A Moral Epistemological Argument for the Existence of God

What would the world have to be like in order for morality to be everything we want and hope it to be? Certainly we would have to be able to form accurate moral judgments. But do we have this ability, and if so, how did we come to possess it? Despite the traditional skeptical arguments and anti-realist intuitions that some people hold, most of us take for granted that we do know moral facts. How *Homo sapiens* access these truths gives many of us little cause for concern. If, however, we suppose that evolutionary accounts provide an exhaustive explanation for the origin of our faculties, then I believe serious epistemological problems arise for moral realists. One of the main purposes of this essay will be to explain just what this problem is, and what relation it bears to moral realism, naturalism, and theism.

We form judgments about morality and value with our faculties; we govern our lives and our actions in this way\(^1\). These facts warrant an explanation. Many scientists and naturalist philosophers believe that the explanation lies in evolutionary theory. For

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\(^1\) For the sake of more elegant prose, I will be lumping moral claims and value claims together. I think I can reasonably stipulate that the two go hand in hand. Whatever arguments I make regarding the status of moral claims, I will tacitly imply the same for value claims. Doing so raises the stakes for naturalists because the argument takes into consideration existential themes such as giving life objective meaning.
more than a century, evolutionists have grappled with an understanding of ethics within the confines of naturalism. If the explanation for morality and valuation does lie in evolutionary theory, then what sort of explanation would it be? The majority of scientists seem to fall into one of two camps. Some think that scientific explanations falsify ethical claims. Others think that morality can be preserved if we understand it in terms of either fitness enhancing rules or in terms of organismic functioning. I will focus on the former approach in this essay. I find the latter view so untenable that I will rule it out from the start. Later I will address other options for naturalist moral realists who surely will object to the notion that they must choose between one of these two perspectives. I will argue, ultimately, that naturalists face a problem with moral knowledge that only theists can resist rationally. Consequently, the former Darwinian view, which implies nihilism, will turn out to be the best explanation for our moral claims on the naturalists’ worldview. Theism, on the other hand, will avoid this problem and provide excellent grounds for moral realism.

I will begin my essay with some assumptions about moral realism that seem to be necessary to take the moral enterprise seriously. I will be viewing moral realism as a

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2 In previous drafts of this essay I conducted an in depth criticism of what I took to be the most promising account in this camp found in William Casebeer’s Natural Ethical Facts. Very briefly, naturalists like Casebeer think that we can preserve moral realism if we define moral facts as mutable functional facts. I found this view rife with absurdity. Casebeer begins with the Aristotelian notion that we should maximize the way in which we function best. Unfortunately for Casebeer, Aristotle’s justification does not transfer to the general concept of organismic functioning – especially absent teleology. Casebeer cannot be species biased on this view, which means that he cannot say that the functioning of *Homo sapiens* is better than the functioning of a mosquito. But it is not morally good for mosquitoes to suck our blood, infect us with malaria, and give us itching bumps. All immoral behavior can play an integral role in an organism’s functioning; biologically speaking, one has no right to privilege some over others. Put another way, if vampires and werewolves evolved, and if they functioned best when they fed on humans, their functioning as such would not be morally good; it would be morally despicable. Finally, moral obligations, moral sanction, and moral responsibility make absolutely no sense on this view. On Casebeer’s view, morality is not an end in itself; it is simply a useful tool to help some creatures function in their environment. Being a couch potato is conceptually just as ‘wrong’ as being a murderer. Furthermore, this prudential view of morality clearly is not an adequate response to the question I posed at the beginning of this essay.
basic, if not *properly* basic belief. Consequently, I will not be defending moral realism or
the truth of objective value. I acknowledge that nihilists have no reason to accept any
sort of argument for the existence of God that turns on morality or value. While I will
consider some issues in ontology, my approach will be primarily from an epistemological
standpoint.

To meet my primary objective, I will go to great lengths to argue that we do not
have moral knowledge if naturalism is true. In order to set the stage for my arguments, I
will provide a general account of evolutionary theory and explore Alvin Plantinga’s antinaturalism argument. This inquiry should provide a springboard for my initial
formulation of the problem of moral knowledge for naturalists. This Plantinga-inspired
argument will show that naturalists have a defeater for all of their moral beliefs.
Supposing that naturalists might have some resources to combat my argument, I will
continue to argue that naturalism is incompatible with moral realism by setting up a
dilemma: either nature explicitly engineered us with moral faculties or did not. I will
show that if naturalists take the first horn of the dilemma, the claim that evolutionary
forces selected for moral faculties explicitly, they will fall prey to the nihilistic account of
morality held by Michael Ruse and E. O. Wilson. By embarking on this horn of the
dilemma, they will have both ontological and epistemological grounds for rejecting moral
realism. If naturalists take the second horn of the dilemma, the claim that moral faculties
were not explicitly selected for, then I will present three major arguments that eliminate
the possibility of having moral knowledge on that scenario. So I will argue that
whichever horn is taken, we do not have moral knowledge if naturalism is true.
Finally, I will argue that theism is the only reasonable way that our claims about morality and value would correspond to the truth. I will argue that if God exists, then not only do moral facts exist, but we can know them as well. Anyone committed to moral realism will thereby have good reason to believe in God.

I. Some Features of Moral Realism

I know that murder is wrong. What makes this knowledge possible, and what do I have in mind when I make such an assertion? In this section of my essay, I will not provide a rigorous defense to show why I think certain aspects of moral realism are essential to the moral enterprise. In a brief overview I will stipulate some features of moral phenomena that I think are necessary. Most importantly, I assert that we must have trustworthy faculties aimed at the production of true moral beliefs. This capacity would require that we have cognitive equipment that enables us to discover moral facts. In consideration of the debate over the nature of our moral assertions and the way we form them, I do not want to burn any bridges. So I want to leave open the possibility that we employ both cognitive and conative faculties in our judgments of morality and value. However, a purely non-cognitive account will imply that moral claims lack truth-values, and knowledge of moral facts requires truth. So I will focus on moral cognition. Whichever source(s) in the human mind moral theorists attribute to our moral reasoning at the end of the day, it must be a legitimate and dependable tool such that, we can form accurate moral judgments reliably.

If we suppose that goods and evils exist, the threat of nihilism does not evaporate. We still need access to goods and evils, and we still need the proper tools to assess them.
This cognitive capacity must be in place in order for us to know moral facts. If we are denied access to ontologies of morality, meaning, and valuation, then nihilism might as well be true. So we need to have knowledge of facts about morality and value in order for moral realism to be true.

Other necessary conditions for moral realism include particular features of the moral claims themselves. First, a moral claim is legitimate just in case it corresponds to a fact or an objective truth. The truth or falsity of the claim must be mind-independent. In other words, a moral claim transcends mere subjective opinion. Some people deny that morality requires objectivity. I think this view is mistaken and incompatible with moral realism, so for the sake of brevity I will stipulate that implicit in morality is objective truth. Timelessness also strikes me as a necessary feature of a moral claim. It is inconceivable that rape might be factually permissible one day, or that it once was permissible a thousand years ago. It is also difficult to imagine how anyone would ever know when such a truth-value changed. However, moral claims often require detailed specification in order to be labeled ‘timeless’ and ‘objective.’ Most would agree, for example, that killing is not necessarily immoral. Killing a terrorist who poses an immediate threat to one’s family may be morally permissible. In this sense, the truth or falsity of a broad moral claim may depend upon the situation. A pernicious form of relativism hardly follows from such considerations. There must be a timeless, objective truth somewhere in the content or context of the broader claim that the asserter has in mind. It is true that beliefs about moral truths may not be the same from culture to culture or epoch to epoch, but the facts must remain the same. I take this issue to be centrally important.
Some sort of bindingness or reason-giving force must also run along side of moral facts. That is to say, moral prescriptions are categorically action guiding. When realists assert that moral claims are categorical, implicit in that description would be a claim like, “for any agent in that situation, that agent must/must not…” We often need to specify the nature of the situation for such claims. While we might not think that we are obligated to refrain from killing in every sort of situation, we must always refrain from gratuitous murder, for example. This notion of categoricity in turn reveals the nature of moral obligations. They are external demands, and they may very well conflict with an agent’s desires. Just as the moral facts must be real, so too must the obligations be.

Finally, moral facts must be irreducible. That is to say, a moral rule cannot be simply derivative of something non-moral like a fitness-enhancing characteristic that maximizes DNA survival. Such an evolutionary description does not lend any weight to whether or not we think the relevant action is bad. For this reason, G. E. Moore’s open question argument continues to ring true. Most of us recognize a conceptual gap between what is and what ought to be. I make these claims to establish the primacy of what we take to be our ordinary conception of morality.

II. Prolegomena of the Formulation of the Problem of Moral Knowledge

A. Evolution and the Origins of the Human Mind

Before addressing the implications that neo-Darwinism carries into moral philosophy and moral epistemology, some exposition of evolutionary theory is necessary. The accepted scientific account of our origins is that human life evolved through a long process of gradual change in accordance with natural selection. Many scientists like
Oxford zoologist Richard Dawkins believe that ultimately, the genetic code of organisms seeks to replicate itself because of the laws of chemistry, which can be reduced to the laws of physics. In varying environments, strands of genetic code have found a variety of ways to maximize their copying. One such way, as Dawkins will tell you, is through the biological organism. Animals, along with all of their physiological features, came about when DNA sequences exemplified or produced such things that turned out to be effective in furthering replication. Given limited resources, these organisms have been struggling to survive to carry out the purpose of their respective genetic codes. The adaptations or mutations that proved effective continued to be replicated in future generations; the changes that did not went by the wayside into extinction.

Viewing evolution at the level of the organism, scientists say that organisms compete for their survival and reproduction. Reproductive fitness is the main criterion of the pseudo-teleology of organisms in evolutionary theory. Generally speaking, every significant physiological change must be either fitness enhancing or selectively neutral to persist through later generations. Any sort of detrimental change would be phased out gradually, if not abruptly. Humans, with their meaty brains that produce their minds, are also the products of the evolutionary process. From an evolutionary standpoint, our brains are just organs that function to further evolutionary ends. From the naturalists’ perspective, there is, at bottom, no teleology.

**B. Plantinga’s Anti-Naturalism Argument**

With a proper understanding of evolutionary theory Alvin Plantinga has formulated an argument that calls into question the rationality of belief in naturalism. The force of the argument turns on the evolutionary origins of our cognitive equipment.
As I articulated before, biological organisms are engineered to behave in ways that maximize the survival of their DNA or lineage. They exist to reproduce genetic code. Nature selects for fitness enhancing characteristics that promote this end. The brain is no exception; it is an organ that exists because it has provided organisms that have it with an adaptive edge. Plantinga cites Patricia Churchland to articulate an important concept. She asserts that the brain, as an evolved organ, functions so that the organism moves in ways that will make it more likely to increase its evolutionary fitness (Churchland found in Beilby 3-4). Churchland famously writes:

Boiled down to essentials, a nervous system enables the organism to succeed in the four F's: feeding, fleeing, fighting, and reproducing. The principle chore of nervous systems is to get the body parts where they should be in order that the organism may survive. […] Truth, whatever that is, definitely takes the hindmost. (qtd. in Beilby 3-4)

Plantinga and Churchland also draw out the role that behavior plays. They explain that nature concerns herself with behaviors, rather than beliefs to maximize the four F’s (Churchland and Plantinga found in Beilby 4). In other words, beliefs are meant to promote fitness, not truth (Plantinga found in Beilby 4).

Plantinga then argues that if our belief forming mechanisms were merely the products of evolution, then our faculties would not aim at the production of true beliefs. Plantinga thinks that there are exactly four possible scenarios that enable us to calculate whether or not trustworthy cognitive faculties would be selected (found in Beilby 5). The scenarios range from epiphenomenalist accounts in which beliefs have no causal efficacy to what psychologists call folk theories of agency.
Plantinga then analyzes the prospects of whether or not cognitive equipment that produces mostly true beliefs would prove fitness enhancing and thus be naturally selected. In entertaining this scenario, Plantinga thinks that we must also take into consideration that other mental states like desires will affect behavior as well (found in Beilby 8). Because actions involve complexity, he argues that there are a number of ways in which desires coupled with beliefs result in the same sorts of adaptive behaviors (Plantinga found in Beilby 8). The combinations that would prove most adaptive may involve false beliefs, which thereby reduce the probability that true beliefs would be selected (Plantinga found in Beilby 8). To demonstrate the significance of this consideration, Plantinga provides a hypothetical example in which a caveman sees a tiger in front of him. Plantinga then provides numerous scenarios in which the caveman’s belief-desire combination would result in the appropriate adaptive behavior – in this case, running away from the tiger – yet include a false belief (found in Beilby 8). For example, the caveman might form the belief that running away from the tiger will prevent his food from spoiling. Since the caveman very much wants his food to be preserved, he dashes away! Later I will revisit this point.

Having taken into account the various possible ways in which beliefs might relate to behavior, Plantinga now can begin to assess the probability of nature alone endowing us with reliable cognitive equipment. The naturalists’ only hope is the scenario in which the content of belief plays a causal role in behavior and the mechanisms that secure mostly true beliefs are selected. To add more force to Plantinga’s argument, he cites Robert Cummins, who maintains that most scientists view beliefs as an epiphenomenon, which means that they play no role in behavior (found in Beilby 9). So Plantinga thinks
that naturalists should invest more stock into the epiphenomenal route than one might think.

Plantinga concludes that the probability that our cognitive faculties reliably produce true beliefs on the naturalists’ worldview is low enough to produce a defeater for all of our beliefs (found in Beilby 10-11). If naturalism is true, then our belief forming mechanism does not reliably form true beliefs. Consequently, those who believe in naturalism have a defeater for all of their beliefs – including naturalism. Furthermore, Plantinga asserts that this defeater cannot be defeated (I shall call a defeater that defeats another defeater a ‘defeater-eater’ from now on). He argues that the beliefs of the potential premises of any counter response will also be defeated by his same argument (Plantinga found in Beilby 11-12). So belief in the conjunction of naturalism and evolution is self-defeating. Theists, on the other hand, believe that God would guide (or be responsible for) evolutionary forces. Theists have no reason to suppose that God would want us to have mostly false beliefs, and there is good reason to think that God would want us to have mostly true beliefs. Plantinga buttresses this point with the predominantly religious view that man was made in the image of God (found in Beilby 2-3). I would make an appeal to commonsense as well.

Critics, of course, have voiced objections to Plantinga’s anti-naturalism argument. Unfortunately, an examination of the objections and Plantinga’s replies goes beyond the scope of this paper. There are, however, some important points to make about this argument. We might agree that Plantinga has a tall order to fill. He must show that we have a defeater for all of our beliefs and no defeater-eater to disarm it. Clearly Plantinga has to be ambitious. Critics usually resist the argument, one way or another, by insisting
that naturalists can believe justifiably that evolutionary forces alone would furnish its creatures with epistemic faculties that reliably form mostly true beliefs.

In order to explain why Plantinga’s argument seems too counter-intuitive for some people to believe, I will offer a general kind criticism. One might insist that if we had true beliefs about the way the world works, and if we were motivated to promote evolutionary ends, then our true beliefs would prove to be fitness enhancing. Hence, we would have reliable belief forming mechanisms that aim at the production of true beliefs… or at least some true beliefs. In the case of Plantinga’s example of the caveman/hominid who sees a tiger, we might believe that it would be evolutionarily beneficial for this proto-human to truly believe that there is in fact a tiger in front of him. If the caveman did not form true beliefs about the dangers of cliffs, we might suppose that he would fall to his demise. Evolution would thereby phase out his faulty cognitive apparatus.

In addition to this sort of worry, one might think that the defeater could be defeated reasonably despite Plantinga’s claim. Consequently we might conclude that as evolved creatures in a godless universe we might have modest cognitive faculties, but not faculties poor enough to make naturalism self-defeating. In order to make these objections more forceful and sophisticated, the critic would have to go into much more depth than I have. For the most part, however, this general account should give us the gist of what a typical objection would look like. Whether or not Plantinga’s argument is convincing, it takes us to an appropriate line of thought that I will exploit.
III. The Plantingian Problem of Moral Knowledge and Naturalism

Now that I have provided a rough, general account of the anti-naturalism argument and the nature of the kinds of objections to it, I will make what I hope to be a novel move. Instead of trying to find a defeater for all of our beliefs under the supposition of naturalism, I want to consider what a modified version of the argument would look like if we focused exclusively on moral beliefs. If evolution is the only story to be told about the origins of our cognitive faculties, then can we rationally hold that our minds aim at the production of true moral beliefs? If we accept Plantinga’s argument, then obviously the answer is no. But let us press the same relevant objections and assume that Plantinga has failed to discover an alethic defeater for all of our beliefs. If we assume the role of Plantinga’s critics, do our objections have the same force? I think that the answer is still no. Evolution might take an “interest” in providing us with cognitive faculties that reliably form true beliefs about dangerous cliffs and some basic mathematical propositions that help us to survive, but it would take no interest in endowing creatures with true beliefs about timeless, objective, moral facts and binding obligations.

In this section of the essay I will explain why moral knowledge is special in the face of the anti-naturalism argument. I will show that when we run Plantinga’s argument with moral beliefs in mind, they fall prey much more easily than all of our beliefs simpliciter. In doing so, I will establish a new argument that evades many of the sorts of responses critics throw at Plantinga. I will argue that the probability that evolutionary forces alone would furnish us with cognitive equipment that reliably forms true moral beliefs would be very low, which in turn defeats all of the naturalists’ moral beliefs.
Consequently, naturalist moral realists will have an exceedingly difficult time salvaging the justification of their moral beliefs.

I begin by arguing that beliefs restricted to the realm of morality and value would be much more likely to be defeated than all of our beliefs in general in consideration of Plantinga’s argument. If I see a bull charging me at top speed, evolutionary forces alone might have equipped me to form the true belief that ‘if I do not move out of the way, I will be trampled.’ Furthermore, one might think that I would need to form this appropriate belief every time a bull charges me. Otherwise, I would lose in the evolutionary game. My evolutionary ancestors who failed to form similar beliefs in similar situations probably would perish before they procreated (incidentally, this sort of intuition/objection does not phase Plantinga). The naturalist surely thinks that the ‘bull belief’ compels me to move out of the way because there really is a bull charging me. Put another way, the ‘bull belief’ was reliably formed because a cognitive apparatus that failed to form such beliefs would have been fitness detracting. The bull would have gutted me. So the truth-value of this sort of belief played a causal role in the success of the cognitive equipment nature bestowed upon me; that is the story that the naturalist will want to give (or at least something along those lines). But this intuition about the way we came to have such cognitive equipment should not lead us to think that we would reliably form true beliefs in the realm of morality and value.

These kinds of beliefs do not need to track the truth in order to ensure our survival or reproductive fitness. Suppose I falsely believe the proposition ‘that killing people whose skin color significantly differs from mine is morally permissible.’ Are my genes more likely to die off if my cognitive faculties produce this sort of belief? If anything,
natural selection might favor a mechanism that forms those sorts of false beliefs. By eliminating those with whom I compete for food and sex, I might find myself in an evolutionarily more advantageous position. Also, such behavior might secure the interests of those who are closer to me genetically/phenotypically. As a matter of fact, slavery has been documented in certain species of ants since Darwin’s days. Scientists had been divided on some of the details of how the process works, but E.O. Wilson, a specialist in the sociobiology of ants, has written extensively on the subject (368). Suffice it to say, having a false moral belief carries no fitness penalty; it can even be fitness enhancing. Interestingly enough, the same argument works for a contrary virtuous belief. If I falsely believe the proposition, ‘that I should donate some money to feed the starving children in Bengal,’ then I will not pay much of a fitness penalty in holding that belief either. The adaptive behavior is all that counts. Whereas the truth of the ‘bull belief’ might have been necessary or likely to secure my survival, the truth of the moral claim is completely dispensable.

Next, we must consider the fact that morality often conflicts with self-interest. If we can learn anything from the history of moral philosophy, it is that ‘what we ought to do’ often conflicts with what benefits us. If an agent confidently believes that he can get away with flouting a moral rule, then something would have to compel him to choose duty over inclination when the two were mutually exclusive. Keeping in mind Dawkins’ selfish gene theory, we thereby have a prima facie reason to think that the notion of reproductive fitness and moral agency would stand in tension and conflict.

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3 Perhaps some of the ancient Greek philosophers were the only ones who disagreed with this view. Aristotle, for example, thought that human flourishing entailed the moral virtues, so he would have denied that our moral obligations conflicted with our self-interest. However, this view of human flourishing stands in stark contrast with reproductive fitness, which is the focus of my Plantingian argument.
Consequently, we would not expect nature alone to select for cognitive faculties that produce true moral beliefs – especially about moral obligations and duties.

At this point in the argument, I must pause to recapitulate a distinction between the moral realism I have envisioned and the ontology of quasi-moral facts that some scientists and philosophers accept. Those who accept the latter moral ontology think that moral facts just are fitness enhancing rules. So on this bizarre view, moral beliefs really are tracking facts about the world. As I have stipulated, genuine moral facts are not reducible to fitness enhancing rules. This view is absurd, and it is not what reasonable moral realists have in mind. The fitness enhancing consequences of a moral belief do not so much as suggest that the belief is true (given our commonsense view of morality). At most, this contingent property of the belief would demonstrate that it has proven to be a useful adaptation in certain cases (many scientists who take the prudential view of morality in terms of organismic functioning or fitness enhancing characteristics fail to see this as a genuine problem for some reason). Which sorts of moral beliefs or dispositions would win out on the evolutionary story would vary from ecological niche-to-niche and branch-to-branch on Darwin’s Tree of Life. But the truth-values of our beliefs would be irrelevant. I will argue shortly that the nihilistic Ruse/Wilson position provides the best explanation for what we take to be genuine moral thinking and behavior (as well as immoral behavior). The explanation will be that moral convictions/behaviors exist because they turned out to be fitness enhancing, which rightfully leads to nihilism, not bizarre moral realism.

In his formulation of the anti-naturalism argument, Plantinga worries over the specification of just how low the reliability of our belief forming mechanism would be if
naturalism were true. For this reason he argues that if we cannot know for sure exactly how low the probability would be, then we should deem it “inscrutable” (Plantinga 9-10). A low or inscrutable probability of cognitive reliability is sufficient for an agent to lack warrant, so Plantinga believes that this stage of his argument would be forceful enough. In the case of moral matters, however, I think I can safely argue that the probability would not be merely inscrutable. The probability that we would have true beliefs about morality and value would be much lower than the probability that we would have false beliefs about objects in the external world because the former beliefs are much more vulnerable in the anti-naturalism argument.

There are some other significant distinctions between Plantinga’s argument and the one I have begun to develop. Whereas Plantinga tries to show that belief in naturalism is self-defeating, I do not have this kind of leverage. This is because the fulcrum of my argument easily could break under the yoke of nihilism. In the confines of my argument, belief in naturalism would not be irrational or self-defeating. I am arguing, however, that belief in the conjunction of naturalism and moral realism would be irrational because naturalists have a defeater for all of their moral beliefs. Loosening Plantinga’s argument in this way has at least two consequences. On the plus side, my enterprise seeks only to undermine beliefs about morality and value, which I explained would make my argument easier to accept and less vulnerable to many objections. On the negative side, if I loosen the reins on Plantinga’s argument to allow naturalists to make appeals to non-moral beliefs, then it may be possible to discover a defeater-eater that would vindicate the conjunction of moral realism and naturalism. Later in this essay, I will explore the likelihood of finding such a defeater-eater.
So, we should not have the intuition that evolution would provide us with somewhat reliable belief forming mechanisms aimed at the production of true moral beliefs. We may or may not be able to resist Plantinga’s alethic defeater that makes belief in naturalism irrational. But by Plantinga’s same arguments, we surely will find that it is much harder to pry away the defeater from our moral beliefs. It is not reasonable to believe that the content of moral propositions will have any fitness enhancing effects on the naturalists’ picture. Consequently, moral facts may not explain anything on a scientific account of human behavior (I will revisit this point shortly). There simply is no evolutionary payoff in tracking the truth of moral propositions. If we weaken Plantinga’s argument and make certain epistemological allowances, there is still reason to think that our cognitive equipment would produce false beliefs about morality and value. Our faculties could aim at true beliefs about mathematical propositions and external world propositions yet produce false moral beliefs.

IV. A Dilemma for Naturalist Moral Realists

Thus far I have modified Plantinga’s anti-naturalism argument to show that naturalist moral realists have a defeater for all of their moral beliefs. A commitment to moral realism requires justified belief, if not full-blown knowledge, and I have argued that naturalists lack it. So we have a prima facie reason to think that we cannot take morality seriously without God. As we dig deeper, we might find that the naturalists have some cards up their sleeve. I have some cards of my own as well.

I will lay out a roadmap to explain how this section will unfold. Structuring this section in the form of a dilemma should be helpful in categorizing my arguments. After I
have completed this section, hopefully I will have painted a very dark picture of
naturalism vis-à-vis moral realism. The dilemma is as follows: evolutionary forces alone
either selected for special moral faculties or did not. I will examine each horn of this
dilemma and argue that naturalists find trouble either way. If naturalists take the first
horn of the dilemma, then Michael Ruse and E.O. Wilson will greet them with nihilism.
If naturalists take the second horn of the dilemma, then they will have to explain how
they can embrace moral realism sensibly despite the fact that nature failed to endow them
with specialized moral faculties. I will meet the naturalists’ potential explanations here
with arguments that I will organize into three subdivisions. I will explain these
subdivisions in piecemeal fashion once we arrive at them.

A. First Horn: Moral Faculties Were Selected

I argued in section III that naturalist moral realists have a defeater for all of their
moral beliefs. We therefore have a prima facie reason to think that naturalists are not
justified in holding their moral beliefs (at least once they read section III of this essay). If
evolutionary forces would preclude us from knowledge of morality and value, then how
might an evolutionist explain the fact that we try to engage in the moral life anyway? As
I stated in my introduction, there are number of options, but scientists and philosophers
with a penchant for evolutionary ethics usually take one of two positions. As I alluded to
towards the end of my Plantingian argument, some maintain with an air of optimism that
moral rules just are fitness rules or prudential tools for organismic functioning. I
dismissed this view from the beginning because I believe that it is absurd and plagued
with irreconcilable problems. The only other dominant view, a view that seems to be the
best explanation for the existence of ethics in the context of evolutionary theory,
essentially entails what the former view does. The main difference between the former prudential view of morality and this latter one is that the conclusion is nihilistic. So I will now connect the initial epistemological argument with an ontological one. Doing so should increase the coherence and plausibility of my claim that naturalism is incompatible with moral realism.

According to Michael Ruse, prominent philosopher of science:

The position of the modern evolutionist, therefore, is that humans have an awareness of morality – a sense of right and wrong and a feeling of obligation to be thus governed – because such an awareness is of biological worth. Morality is a biological adaptation no less than are hands and feet and teeth. (262)

Ruse does not mean to say that we have an awareness of moral facts because nature just so happened to harmonize us with them. He means that we think and behave in ways that we call ‘good’ and ‘bad’ because doing so has proven an effective means to preserve our lineage. In his book, Darwinian Paradigm, Ruse writes a chapter entitled, “Is Rape Wrong on Andromeda?” Ruse hypothesizes that creatures with intelligence on par with ours will develop with some form of moral sense, but ultimately he rejects the view that moral rules will transcend us (236-237). So rape actually could be an accepted practice on Andromeda. If Andromedans were to land on earth, they might not have any qualms about abusing us. They could treat us like animals without shedding a tear. There is nothing to prevent such a state of affairs from obtaining if our contingent, evolved biological functioning coupled with environmental variations provide a sufficient
explanation for the existence of moral disagreement. Obviously if this explanation is correct, then moral realism would be undermined if not destroyed entirely.

The problem of the Andromedans served as one of the reasons for Kant’s criticism of Hume’s weak moral theory founded on sentiments and taste. Then again, Ruse even takes issue with Kant. Kant was convinced that only acting for the sake of duty without inclination warranted moral praise. Ruse says that this sort of thinking is precisely what we should expect if we are merely evolved creatures. In addition to Freudian wish fulfillment, self-deception is a virtue, evolutionarily speaking. An agent who believes that he acts exclusively altruistically will have more evolutionary success than one who recognizes the pursuit of selfish gain (Ruse 231). From Ruse’s perspective, we think we are acting for the sake of duty, but really unconscious motive directed toward self-interest or group phylogenetic selection is the only story to be told (Ruse 235). So psychological egoism might very well ring true if naturalism is true. If the agent were not aware of these subconscious motivations, then something akin to psychological egoism probably would be true.

The meta-ethical conclusions that Ruse reaches should not surprise us. According to Ruse, ethics has no foundation; it is the product of an illusion brought about by natural selection (268). He sympathizes with those who think we have obligations to others, but he ultimately concludes that “morality is just an aid to survival and reproduction, and has no being beyond or without this” (Ruse 268). Moral realists believe that we have genuine moral obligations that place a sanction on us. As evidenced in his view of Kant’s moral theory, Ruse argues that the belief in moral objectivity would prove to be superbly effective in carrying out this cold plot (268-269). Ruse explains that
beliefs about the objectivity of morality and value “are fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate” (qtd. in Walls 172). That we would lack justification for our moral beliefs coheres perfectly with this nihilistic account under the supposition of naturalism. To suppose that moral facts existed but that we never encountered them would be kind of weird. If there were no justified moral beliefs, then it would make sense that there were no moral facts either. The absence of facts does not follow logically from the absence of justification, but we would expect a nihilistic explanation for our moral claims on such a picture of the world.

With Ruse’s take on morality, we see a nexus of science, philosophy, and religion. Eventually I will argue that theists can resist Ruse’s position rationally. Even as a theist, however, I find Ruse’s view alarming. Naturalists especially should find this view troubling. As I have been insisting, I seek to connect Ruse’s position with my modified version of Plantinga’s anti-naturalism argument. Here I will take as an example a mother’s protection of her child to make several important connections about moral ontology and epistemology under the supposition of naturalism.

First, let us recall that Plantinga thought that there would be a potentially large number of belief-desire combinations that would yield an adaptive behavior, yet include a false belief (the caveman ran from the tiger because he thought doing so would prevent his lunch from spoiling!). Let us take the stance of a critic who might argue that desires need not play a role in every belief formed. After all, many beliefs do not seem to be linked to desires. My desires really do not factor into my beliefs about mathematics. Bizarre belief-desire combinations might succeed in getting Plantinga’s caveman to run
away from the tiger, but doubtfully will desires affect the basic perceptual belief that a
tiger stands before him.

Unlike these former cases, belief-desire combinations will factor into our moral
thinking and behavior. And they do not need to be bizarre at all. As we keep in mind the
modern evolutionist’s position on morality, I will make apparent the dispensability of
truth in our moral agency. Clearly a mother’s care toward her children is an evolutionary
adaptation. Among species in which few offspring are produced, a mother must tend to
her babies to maximize their chances of survival into reproductive maturity. Now, if a
mother sees someone pointing a loaded gun in her child’s general direction, the adaptive
behavior under scrutiny would be the act of the mother rushing over to protect her baby.
If the mother believes that her baby has mind-independent value, and if she strongly
desires to save it, then she will be more likely to respond appropriately, evolutionarily speaking. But the baby does not actually need to have such value.

Facts about morality and value do not need to exist at all to effect such adaptive
behaviors. The stronger the agent’s conviction of loftier notions of morality and value,
the more effective it will be in motivating fitness enhancing behavior. Thus false beliefs
about timeless, objective, mind-independent moral facts would infect our moral agency
because they would lead us to remove baby from harm’s way. But it is not necessary for
‘baby in harm’s way’ to be an objectively bad state of affairs. The fraudulent glow of the
beliefs coupled with strong desires will spring the mother into action. The beliefs are
fitness enhancing in virtue of their falsity. So the defeater is brought well into view for
the agent who accepts naturalism, and it cuts with much more force than a belief like, ‘the
sky is blue’ or ‘objects usually travel parabolically in mid-air.’
Altruistic behavior serves as another good example. It need not be true that we have moral obligations. So long as we behave in ways that enhance the fitness of our close relatives, we will further evolutionary ends. If you turn on the television and see starving children, that tug on the heart is all that is necessary to get your body parts moving as evolutionary forces see fit. As Ruse said, evolutionary forces would make our obligations seem real in order to get us to cooperate. The apparent feeling of a powerful, external, demanding force would lead to excellent evolutionary pay-offs. So we would expect a pernicious belief-desire combination to infect all moral discourse and valuation.

As I mentioned before, neo-Darwinians can explain immoral behavior as well. If David Hume’s sensible knave descends upon the Amish, he can lie, steal, cheat, and kill all he wants. He need not form the true belief that those sorts of behaviors are wrong. So long as he fills his belly and maximizes his own fitness, he will succeed on the evolutionary narrative. The knave’s desires coupled with his anti-realist beliefs about ethics will suffice to produce such behavior. If a passer-by learns of the knave’s behavior, he might form the belief ‘I should teach that guy a lesson.’ But even that belief can be false as well. So long as the passer-by wants revenge and justice and believes that the knave really does deserve it, he will behave with typical alpha-male bravado to secure his own welfare (and perhaps the welfare of the group). Truth simply has no bearing on these behaviors.

I will make this point more explicit by drawing on the work of Gilbert Harman. Harman says that scientists need to posit facts about the physical world in order to explain the phenomena that they observe (6). In doing so, they can construct plausible scientific theories (Harman 6). When scientists conduct an experiment, they see if their
theory best explains the experience of their observations. If the psychological happenings in the scientists’ minds by themselves better explain their observations than the theory, they reject the theory (Harman 6). Beliefs about the world are more plausible when they explain phenomena. Harman argues that moral realism lacks this explanatory power, which philosophers consider an epistemic virtue in the pursuit of truth. We can explain moral behavior without positing mind-independent moral facts; subjective opinions of the agents in question fully explain why they act the way they do (Harman 6). Whereas a scientific theory best explains why a scientist comes to observe something in an experiment, a moral fact is not needed to explain why an agent comes to have a belief that a particular state of affairs is good or bad, right or wrong (Harman 8-9).

Now let us return to the mother and her baby. Not only does Harman lead us to think that moral realism is dispensable to explain moral behavior, but Ruse’s nihilistic position provides an excellent explanation for such behavior. The mother’s beliefs about morality and value include mind-independent facts, but they do not have to be true; at most, they must seem to be true. We can picture her pleading and arguing with the gunman. She is much more likely to protect her baby if her strong desires are accompanied by beliefs of mind-independent, timeless, objective value about her child. Similarly, when American GIs liberated the concentration camps, they certainly believed with conviction that something truly awful had happened. We act on these beliefs because we think they correspond to something of quintessential importance, and yet such external sanctions seem oddly out of place in a world of careless, microscopic billiard balls bouncing around in the void. This metaphysical glow of beliefs in moral obligations is precisely how Darwinian forces compel us to pursue a moral demand that is
not there. The stronger the commitment, feeling, sense of obligation, the greater chance agents will cooperate with their genes.

Such mental states would ensure the appropriate fitness-enhancing behavior. And of course, no one should care in the slightest if a behavior proves to be fitness enhancing. DNA survival is neither morally good nor intrinsically valuable. A married couple that decides not to have kids should not apologize to mindless Darwinian forces for engaging in a fitness detracting behavior.

This nihilistic ontology coheres well with the epistemological problem for naturalists. If the justification of our moral beliefs has been defeated on the naturalists’ hypothesis, then what led us to form all of these beliefs about moral obligations anyway? As I have argued, the answer lies in the nihilistic evolutionist’s conception of morality. If Darwinian forces selected for our moral faculties absent teleology, then we would live in a world underpinned by no moral law; we would have only the strong convictions of one. So the defeater for the naturalists’ moral beliefs does not seem to be vanishing anytime soon. If naturalism is true, then not only is our justification trumped, but we do not even have the truth condition for knowledge met.

E.O. Wilson, one of the top sociobiologists today, embarked on this nihilistic position before Ruse’s generation. Wilson insists that the limbic system heavily influences our ethical thinking (3). All of our emotions, reasoning skills, and cognitive faculties were honed and developed to promote genetic replication (Wilson 3). We are not wired to love our neighbors because we ought to, but rather, having the associated beliefs and behaviors for such practices is prudential for DNA survival. Proto-humans and their descendants had more success working together to survive than hermits that
remained in isolation did. Our flourishing civilization seems to be good evidence for this claim. Ruse and Wilson assert that nature selected for what we call ‘moral thinking’ and behavior. But such things have nothing to do with objective goodness. Understood in terms of sociobiology, anti-realist views of morality cohere hands down much better than realist views. For this reason, one can understand why some of the other scientists and naturalist philosophers have attempted to preserve moral realism in terms of organismic functioning. But as I stated before, I will not even consider entertaining this view as an option for naturalist moral realists in this essay.

I want to make clear again that Ruse and Wilson are not protégés of Plantinga or Harman, and neither were the non-cognitivists like A.J. Ayer, error theorists like J.L. Mackie, and the other moral skeptics. The naturalist philosophers, scientists, and intellectuals who have rejected moral realism have done so for independent reasons of their own. I say this because bringing all of these positions together codifies the argument that I have been making, which should bring even more strength to it. If we would not have moral knowledge under the supposition of naturalism, then we would expect this sort of nihilistic explanation. We would lose our justification for thinking that moral facts ever existed in a world in which naturalism obtains. In an effort to find a defeater-eater for their moral beliefs, secular realists might have appealed to the explanatory power of moral realism. I have no reason to think that such explanatory power actually would function as a defeater-eater, but the alternative nihilistic position explains moral agency much better on the naturalists’ picture anyway. So there are grounds for thinking that nihilism is true for both ontological and epistemological reasons under the supposition of naturalism.
B. Second Horn: Moral Faculties Were not Selected

In the first horn of the dilemma I provided good reason to think that if nature alone selected for moral faculties, then morality would be a sham. We would have thought that our beliefs were corresponding to the truths about what I had laid out in section I, but we really would have been duped all along. So if naturalist moral realists take the first horn of the dilemma, they land themselves in nihilism.

The second horn of the dilemma is that moral faculties were not the direct products of evolutionary forces. In taking this horn of the dilemma the naturalists are supposing that moral faculties were not explicitly made to ensure genetic cooperation. Instead, they want to suppose that they arose out of other faculties that came in place to promote evolutionary ends. In this way, the faculties might not be generating illusions and false beliefs about morality. In taking the second horn of the dilemma, naturalists should not breath a sigh of relief. The Ruse/Wilson position coupled with my Plantingian argument still poses a serious threat. As I stated at towards the beginning of the essay, I structured this section in the form of a dilemma primarily for organizational purposes, so by opting for the second horn naturalists are not really avoiding nihilism. Nevertheless, naturalists might turn away from those arguments and look for another way to regain their justification and make sense of moral knowledge. Here is a more detailed account of what the naturalist might have in mind by taking the second horn of the dilemma:

Plantinga is nuts; evolutionary selective pressures surely gave us cognitive faculties that reliably form true beliefs about bulls and tigers, and it just so happens that we derive our moral judgments from those same faculties.
Since those faculties track the truth of bulls and tigers, they also track the truth about morality and value.

I will spend the rest of section IV mounting a response to this view. I will sub-divide the remainder this section into three: anti-piggybacking arguments, anti-trashcan arguments, and Sharon Street’s arguments. I will explain what each of these arguments mean as we arrive at them in piecemeal fashion. My reader might find it useful to refer back to ‘what the naturalist might have in mind’ from time to time.

1. Are Naturalists Entitled to Piggyback Rides?

In an attempt to avoid nihilism and pry away the defeater I have turned up for them in my Plantingian argument, naturalists might endorse the position from the above passage (‘what the naturalist might have in mind’). Naturalists might reject the claim that moral thinking was selected for evolutionary purposes and insist that it arises from the very same faculties that reliably form beliefs about tigers and bulls. We are to suppose that the cognitive reliability of the tiger/bull beliefs ensures the reliability of the moral beliefs. That is the argument. In other words, the production of moral beliefs piggybacks on the production of bull beliefs. In this sub-division I will offer three responses to show that naturalists ought to reject this piggyback option.

My first response is one primarily of skepticism. This piggyback move reminds me of a kind of scene prevalent in the Rocky movies. Sometimes when Rocky was losing badly, his opponent would corner him in the ring to go for the knockout. Aware of the grave danger, Rocky would then try to escape the barrage of punches by running toward the other side of the ring. The aggressive opponent, however, would extend his arm like a clothesline and heave Rocky back in the corner to continue the pummeling. Like
Rocky’s opponent, I have a mind to shove the naturalist back in the corner as well. Why think that the scientists were wrong and that moral thinking did not evolve solely for evolutionary purposes? If the naturalist thinks that a moral phenomenon like obligation should not be explained the way Ruse and Wilson have done so, then the naturalist is going to have to offer a radically different story within the confines of naturalism. While this feat could be accomplished, it seems unlikely that the story would describe our psychology accurately. The story that evolutionary psychologists present (up the Ruse/Wilson alley) seems much more plausible. So I doubt that this alternative story would neutralize the defeater. Perhaps the plausibility of such a move would depend upon the intuitions of my readers – epistemologists, in particular. By the end of this essay, the plausibility of this move should look much more dismal.

Now that I have disclosed my initial intuition, I next want to examine the soundness of the argument in more concrete terms. Let us consider the formation of perceptual beliefs. A normal, healthy observer gazing at non-camouflaged objects relatively close by in decent lighting will reliably form true beliefs about the identity of those objects. From time to time the observer might be fooled by a well-designed replica or fake, but for the most part, his or her faculties would function well under such ideal conditions. Now let us imagine that the conditions are not ideal. The observer is running a fever, is malnourished, dehydrated, and sleep-deprived. The object in question is far away, blends in the background, and the lighting is poor. The same faculties that form the beliefs in the former case with ideal conditions are forming the perceptual beliefs in the latter case with poor conditions. But clearly the beliefs formed in the poor conditions do not have the same epistemic status as the beliefs formed in the ideal conditions. So
the reliability of cognitive faculties varies in different sorts of scenarios. Plantinga expounds on this fact in great detail in his pieces on warrant. If the naturalist argues that the cognitive reliability of the bull beliefs ensures the reliability of the moral beliefs, he has committed a fallacy. “Fair enough,” says the naturalist. “The reliability of the formation of moral beliefs does not follow logically from the reliability of the formation of the bull beliefs. But maybe there is sufficient inductive strength to suppose that it works that way?”

To respond, I would note that in my example of the formation of perceptual beliefs, each set of beliefs was of the same kind. On both scenarios perceptual beliefs were being formed. In the case that occupies our concern, we are supposing that faculties that form perceptual beliefs, memories, mathematical beliefs, etc form beliefs about morality and value reliably. The latter kind of beliefs, by my lights, seems radically different from the mundane kinds of beliefs that I granted the naturalists when I loosened Plantinga’s argument in section III. As I will argue in the next subdivision, the idea that faculties that were designed to promote the four F’s could form moral beliefs at all, let alone reliably, is unlikely. Absent any positive reason to think otherwise, the mere possibility of piggybacking moral belief formation does not eat the naturalists’ defeater.

These intuition pumps take me to my final point in this subdivision. The naturalist has proposed that moral beliefs might be reliably formed if they arise from the same mechanisms that reliably form true beliefs of a different sort. If the naturalist maintains this position, then from the naturalist’s perspective there seems to be a double standard, which I will now explain. According to the naturalist, every time anyone has ever formed a belief in the divine or the supernatural, the belief was false. Perhaps many
of the faithful form beliefs in the supernatural just by accepting what their family and community told them. But many other religious agents, including claimants of religious experiences and the first groups of people around the world who independently began to believe in the supernatural, would have formed consistently false beliefs about the same subject matter. I argue that if the naturalist thinks we help ourselves to piggyback rides to secure the reliability of moral beliefs, then he must play fairly and admit that his neighbors also ride piggyback when they form religious beliefs. But wait a minute. If true religious beliefs are reliably formed, then the naturalist is in trouble. He must concede that his religious neighbors have hit the bull’s-eye in forming their beliefs about the supernatural at least once. One true belief about the supernatural in the history of the world – just one – formed at anytime, anyplace – would entail that the falsity of naturalism.

So the naturalist wants to suppose that no one has ever formed a true, positive belief about the supernatural that might piggyback from reliable bull belief forming mechanisms, but we do form true moral beliefs from those same trustworthy faculties. By my lights, the naturalist finds himself in a dilemma. If there are no free lunches or piggyback rides, then he has a defeater for all of his moral beliefs. On the other hand, if he thinks he is reasonable in thinking that he reliably forms moral beliefs because that same cognitive mechanism usually forms true ‘bull beliefs’ – a move I personally am skeptical of – then he should apply the same justificatory rules to the billions across time, continent, and culture who have formed beliefs about theism or religion. The naturalist cannot have his cake and eat it too. He cannot insist that moral beliefs safely ride piggyback with decent cognitive equipment, but that religious beliefs do not. He cannot
rightfully hold that the faithful are just anthropomorphizers or infantile wishful thinkers who suffer from chemical imbalances when they claim to have experienced the divine, while naturalists reasonably coast by the Ruse/Wilson position in holding their moral beliefs. So we have several good reasons to doubt that naturalists could salvage their moral beliefs with the piggyback principle.

2. The Trashcan Objection?

To rehash: naturalists who have taken the second horn of the dilemma are supposing that their moral faculties are adaptive by-products. I just argued that the piggyback option should be rejected, but I want to consider what it would be like even in principle to form moral beliefs through faculties that were not designed as such. Rather than examine whether or not the reliability would hold from bull beliefs to moral beliefs, I now want to explore a more phenomenological, concrete approach that naturalists might consider. I will flesh out the proposal by way of analogy. The purpose of a trashcan is to contain garbage that we want to store; that is why we make trashcans; that is why they exist. But suppose we do not have much of a need for a garbage can in a classroom, and we do need something to prop open the door. A small metal trashcan might be able to do just the trick. In fact, it might perform rather well, even though the function of the trashcan is to hold trash, not to prop open doors. Analogously, our faculties may exist because they promote our genetic replication, but we may use them for other purposes. Might it not be the case that we engage in moral thinking via faculties that arose for a purpose that happens to promote evolutionary ends? Perhaps our abstract reasoning skills exist to help us keep track of predators and prey that we have observed entering and exiting caves, but we may use them to engage in activities that do not promote DNA
survival – like NASA’s space program. Then again, maybe employing merely evolved faculties to engage in the moral life would be like using pure jelly to prop open a door. I will argue that if evolution alone produced our faculties, they would function more like jelly, rather than trashcans.

In order to evaluate the trashcan objection, we must consider what is needed to cognize moral facts. Providing an exhaustive account of the phenomenology of moral thinking would be no easy task; however, there are a number of phenomena that I can analyze within the context of evolutionary theory. In this subdivision I will not generate a knockdown argument, but I will lend skeptical weight to the possibility that naturalists might evade the arguments I have presented thus far. I will undermine the prospects of employing moral sentiments, value judgments, abstract reasoning, and intuitions as co-opted traits.

First, I want to consider the status of moral sentiment. If moral sentiment plays a significant role in moral thinking, then how will it fare on the naturalists’ worldview? In terms of the evolutionary psychology considered in the Ruse/Wilson position, I argue that moral sentiment fares horribly; it would take naturalists to anti-realism or nihilism. To see how this phenomenon might be employed as a spandral, we might suppose that our emotions exist to aid in the four F’s, but the moral application is something of which Homo sapiens embarked on their own. For example, we might suppose that fear was meant to promote cautious behavior, but can be borrowed to form a moral judgment.

I argue that this proposal fails for two reasons. First, the sentiment would be directed at objects or states of affairs conducive to the four F’s, not moral truths. Facts that promote the four F’s are distinct from the facts that constitute moral realism. There
is no reason to think that sentiment would correspond to moral truths. Second, as I mentioned in the beginning of my response to the piggyback option, it is much more plausible to think that moral emoting was designed to promote genetic replication. Recall our heartache to the starving children on TV or the reaction of horror that accompanies the witnessing of a grizzly murder. This clearly is not a case of alternative trashcan use. The emotive responses that we have in cases of sexual morality, murder, altruism, moral obligation, bravery, cowardice, stealing, etc are not coincidences or mere by-products.

For a more concrete example, consider a moral judgment an agent might form about prostitution. The agent says to himself, “She sells her body for money. That disgusts me. I thereby judge prostitution morally impermissible.” I am not proposing that we all form moral judgments this way, but I think this explicit case helps us to see the potential implications that moral sentiment might play in our moral judgments. If naturalism is true, then the man’s disgust is not directed at the practice of prostitution because prostitution really is wrong. Instead, it is directed at prostitution because that sort of moral psychology has promoted the four F’s one way or another. Spelling out the details of the origins of the man’s disgust will be a story for evolutionary psychologists to tell. When they tell it, they will leave out the notion of corresponding to the truth of the sorts of beliefs I discussed of section I.

So contra Hume, the popular, lasting opinion that those states of affairs are poor would lend no inductive strength to such beliefs. The men of taste, with their ultra-sensitive limbic systems, do not help either. Emotive responses arise within us not because the corresponding states of affairs are bad, but because those responses lead us to behave in ways that maximize fitness. So bearing in mind the Ruse/Wilson position, we
have reason to reject Hume’s view that we take things to be beautiful because they really are beautiful, wrong because they really are wrong, praiseworthy because they really are praiseworthy (found in Aesthetic 106).

The explanation lies in the fact that evolutionary forces have given us these contingent affects to lead us to hold those opinions for evolutionary ends, not moral ends. Conceptually speaking, using moral sentiment as a spandrel for the real moral facts (if they even exist on this story) makes no sense. We really have no control in directing our sentiments so that they aim at moral facts. The notion of moral motivation (and any sort of ethics of care) also comes back to haunt the naturalist. Those realists who believe that the emotional life is essential for their enterprise would drift dangerously close to what Ruse and Wilson have in mind with their understanding of ethics. Those who care about morality and the welfare of others do so not because they really ought to, but rather, because evolutionary forces draw them into what they take to be the moral life. The bothering of one’s conscience, the feelings of guilt, the yearnings for justice and reciprocity, the sense of obligation – these dispositions could not possibly be spandrels in a legitimate moral enterprise. They are, however, what many would take to be irreducible, essential features of the moral life. But those features exist not because the obligations are real, and they do not exist because we really should feel guilty when we wrong others. Given naturalism, they exist, for the sake of genetic replication.

Once we adopt the naturalistic evolutionary perspective, one cannot avoid the absurdity of the emotional life. The claim that one should be depressed after a divorce would be literally false. When I use ‘should’ in a case like this, I am not referring to an expectation of statistical regularity or averageness. ‘Should’ means ‘supposed to’ in this
sense. But there would be no objective ‘supposed to;’ there would be no truth of the matter. Furthermore, there is no answer to the question “for how long should a divorcée remain depressed?” or “how bad should she feel?” The norms that happen to exist are controlled by limbic systems that have promoted fitness by various degrees of emoting for various intervals of time. Those evolutionary reasons for the severity and length of the divorcée’s depression have nothing to do with the way things really ought to be.

This fact has implications for the way in which we punish agents for immoral behavior. If the emotional life plays a significant role in our assessments, then we would have an unsettling explanation for why we issue murderers life sentences and petty thieves less jail time. In a hypothetical possible world, if our moral sensibilities were reversed, we might give murderers a slap on the wrist and J-walkers a life term. For the most part, we do not choose the severity or duration of our emotional responses. They are determined even if we have a fairly robust form of libertarian freedom. But determined by what? If the answer lies in the conjunction of our genes and environment, then any traces of objectivity disappear. Genes do not encode sentiment towards moral facts; they encode it for the four F’s. So our sentiments will not be reliable in the moral domain.

Next I want to consider what sorts of evolved faculties could be used to form value judgments. If value judgments are derivative of sentiment or some kind of conative state, then we can draw the same conclusions. If this is not the case, then I must confess that I am baffled. What specific faculty or faculties could be used in this fashion? The naturalists will insist that intrinsically valuable objects and states of affairs are constituted by natural facts. But even if I grant this concession, there seems to be no explanation for
how agents distinguish valuable states of affairs from neutral or disvaluable ones. We might expect evolved creatures to form prudential beliefs about that which furthers evolutionary goals. For example, Plantinga’s caveman might form the true belief that shelter will be necessary to survive the winter. However, the meta-value judgment ‘that surviving the winter is good’ seems to extend well beyond the first judgment. If objectively valuable entities were not the same as the evolutionary values (food, shelter, survival), then merely evolved faculties probably would be antithetical to the task of finding the Good. And the conative states would exacerbate the problem; they would warp our judgments.

Kantian ethical thinking seems to me to have the greatest potential for successful piggybacking/trashcanning. Kant thought that morality was something that pure reason gave to rational agents. If we brought Kant up to speed with neo-Darwinism, he might argue that evolutionary forces would furnish us with abstract reasoning skills that proved to be fitness enhancing, and those faculties alone would do the trick. The Categorical Imperative, for example, requires agents to represent to themselves *a priori* what would happen if everyone performed a particular action. If the action were universalizable, then it would be morally permissible. Moral wrongdoing just *is* a species of irrational behavior on Kant’s view. So Kant might argue that moral thinking is not wholly different from beliefs about mathematics, for which evolved creatures might have a knack.

The problem with this appeal is that most of us agree that morality is not entirely constituted by pure reason and the Categorical Imperative. Abstract reasoning will not account for all of the necessary components of moral realism. Our actual moral judgments seem to depend on other faculties. A cold, Kantian description of moral
phenomenology seems off target. If we buy Kant’s claim that agents who violate the Categorical Imperative are irrational, most of us would still think that immoral behavior goes beyond the bounds of pure reason. Lots of behavior is irrational. Building a house with matches; arguing fallaciously; engaging in any of the activities performed on MTV’s “Jackass;” telling a bald-faced lie: Kant would say these are all irrational activities. But the last case is different. We go a step further in our moral thinking. We say of immoral agents that they are evil. Hitler was evil. This predicate transcends what we can deduce a priori from pure reason alone. The neo-Kantians might take solace in their employment of abstract reasoning skills originally meant to aid in survival, but those skills alone will not salvage moral realism if naturalism is true.

Some of Kant’s own views lie outside the bounds of pure reason. For example, he thought personhood should be respected because he thought that self-directing, ends-setting agents with free will were intrinsically valuable. His justification sounds good to me, but he does not arrive at that judgment simply by using his abstract reasoning skills. Something more is needed to recognize the value of personhood. Mind-independent value does not seem to follow logically from the existence of personhood.

If naturalism is true, then I see no reason why evolution could not have produced creatures that were hardwired to disvalue something like autonomy and to treasure behaviors that cause them to act like automata. In fact, I imagine that if worker ants had an emotional life, it would be geared as such. If ants were hardwired with a sense of freedom and autonomy, they might revolt against the queen or try to survive on their own steam! So that sort of behavior would be phased out because it would be too costly, and the libertarian-minded ants would surely perish outside of the colony. Now I realize that
most of our views about the value of autonomy are not so extreme as to compel us to live as hermits outside of society. My point still stands. We may not be hardwired to value autonomy in the sense that our valuings lack fungibility. Perhaps we could be conditioned to value otherwise, but the origins of such thinking probably would be explained in way that a moral Realist would find unacceptable: through genetics or culture. The naturalist needs something more than abstract reasoning skills to judge that Kant was right, and the ants were wrong. And this *something more* would not be explicable as a spandrel.

I now turn to the concept of intuition. In addition to logic, intuition has always been one of the primary tools of the trade in philosophy. I argued that logic by itself would be insufficient for naturalist moral realists hoping to employ faculties that were not designed to cognize moral facts. Knowing that personhood has mind-independent value, it seems to me, requires intuition. But the concept of intuition can be broad and vague. If there is a subtle rustling in the bushes, an evolved creature might develop an intuition that danger lurks nearby, but that *sort* of intuition will not help the naturalist moral realist. The creature’s ‘sense’ of danger would be explained as the result of faint sensory stimulation (i.e. auditory) coupled with fear. If naturalism were true, then piggybacking *that* kind of intuition to make moral judgments would not be acceptable; I just argued that the emotions would not work as spandrels, and adding faint sensory stimulation does not help. A more specialized form of intuition would be necessary.

Interestingly, some of the English philosophers in the analytic tradition signed on to the primacy of intuition. Most notably, G. E. Moore insisted that this was the way we came to know beauty and moral goodness. Surprisingly, Peter Railton, a contemporary
naturalist moral realist balks at this notion. Railton thinks that the notion of moral intuition has been and should be largely abandoned (*Moral 34*). What someone like Moore thought was “moral insight,”’ Railton thinks was just the product of rigid social conventions (*Moral 34*). In light of my arguments, I would say that Railton is doing his fellow naturalists a disservice to moral realism and a viable account of moral epistemology. David Brink, another contemporary naturalist moral realist shares Railton’s opinion. The problem is that Brink, much like Railton, does not provide much of an account of how moral cognition works. Brink is a coherentist, but assessing the coherence of beliefs typically happens *after* the agent has acquired them (108-111). There must be some other way in which agents form the strands of their web of beliefs. If Brink and company have a defeater for *all* of their moral beliefs, then the entire web dissolves, and coherentism will not save the day. More than anything, the notion that evolved faculties endow us with dependable intuitions seems highly suspect on the naturalists’ view.

In an attempt to duck under John Mackie’s argument from queerness, contemporary naturalist moral realists have presented accounts of moral realism in which moral facts are wholly constituted by natural facts. The general strategy they would employ to meet the arguments in this essay would be to naturalize moral facts as much as possible. That way, moral beliefs would be just like ‘bull beliefs.’ The problem is, there really is no payoff in calling the wrongness of murder ‘natural.’ If naturalists insisted that the wrongness of murder just were the aggregate of mundane non-moral facts, then moral judgment formation would be a shot in the dark. Hopping on one foot would be no more distinguishably wrong than what we take to be a heinous crime. Colin McGinn’s
view of mind helps to illustrate this point. McGinn expressly denies physicalism, but he
is a naturalist. He thinks that, as evolved creatures, we did not come to have the
cognitive equipment necessary to understand how meaty brains could produce immaterial
minds. McGinn remains convinced that the mind is a natural entity, but we are denied
cognitive access to the nature of consciousness. The moral of the story is that labeling
moral facts ‘natural’ does not open up the floodgates necessarily. The cognition of the
facts is still a loose end because even a naturalist’s analysis of ‘moral wrongness’ and
what he judges to be wrong are vulnerable to my arguments.

If moral facts had some sort of supernatural glow that we could recognize, or if
we had faculties explicitly designed for recognizing moral facts, then epistemological
accounts would make sense. A propos, Moore thought that all competent English
speakers were capable of noting the distinction between natural facts and moral facts.
His famous open question argument convinced many that ‘goodness’ was a non-natural,
unanalyzable property. By reducing moral properties to natural properties, Moore
thought a fallacy had been committed. Whether or not Moore’s arguments were
convincing, the point is that moral facts are recognizably different from mundane
empirical facts. The cognition of the presence of a tiger is too far removed from the
cognition of the objective disvalue and wrongness of states of affairs. Nihilists have all
of the empirical facts that realists do, yet they conclude that the world is devoid of both
value and disvalue. Even if I grant that moral facts are not queer, moral judgment
formation would still significantly differ from mere perceptual belief formation. I also
should note that the more naturalists deflate morality, the more difficult it is to preserve
moral realism.
The arguments in this subdivision have covered at least two pressing issues. First, it further reduces the plausibility of the piggyback principle. The second issue focused on a more general claim that did not focus on the aspect of cognitive reliability. The objector suggested that we could use faculties meant for the promotion of the four F’s to capture nevertheless ‘what we ought to do.’ I have argued that a phenomenological understanding of moral belief formation vis-à-vis naturalism does not cohere well at all. Moral judgments are not the sorts of things that can be used qua trashcan doorstop. At best, the naturalist’s account remains shrouded in mystery. Moral beliefs are too distant from the more mundane beliefs that I have supposed the naturalist is entitled to; it is not clear at all that moral beliefs are just extensions of empirical beliefs. The is/ought gap, the argument from disagreement, the appeal of Moore’s open question argument, and the Ruse/Wilson position also lend weight to the claim that moral belief formation is not just a reliable extension of tiger/bull belief formation.

3. Street on Evaluative Attitudes

In my attempts to combat naturalists who have embarked on the second horn of the dilemma, I have argued against the plausibility of the view that our faculties might be able to form accurate moral judgments even if they were not meant to do so. In case my arguments against the piggyback objection and trashcan objection have not proven to be convincing enough, I will now turn to Sharon Street, my ace in the hole. Street’s arguments support my thesis in two ways. First, they independently threaten naturalist moral realists no matter what horn of the dilemma they choose. Second, she has responded to some of the objections I have been entertained in section IV. Many of Street’s arguments run parallel to mine, but her views have a different twist that
contributes to the Darwinian attack. So if I failed to convince my reader in the last subsection, I imagine that Street’s version of the problem should do the trick. The brunt of her argument is that Natural Selection must have applied enormous pressure on the shaping of evaluative judgments that evolved creatures possess. She concludes that our judgments have been irrevocably tainted by evolution.

The argument begins by first considering the implications that certain judgments would have on merely evolved creatures. If a creature like a proto-human judged that an action would be harmful to him or any of his kin, and if he decided that the consequences of the action were worth doing, then his lineage would die off quickly (Street 114). Street writes that a creature with such evaluative judgments “would run itself off cliffs, seek out its predators, and assail its offspring” (114). On the other hand, if a creature judged that an action would aid in his survival or help his kin, then that judgment would be superbly fitness enhancing or helpful in maximizing DNA survival (Street 114). The argument continues by considering the number of cross-cultural norms that clearly cohere on the evolutionary theme. They include the greater concern for family members than for strangers, the reciprocation of kindness, the praise and admiration of altruism, and the indignation and desire for punishment for those who inflict harm on us on purpose (Street 115). Street goes on to argue that many if not all of our evaluative attitudes about morality and value tie into this picture. We should expect these norms if morality is a product of natural selection, which lends more weight to my claim that naturalists should be inclined to accept the Ruse/Wilson position from the first horn of the dilemma.

Now we consider a list of hypothetical evaluative judgments that stand in direct opposition to the previous ones listed. Included in this list, for example, would be the
evaluative attitude that we should prioritize strangers over our children (Street 116). Another example would be the judgment that a person who treats us with kindness provides a reason for us to hurt him in response (Street 116). Street concludes that we see no such judgments across time and culture, which provides forceful evidence that evolutionary forces have been shaping our beliefs about value and morality. Street also notes that there are similar corresponding behaviors or attitudes in other species that are close to us on Darwin’s Tree of Life (117). She surely has monkeys and apes in mind.

The upshot of this argument is that we have not been evolving to come to know moral truths that we would otherwise affirm under the Realist enterprise. Instead, evolution has destroyed our ability to know the “independent evaluative truths” by leading us to believe in things that promote the survival of our genes or species (Street 122). Our beliefs would not be corresponding to the truths that supposedly exist. Our moral compass would be way off. Street then dismisses the probability of a secular miracle – namely, that just by coincidence, our judgments are true even though they were shaped by evolution. We would have to suppose that, of all of the logically possible judgments, we *Homo sapiens* just so happen to have ones that correspond to the truths that are not products of evolution (Street 122). Street and I conclude that this secular miracle is untenable (with the caveat of naturalism).

Another objection seeks to show that evolved creatures have a say in the evaluative attitudes that they form, which could preserve accurate judgments. Since we critically engage and reflect on moral matters instead of tacitly adopting prevailing attitudes, one might think that we exert a positive influence over the evolution and development of our moral thinking that has endured from generation to generation (Street
Street replies that the objector is suggesting that we have some pure, untainted tools that enable us to weed out the judgments that we suppose are merely evolutionary products from the judgments that correspond with moral/value facts. She argues that making such evaluations require that we compare and contrast pre-existing values with one another. The final verdict in this reflection period also requires some sort of pure, untainted judgment. In a way, this objection turns out to beg the question to a large extent. In order to make moral progress, we must first have the tools and judgments that lead us in the right direction. Our rational thinking alone, however, never has a legitimate, untainted set of evaluative attitudes to begin with on any part of the evolutionary timeline.

Street handles another objection that tries to harmonize evolutionary theory with moral/value Realism. The objection claims that evolved creatures act with their respective beliefs and evaluative judgments because the beliefs are true. Otherwise known as the “tracking account,” the objector is supposing that the agent has the judgments that he does “because they are true, and it proved advantageous to grasp evaluative truths.” In my Plantingian formulation of the problem of moral knowledge, I argued that the truth-values of moral content would have to be causally efficacious for this move to work. I then provided good reason to think that it would fail.

Street believes that this view is mistaken as well. She thinks it is more reasonable to believe that evolved creatures simply have the beliefs about evaluative truths, not true beliefs. I will not develop her detailed response, but she has three reasons for dismissing the objection. First, she thinks this tracking account lacks parsimony vis-à-vis her Rusean view. Second, she sees no reason to think that the truth of the
evaluative beliefs has any benefits on the evolutionary story (Street 129-130). Third, she claims her view has more explanatory power (Street 129-130). In my discussion of the mother saving her child I codified this claim with Harman’s argument against moral realism along with Ruse. To add force to Street’s take on the argument, I would remind the objector that the evolutionary process is mindless. It does not know or care about moral truths or objective value. So there is no reason to think that natural selection endowed us with a trustworthy moral compass for the purposes of helping creatures to track moral truths. In fact, it would not necessarily endow us with the ability to know any sort of objective truth, which echoes Plantinga’s anti-Naturalism argument.

To reinforce some of the arguments I have made thus far, I will provide some additional intuition pumps from Street. She questions the very idea that we may have an ability to latch onto evaluative truths as a result of evolution. Street thinks the Realist will have an insuperable task explaining how this ability evolved and why it too is not subject to her previous arguments that evolutionary pressures have warped this ability (142). If we suppose that this capacity was not explicitly selected for, yet managed to work for us well, then the secular miracle objection arises again. In addition to this charge, Street argues that such an ability to grasp these sorts of truths would have to be quite “specialized” (143). This faculty would have to be highly attuned to the truths that it would grasp, and it would most certainly be rather complex, intricate, and “sophisticated” (Street 143). In addition to the costs of such a system *qua* byproduct, it is inconceivable that this state of affairs could be true. Street illustrates this point by asserting that this view would be like suggesting the following: The human eye does not serve an evolutionary function; it is a byproduct that Natural Selection did not phase out;
it arose out of some other trait that was fitness enhancing; it works exceptionally well at helping us to see nevertheless (Street 143). Since this proposal is absurd and scientifically untenable, Street argues that we must abandon this outlet. These points should further reduce the plausibility of the piggyback and trashcan objections.

In her final defense of the Darwinian attack, Street addresses one final objection. Our intuitions about the disvalue of pain seem on target, but they are also fair game, according to Street. Street stipulates that in order for a noxious stimulus to count as pain, it must include an evaluative reaction (146-147). Without this evaluative reaction there is only a sensation, which Street stipulates does not count as pain (148). She argues that if there were no such reaction, then no one really would assert that the sensation was bad (Street 148-150). She even suggests that the agent could enjoy a stimulus normally associated with pain if he had a pro-attitude toward it (Street 150). I tend to think that pain is necessarily undesirable and that such a case would not count as pain, but issues of semantics and definitions will take us to far afield. Street concludes that the evaluative attitude toward pain falls under the Darwinian attack that she has formulated. The evaluative attitude toward pain is an attitude that we have because that attitude promoted survival. Hence, not even our judgments about pain are untainted by neo-Darwinism. The same argument works for pleasure or any seemingly self-evident truth about value or morality.

In my opinion, Street’s analysis of the disvalue of pain (and its ilk) is the only part of her argument that fails to convince. I argue that certain kinds of pain are necessarily bad. If an agent encounters a noxious stimulus and has a negative attitude toward it, then that state of affairs could not have failed to be bad. She may be correct that a suitably
positive evaluative attitude or reaction would prevent the pain from being disvaluable, but it hardly follows that an agent writhing in agony is not genuinely suffering. Such a state of affairs transcends mere personal preference. If am mistaken – if Street’s views on pain are correct – then her arguments work well for my position. If I am correct, then not only do I know facts about the badness of pain and the goodness of pleasure, but I also know that those facts obtain categorically in every possible world. As I have argued throughout this essay, such knowledge does not cohere on the naturalists’ picture.

V. Theism as Solution

In this essay I have argued that moral realism would be false if naturalism were true. There would be no objective moral facts, no moral obligations, nothing of mind-independent value. Even if there were such things, we would not know any of them, so we would continue our descent into nihilism. We would not have moral knowledge because our justification would be defeated. Either our moral faculties were selected for or they were not. If they were, then our moral judgments would capture only illusions and chimeras. If they were not, then we still would not form accurate moral judgments reliably. Both the piggyback and trashcan options are too implausible to accept. If we supposed that they were not quite so implausible, our evaluative attitudes would still warp our judgments irrevocably. In short, if naturalism were true, then nihilism would be true. At the very least, one would be justified in believing that conditional.

But before we go Goth, we might accept the one solution to this existential nightmare: God. Theism avoids all of these problems. First, if God exists, then there is, at bottom, moral goodness. Moral goodness is a part of God’s nature; value is a part of
the fundamental ontological furniture of the universe. Second, if God exists, then we would have moral knowledge. God would have been responsible for the intermediary evolutionary forces that created our faculties. It is inconceivable that a perfect being or greatest compossible being would not furnish his children with genuine moral faculties that would produce true beliefs. It is even more inconceivable that such a being would deceive us or enable us to discover through science that morality was an illusion meant to promote genetic replication and nothing more. Our moral beliefs would not be defeated, and for the most part, our evaluative attitudes would be on target. We would react in horror to murder because murder really would be wrong. The death of loved ones really would be tragic, and our mourning them would ‘supposed to be.’ With these sorts of considerations, we see that the problem of Euthyphro has no place in this essay.

While I have implied perfect being theology, I have yet to specify in detail all of the salient features of God. This argument gives us reason to believe in a personal, loving God who is responsible for the existence of the physical universe and places moral demands on us. While divine command theory and religion are viable outlets as sources for normativity, we can know moral truths and obligations through our own, independent thinking as well.

There is an objection or point of contention that a skeptic would be apt to present to this view. There is moral disagreement, and many agents in the history of the world have failed to know moral truths. These facts stand in tension to the claim that our moral faculties aim at the production of true moral beliefs. They may seem rather unreliable, as a matter of fact. This problem should be taken seriously, and I am prepared to meet it; however, I think I will save my response for another essay. Suffice it to say, I believe
that there are ways of reconciling this apparent problem, and I do not think the objection is particularly damning. Moral realists still should be inclined to embrace theism.

My weak claim is as follows: to be rational, a moral realist ought to believe in God. Put another way, morality requires God. My strong thesis can be phrased in a number of ways. Here is one that will suffice:

1. If evolution is true, then we can have moral knowledge iff God exists
2. Evolution is true.
3. We do have moral knowledge
4. Therefore, God exists.

This argument, via modus ponens, is valid. Michael Ruse would reject the third premise and might be inclined to reformulate the argument with the G. E. Moore shift that William Rowe popularized in his evidential argument from evil. It would look like this:

5. If evolution is true, then we can have moral knowledge iff God exists.
6. Evolution is true.
7. We do not have moral knowledge.
8. Therefore, God does not exist.

This argument is also valid. If Ruse espoused it, I would have little to say to him. I suspect the first premise of each argument would be the area of contention for many critics. I would think that, absent moral knowledge, it is hard to imagine that we still could take theistic belief or religion seriously. If my critics are nihilists, then obviously a moral argument for the existence of God will not convince them, and reading this essay was probably a waste of time for them.
Ruse and the nihilists hold perhaps the most forseeably troubling view on my argument. Now that we are aware of the contemporary, nihilistic, scientific account of morality, we can proceed in a positive direction, I think. Were the Nazis wrong? Most of us still would answer this question in the affirmative because most of us take moral realism as a properly basic belief. If we cannot know one way or the other, then Pascal’s wager might prove more convincing in this context. If it turns out that God does exist, then our beliefs about morality and value were probably legitimate. If it turns out that God does not exist, then nihilism is true and having wagered on God technically would not be bad since ‘bad’ would fail to refer to anything in the world. While I will not develop the wager in further detail, it seems clear to me that in this context, it avoids all of the usual objections. But as I stated from the outset, I take moral realism to be a basic, if not properly basic belief. So presumably my reader would accept my third premise (that we have moral knowledge).

Absent value and morality, it is hard to see what legitimate reason one would have for living. The nihilists must be prepared to concede that the Holocaust was not really a bad state of affairs and that the men who carried it out were not immoral. The nihilists are mistaken. Nevertheless, we need legitimate moral faculties to be made for us, for it they are not, then the content of our beliefs are surely chimeras. Interestingly, some Jews lost their faith after Auschwitz. They thought that the world was too absurd, evil, and unjust for God to exist. But perhaps the only thing more absurd than the Holocaust is a world in which the Holocaust is as morally bad as sneezing. If my arguments are cogent, then they might have enormous implications for the problem of evil. It would seem that in order to establish an argument from evil, one would first have
to be justified in believing in objective, factual moral evil. But God would be necessary to secure such justification. As William Lane Craig argued in his debate with Paul Kurtz, if atheism is true, then “humanism is not the default position.” Like Craig, I would think sooner that nihilism was true and that all hope was lost. I have argued that in a world produced by nothing other than natural selection, naturalists can pin their hopes to nothing. Consequently, moral realism provides good reason for belief in God.
Works Cited


