary to review the reply to evolutionary debunking arguments of the realists that deny such an influence. According to the latter, evolution forges moral intuitions initially, but there is a point where those intuitions can be neutralized or even corrected. That correction results in moral facts with mentioned features of being 'objective', 'universal' and independent of human evaluative tendencies. So, the next section is devoted to assessing whether this kind of moral conception can properly answer evolutionary debunking arguments.

2.2 Shafer-Landau and Huemer's moral realism and the evolutionary debunking arguments

Russ Shafer-Landau argues that moral realism can survive evolutionary debunking arguments, provided that it can show that there are specific moral beliefs, doxastic moral dispositions or moral faculties that are immune to the evolutionary influence (Shafer-Landau, 2012, p. 5). Once the primitive moral beliefs are identified, Shafer—Landau argues that they can be corrected, changed, and set free of evolutionary influences (Shafer-Landau, 2012, p. 6).

According to Michael Huemer, some 'formal intuitions', which are good tokens of doxastic dispositions, are immune to selective pressures:

> [They] are particularly plausible candidates for being products of rational reflection. They are not plausibly regarded as products of emotional bias, cultural or biological programming, or self-interested bias (Huemer, 2008, p. 386)

So, for example, in a situation requiring a moral assessment, a person could reason that

If *x* is better than *y* and *y* is better than *z*, then *x* is better than *z*" or that "If two states of affairs, *x* and *y*, are so related that *y* can be produced by adding something valuable to *x*, without creating anything bad, lowering the value of anything in *x*, or removing anything of value from *x*, then *y* is better than *x*. (Huemer, 2008, p. 386)

Huemer considers that reasoning is free from biological programming. This could be true. However, the mentioned formal intuitions are useless in any moral setting if the evaluative terms 'better than, 'bad' or 'valuable' are not clearly defined and clarified. And this precisely is what evolution provides to humans. So, these moral intuitions by themselves are not enough to guide a human being to adopt some particular system of moral beliefs.

Shafer-Landau considers that the main evidence for measuring the influence of evolutionary forces on human moral beliefs is the extent to which those beliefs are adaptive. Moral realism will demonstrate that evolutionary influence on those beliefs is not ubiquitous if some moral beliefs are not adaptive. Shafer-Landau provides some possible examples:

Those that counsel impartial benevolence, compassion for vulnerable strangers, kindness to small animals, concern for distant peoples and future generations, and speaking truth to power (Shafer-Landau, 2012, p. 8)

A basic evaluative tendency can be defined as a proto-evaluative judgment that consists of a non-reflexive or linguistic impulse aimed to achieve a behaviour called for or necessary. Its appealing nature is due to the evolutionary needs that it is supposed to fulfil, increasing its biological fitness.

According to Shafer-Landau, the beliefs mentioned above are not adaptive, and he challenges evolutionary debunkers to provide a direct or indirect evolutionary explanation for each belief. He thinks that such a possibility is remote (Shafer-Landau, 2012, p 8). However, it is not difficult to offer a direct or indirect evolutionary explanation of those beliefs. Among all of Shafer-Landau's potentially non-adaptive moral beliefs, the last one, "speaking truth to power", is different from the rest, at least in one significant concern: the first four beliefs can be convincingly considered as a set of ancestral evaluative tendencies which, as it will be seen, have widened their range

of application, while the last one can be deemed to be a token of what anthropologists and evolutionists call the 'reverse dominance hierarchy[5]. This is a human sense of anti-hierarchical feelings expressed through a predisposition to reject being dominated (Boehm, 1999).

It is possible to find the evolutionary origins of this predisposition in the hunter-gatherer societies classified as immediate return systems (Woodburn, 1982). In this system, group members obtain a direct return from their labour in hunting and gathering. The gain in hunting and gathering requires a fair immediate distribution to guarantee cooperation in the next hunt-gathering activity. Accordingly to Herbert Gintis, Carel Van Schaik e Christopher Boehm:

> Social dominance aspirations are successfully countered because individuals do not accept being controlled by an alpha male and are extremely sensitive to attempts of group members to accumulate power through coercion. (Gintis, Van Schaik & Boehm, 2015, p. 336)

In contrast, the delayed-return system societies are —as the fossil record suggests— recent, appearing some 10.000 years ago. In these societies, the availability of accumulated material wealth allows those who seek social dominance to control resources and allies so that social domination is possible through the material control of means of production and obtained goods. This is the kind of system exhibited currently. However, since it is relatively recent, humans show their natural 'reverse dominance hierarchy' attitude. And given the effect of encephalization on enhancing the mean fitness of group members, the way this attitude is expressed is not through violence or physical coercion but through the capacity to motivate, persuade, or reach a consensus (Byrne & Whiten, 1988). And 'speaking truth to power can be deemed a token of any of these attitudes. Speaking truth to power is a way to reach a consensus for unchaining repressed anger against power and dominance. The evolutionary roots of moral beliefs about

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5 This phenomenon can be considered as an extension of the leveling coalitions seen among primate males. Female chimpanzees in captivity act collectively to neutralize alpha male bullies, and wild chimpanzees form coalitions to punish high-ranking males. Bonobos in the wild have been observed to behave in a similar way (Gintis & Schaik, 2013, p. 336).

counselling impartial benevolence, showing compassion to vulnerable strangers, being kind to small animals and caring about distant people and future generations can be safely said to be just samples of the contingent process of widening the circle of human moral concern. These benevolent and caring attitudes are initially displayed towards family members (Street, 2006, p. 115) through some psychological mechanisms, which are then exapted or co-opted for favouring strangers and outsiders (McNamara & Henrich, 2017).[6]

A moral realist could reply that precisely the process of widening the circle of moral concern is the very process of reaching moral truths (Singer, 2011, p. 116). This reasoning is incorrect because there are reasons for thinking that there is no actual widening but a displacement of the circle. Even in the case that there is an enlargement of the circle of moral concern, the way human beings consider who is inside the circle is contingent and somewhat arbitrary, or it is dependent on accidents and historical circumstances, rendering doubtful the existence of universal and independent moral truths. That the human moral circle is displacing instead of widening is seen in cases where knowing facts about the world has made humans change the focus of their moral concerns rather than become more tolerant. For example, the fact that there are not women who have been awarded supernatural evil powers by the devil has stopped the killing of alleged witches. This does not mean that humans have enlarged their tolerance circle. This only means that human beings are sure that there are no witches, but if there were such creatures, surely some humans would consider it moral to kill them. Similarly, attributing immigrants most felonies and crimes in the host country gives xenophobic people reasons for hating and condemning foreigners in their country. Distrusting, blaming and even punishing allegedly dangerous people are an ancestral evaluative tendency that only changes its focus, but it does not disappear.

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6 Exaptation or co-option are concepts that describe a shift in the function of a trait during evolution. The classical example is the exaptation of the feathers which initially evolved for heat regulation and subsequently acquired the function of assisting flight (Gould and Vrba, 1982).

One can argue that there are concrete cases where a widening of moral concern occurs, for example, considering animals as bearers of rights or applying human rights regardless of ethnicity, age, gender, etc. This is undeniable, but this widening is subjected to contingent happenings and evolutionary facts in such a way that the idea of reaching the universal, objective and independent moral truths is impossible.

The evolution of human social stereotyping, for example, is a process that significantly affects the real-world application of human rights. Social stereotyping has an adaptive role because it helps humans save energy in gathering and discriminating useful information about the social environment. Human beings have neither the cognitive capacity nor the time to perceive each person individually and in detail; for this reason, stereotypes are convenient evolutionary devices (Hutchinson & Martin, 2015, p. 292). According to some studies, there are racial stereotypes that affect the application of human rights. In contrast with gender stereotypes, the identification of the racial ones is not easy:

> For instance, in many restaurants in big cities of Western Europe, the menial kitchen work is mostly done by Black or immigrant workers, whereas the waiters are often White. Similar observations could be made with regard to Black or Filipino domestic workers in economically developed countries. Again, the parallel with gender stereotypes may help to highlight the different legal relevance of the two situations: if the same labour division were gendered, in the sense that women were predominantly working in the kitchen and the men waiting on tables, gender stereotypes would or at least could be invoked. However, the racial contract is much harder to break down through (human rights) law. (Möschel, 2016, p. 139)

Why are currently gender stereotypes more addressed? Is it due to contingent historical or political situations? It is not the aim of this paper to answer these questions; however, it seems again that the focus of human moral concerns has been displaced, in the sense that some historical and critical facts could make humans focus more on some of them than others. Realists could argue that even though racial stereotypes are harder to break down, the identification of them is possible, and that means that progress toward a free stereotyped

society is possible. To this, debunkers could offer two replies: first, those stereotypes are not necessarily negative, that human beings cannot avoid them, and even a special kind of morality could defend their necessity. The subset of negative stereotypes could be called 'prejudices', but there are positive stereotypes as that Filipinos are more caring than others towards children or the elderly (Möschel, 2016, p. 120). Even this sort of 'positive' stereotype could be used by a nationalist Filipino to claim the superiority of his countrymen over the rest of the non-Filipinos. It could be argued that stereotyping by itself is not good or bad and, as it was said above, social stereotypes pave the way for smooth social interactions. So, is eliminating stereotypes desirable? Is it even possible? An evolutionary debunker could argue that the very process of eliminating stereotypes entails the impossibility of escaping human evaluative tendencies and that this attempt will have the same success as that of Copp's intention of correcting evaluative ancestral tendencies. He will use them in the process of correcting them.

The second reply a debunker could pose is that increasing the range of beings included in human moral concerns is a contingent process, as the mentioned expansion is based on the globalizing transformation that began in the XVII century. It was boosted by technology, capitalism, mobility and new ideas about the individuals (Tönnies, 1947). This globalization is not unavoidable because if the factors that made it possible collapse, the globalizing tendency could also crash. A scenario of a technological and communicative collapse, even though remote, is possible (Torres, 2017).

2.3 Moral progress and moral realism

Huemer, when confronting Peter Singer (2011), denies that moral progress consists in widening the circle of human moral concerns. According to Huemer, there are cases in which changes do not imply an expansion of moral concern but a plain improvement of moral considerations. He gives some examples of it: the idea that capital punishment is a disproportionate sanction to cases of adultery, theft and other minor crimes, or the estrangement from traditional moralities in which premarital sex is considered morally wrong (Huemer, 2016, p.1998). However, these examples fail because, in the first case,

evidence shows that the support for the death penalty decreases by exposure to international contextual information (LaChappelle, 2014). This means not only that the new moral consideration is, in a broad sense, a widening of the moral concern, but that it could also be explained by the former process of globalization mentioned above with all its concomitant contingency. The second example, *i.e.*, the relaxation of moral standards about premarital sex, also fails in showing Huemer's point because this could be considered the outcome of the feminist sexual liberation (Clavan, 1972), which implies that at the core of this moral attitude resides a broadening of the circle of moral worries that consists in including women's sexuality inside it.

Huemer considers that moral progress is the overcoming of prejudices and biases (2016, p. 2001), and based mainly on two ideas, argues that moral liberal principles are the true ones. In the first place, he considers that, as the history of scientific knowledge shows, truths are gradually grasped over time, and he believes that, accordingly, humanity has progressively reached moral liberal truths. Secondly, the fact that a big proportion of humans worldwide has gradually adopted not only one but also a cluster of such liberal moral truths cannot be explained by biological or cultural evolution (Huemer, 2016, p. 2000). The reason why Huemer denies that biological evolution can explain moral progress is weak and based on an oversimplification of the way evolution works. He tries to argue that there are not 'liberal genes' and that the reproductive success commonly attributed to adaptive biological traits cannot be ascribed to liberal moral beliefs:

> […] there is no reason to think, for example, that in the 1960s, racists started having fewer children than non-racists and thus failed to pass on their racist genes, or that during the last 200 years, people who supported democracy started having more children than those who supported dictatorship. (Huemer, 2016, p. 1995)

This makes apparent the naïve and misleading conception of the evolution of morality that Huemer uses for arguing in favour of his realist account.

He also believes that the convergence reached by Western society in relation to liberal ideals and values cannot be properly explained by cultural evolution understood as a process with an unpredictable

result or with a random direction. The development of liberal moral values has to do with a set of changes in attitudes on issues such as slavery, war, torture, women's suffrage, and so on; all these items converge together in a way that shows certain coherent ethical standpoints (Huemer, 2016, p. 1999), which can be more convincingly explained by positing moral facts:

> Why was slavery abolished? Because slavery was unjust. Why have human beings become increasingly reluctant to go to war? Because war is horrible. Why has liberalism in general triumphed in human history? Because liberalism is correct. These, I suggest, are the most simple and natural explanations (Huemer, 2016, p. 2000)

However, an evolutionary explanation of moral convergence is possible without postulating universal, human-independent and objective moral facts. In fact, an evolutionary debunker can accept the existence of moral progress in the same way as she accepts the progress of biological traits, as, for example, the human eyes, in accomplishing its function of seeing.

In one important sense, evolutionary convergence of moral values is not different from convergence in cases of the evolution of complex structures such as the human eye, which has reached such a level of specialization that is so sophisticated that it makes appealing the idea of a pre-existing model to which the evolution of vision has to arrive. The human eye has reached such a level of specialization that the possibility of morphological variation of its structure has been considerably reduced. However, it is necessary to bear in mind that biological aptitude is a complex relationship between the biological trait and the medium through which this trait develops, in such a way that the adaptation of a biological trait supervenes on its physical features (Sturgeon, 1985, pp. 74-75). This means that the relationship between the physical properties of the trait and the environment in which these trait works determines its level of biological aptitude. In other words, despite the human eye's level of specialization and complexity, this trait could have had a physically different structure and successfully accomplish its function nonetheless. The existence of exaptations evidences the proof of such a separation between physical properties and function, *i.e.*, traits that acquire different functions from those initially selected for (as in the case of the wings of birds)

and vestiges, *i.e.*, traits that lose their initial function because of a change in the environment (for example the hind legs of the whale). Vestiges and exaptations show that, in the case of biological traits, speaking about progress is possible, with the caveat that this progress —understood as the gradual increase of the biological aptitude of the trait— is dependent on the environment in which the trait accomplishes its function (Gould & Vrba, 1982).

Those considerations can be applied to the evolution of morality. Suppose the function of morality is to strengthen social cohesion. In that case, the trait on which morality is based (whatever it be) increases its fitness depending on its complex interactions with the environment. Given these complex relationships between the trait and its surroundings, liberal morality seems to be the fittest for accomplishing the function of promoting social cohesion. However, this kind of morality is not inherently what best attains that function. As stated above, there are two different moralities that best serve the purposes of producing social harmony (a Western individualist, liberal and an Eastern communitarian conservative ethics), which shows that morality's function depends on the environment. Given the current large-scale globalization process, it is no surprise that a liberal individual centred ethical system becomes fittest. However, as in the case of human vision, this does not mean that there is a pre-existing moral model to which moral progress is directed.

In the same way, as vision may become a vestige in some peculiar circumstances (abyssal fishes' and salamander's eyes are good examples of it), liberal individual-focused morality could become vestigial in different environmental conditions those fuelled by globalization. This makes it apparent that no evolved trait progresses in a definite and pre-fixed direction. And suppose it is accepted that morality is such an evolved trait. In that case, a right understanding of the way evolution works has the awkward conclusion that there are no universal, context-independent, and free from human interests moral facts that are inherently successful in achieving the function of morality.

2.4 A possible answer to debunkers: blurring the distinction between facts and values

In a recent paper, Martínez, Mosqueda & Oseguera (2020) presented a critical examination of Street's argument. They aimed to show that, given the features of the language of moral realism, i.e., its cognitivism, its representative intention and its claim that there are moral facts, there is no valid reason -as Street argues- for denying moral realist language a less objective status from that attributed to other types of languages used for describing the world.

In remarking the representational character of the language of moral realism, that is, in stressing the fact that moral statements intend to describe states of affairs or facts about the world, Martínez, Mosqueda & Oseguera (2020) make apparent that the moral language behaves in a very similar way to another type of representational languages:

> Both the sentence 'corruption is common' and 'corruption is incorrect are statements that we can affirm or deny and to which we can assign truth values based on facts. By taking moral language as representational, our evaluative judgments aim to describe a reality that is independent of our way of speaking and thinking about it (Martínez, Mosqueda & Oseguera, 2020, p. 111)

One of the key points of the authors' critical analysis is to make apparent that Street's debunking of moral realism pretends to be completely ontological (arguing that there exist independent moral facts), is the case that her debunking has an important semantic element (posing the existence of independent moral truths) that is underestimated because, in considering this semantic dimension, as it was already said, the moral language is not different from any other kind of representational language.

This way of answering Street's evolutionary debunking arguments reveals that, at least at the semantic level, there seems to exist in human beings the tendency to use language in such a way that there is no clear distinction -as debunkers claim- between facts and value. This distinction is fundamental for running the debunking argument against moral realism. Doubting about this distinction seems to question the validity of evolutionary debunking arguments.

So, for example, according to Joyce, in assessing the biological fitness of an arithmetic belief such as 1+1=2 (an alleged proposition of fact), it is necessary to consider its truth:

> 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. The truth of "1 + 1 = 2" is a background assumption to any reasonable hypothesis of how this belief might have come to be innate (Joyce, 2006, p. 182)

On the other hand, in assessing the biological fitness of moral beliefs (proposition of value), it is possible to make sense of their use independently of their truth (Joyce, 2006, p. 183). Moreover, as discussed, it is difficult to identify a state of affairs depicted by a moral proposition, which seems to be required to deem it true or false. So, evolutionary debunking arguments require a clear distinction between facts and values to be raised.

However, the distinction between "thin" and "thick" concepts (Williams, 1985) seems to challenge the aforementioned fact-value distinction. Thin evaluative terms assess actions and behaviours by means of plain evaluative adjectives, without committing themselves too much, be it good or bad, or right or wrong, for example; 'thick' concepts, on the other hand, seem somehow to involve both an evaluation and non-evaluative description. Examples of such concepts are 'generous', 'selfish', 'just', 'unfair' and 'cruel', epistemic concepts such as 'open-minded' and 'gullible', or even aesthetic concepts such as 'gracious' or 'harmonious', among others. As it is apparent, the application of these kinds of concepts is determined by the way the world is. This means that 'thick' concepts tend to blur the distinction between fact and value because as they allegedly describe the world, they also implicitly carry an evaluation of it. And the key point is that there seems to exist thick irreducible concepts, i.e., concepts that cannot be factored in terms of value and description separately:

> Most famously, thick concepts have been held to break down the 'fact–value' distinction. There are at least two fact-value distinctions that thick concepts have been held to break down. First, we might make a semantic distinction between two different kinds of meaning, two different kinds of things we can do with language: we can evalu-

ate, and we can describe. Thick concepts have been held to undermine any sharp distinction between non-evaluative description and evaluation, which some think is a problem for certain metanormative views (Roberts, 2018, p.162)

In other words, the intuition expressed in Martinez *et al.* (2020) about the nature of moral language has clear support in the existence of thick concepts. The key question is to what extent the nature of this kind of concept is present in our language and specifically in our moral discourse. In fact, it seems that moral neuroscience and psychology experiments seem not to include serious research about thick concepts. Instead, when researching human moral language, they focus exclusively on thin concepts (Abend, 2011). Thus, it is still necessary to focus on this empirical research.

From the conceptual and philosophical view, the intuitions about the nature of moral language and its connection with representational language, in general, are clear, and the related empirical research could be of great help:

> But why is it necessary to postulate a special capacity that allows us to see the evaluative traits? As Platts points out, "why to change the case, we cannot account for the recognition that people make of the malicious, the loyal, the aggressive, the dishonest, simply in parallel terms to those who realize their recognition of others traits in the world?" (Platt, 1983, p. 4, *apud,* Martinez *et al.*, 2020, p. 112)

Applying this intuition to Joyce's example provided above, one could notice the unconvincing account according to which the fact about the quantity or number of lions is really a 'fact' of the world, in contrast with the unspecific moral values, which are not supposed to be facts. Is it not the case that, at least in this example, the whole situation is perceived as dangerous (a thick concept)? Would it not be a cheaper way in which evolution could improve the human probability of survival? For evolution, the shaping of a single mechanism for describing and valuing the world could be more effective than two separate mechanisms for detecting 'plain facts' on the one hand and for valuing those facts on the other. However, the determination of this possibility needs empirical support, which, up to date, is not fully substantiated.

3 CONCLUSIONS

This paper explores two versions of evolutionary debunking arguments (function and contingency). It makes it apparent that those variants share the basic premise that human moral capabilities are the product of evolution. As a corollary, we added that those capabilities had been selected for accomplishing a function, and contingency plays an important and key role in their evolution. The conception of human morality as a set of universal and objective propositions that depict a priori states of affairs, existing independently of any human evaluative tendency, is debunked.

Realists' attempts to answer evolutionary debunking arguments are classified as those who consider that their main premise can be accepted and those who consider that morality requires denying the pervasive influence of evolutionary forces in human morality. In the first case (Copp's society centred realism), it is evident that at some point, this theory requires to step further from evolutionary debunking arguments' main premise. In trying to keep it, it commits a contradiction in the sense that morality cannot bear counterfactuals (as this theory claims). In addition, in the process of 'rational' correction of 'wrong moral propositions', human beings cannot be free of their evaluative tendencies. This view is unaware of the fact that, in correcting the supposed wrong evaluative tendencies, human beings are inevitably using them.

The second branch of realism tries to show that some moral beliefs are free of evolutionary tendencies. However, those moral beliefs that are allegedly free of evolutionary forces are shown to have some kind of connection with evolutionary forces, which demonstrated that, in assessing human moral claims, the very same evaluative tendencies are at work.

In spite of being attractive and compelling, the idea of moral progress needs to be carefully examined because it entails the dangerous belief that there are pre-fixed ideas toward which morality has to be directed. It is dangerous in the sense that progress could make human beings blind to the idea that a sudden or gradual change in human conditions and context could produce a different moral response from that advocated by such progress. From a biological point of view, progress can be explained, but, as it was shown in this paper, it

is context-dependent, and it has to be situated in a definite frame. The existence of vestiges and co-optations demonstrate that every biologically evolved trait is dependent on its complex relationship with the environment and that it is not immune to the possibility of disappearing. And if morality is such a trait, it is neither immune to drastic changes and pressures. It cannot be forgotten that current moral progress is sustained in a globalizing context, which is contingent and, as such, could collapse. In such a remote (however possible) situation, it would not be a surprise if some old forms of moral responses reappeared or that some others, based on primitive emotions such as fear and distrust, directed the appropriate moral responses (once the new context is given).

Finally, this paper argues that the evolutionary debunking arguments are based on a key distinction between facts and values. However, there are some reasons for doubting that this distinction is the natural setting of human language. So, it is necessary to look for a particular kind of concept called 'thick concepts', which show that there is a capacity in human language to describe and value the world simultaneously. This could be the way natural evolution shaped our moral language. In any case, the determination of this possibility needs empirical support.

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