

Debunking reviewed: Kagan

Remark 1. A lot of the material in Kagan's discussion has been addressed in great detail when we looked at Railton's, Street's, and White's readings. Indeed, it should be read as a textbook presentation of the debate. Hence our coverage of it will be especially fragmentary.

DEBUNKING: THE FIRST TRY. Kagan begins with an observation that metaphysical and epistemological worries about moral facts are intertwined. Once we realise that our epistemic channels like emotions and intuitions are unreliable, we face the possibility that moral facts are not only not reliably accessible, but rather likely not exist at all.

Question 2. Kagan says: 'We normally take our moral intuitions and emotions to be evidence for the corresponding moral beliefs.' What do you have to say about this statement in the light of our earlier discussions?

The first version of the debunking argument looks like this:

(11-1) Evolution shaped our moral intuitions. Therefore, they can't be accurate in capturing moral truths/facts.

But this argument is ineffective, since the mere mention of causal origins does nothing to undermine the channel reliability. In addition, why can't we mount a parallel argument against reliability of vision, for example, since vision, too, has emerged in evolution? Yet (almost) no-one reasons this way about vision.

TRUTH AND ADVANTAGE. Suppose that there is an obligation to kill children. Then committing to this obligation on a species-wide scale would be disadvantageous, since a behaviour governed by this obligation won't improve survival and reproduction. But the latter two are *the* advantages that evolutionary processes sustain. Hence, under these conditions, it would be advantageous to have false beliefs about obligation.

This argument ignores the possibility of the link between truth and advantage. Once again, consider the case of the external world. It is advantageous to have true beliefs about trees, since this enables you to avoid bumping into them. Hence, advantage tracks truth, at least in this case.

Yet the sceptic will say that this only shows the link between truth and advantage in the empirical (perceptual) domain. As yet, there's no evidence that such a link exists in the moral domain. In the perceptual case, the fact that your perception is veridical explains why it is useful. But nothing like this holds in the moral case. The truth of the statement, 'It is wrong to kill one's children' does not explain why it is advantageous not to kill one's children.

Remark 3. What we are here discussing is, of course, the Tracking account introduced by Street.

Kagan insists that the sceptic, in effect, commits himself to normative nihilism. Yet, as we saw in Railton and Street, that doesn't have to be so. The sceptic may well be a moral anti-realist who believes that moral facts are constituted by natural facts (that do track advantage, as already argued).

In fact, that's precisely what Kagan himself recommends under the rubric of 'common ground'. There is a set of 'underlying facts' (=natural facts) that explains *both* why certain behaviours advantageous and why there is a normative reason to engage in them (see the example of corn harvesting).

THE POVERTY OF INTUITION. Not all behaviours that are advantageous, from an evolutionary point of view, are perceived by us as moral. But only require some beliefs to be directly intuited. The rest will be figured out by a familiar process of enquiry whereby we will reflect and analyse those initial pieces of evidence directly given to us.

But this creates a further problem. Once we rely on a 'systematic enquiry' not directly accessible to us in intuition, what warrant do we have that intuition will 'continue' to be reliable outside the home range? Well, Kagan assures us that the same process of rational enquiry that serves us in the empirical domain should serve us in the moral domain.

Yet this response assumes a lot. In particular, we need some further assumption that reason (and other faculties?) used in moral enquiry are also able to track independent moral facts. We will have to have *another* evolutionary account of reason to show that.

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