

REALISM AND NATURALISATION IN A PRACTICAL REASON ACCOUNT

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ABSTRACT

The paper contends that moral realism entails the mind-independent truth of some moral judgements; but that the mind-independence of "moral facts" is only partly analogous to the mind-independence of physical facts. It is also argued that characteristic moral facts are those relative to the character and dispositions of persons, which supervene on psychological facts. Along with these evaluative facts there are also deontic facts, concerning the reasons for or against embarking on some course of action; these are based on natural facts concerning human beings and the effects of certain actions on their well-being and dispositions. These facts about human beings are not immediately moral facts, but necessarily assume a moral significance for any rational individual reflecting on them. So, there are objective reasons for action, as contended by moral realism, even though actual obligation presupposes the reflective endorsement of these objective reasons into our subjective system of intentions. Finally, some standard objections are discussed to this moderate realistic account

KEYWORDS

Moral realism, constructivism, objective reasons, evolutionary debunking.

The most common version of moral realism is the naturalistic one, which conceives of moral facts or properties as natural ones, thus warranting their scientific respectability¹. A canonical objection to this realistic account is that it adopts a sort of theoretical attitude, that is, it conceives of morality as a form of knowledge: what we are doing in morals is knowing the "moral part" of the

¹ Paradigmatic statements are in R. N. Boyd, *How to Be a Moral Realist*, in G. Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1988, pp. 181-228; N. Sturgeon, *Moral Explanations*, in G. Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism*, pp. 229-255; D. O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989.

world. According to the objection, this poses decisive difficulties concerning the intrinsically motivating feature of moral propositions. Those who accept a moral framework based on the genuinely practical capacities of reason, on the contrary, tend to accept some version of constructivism, according to which moral facts or properties are produced or constructed through practical reasoning².

Defenders of naturalisation, who pursue a conception of morality based on empirical research in evolutionary biology, developmental psychology, and neuroscience, generally presuppose a non-cognitivist meta-ethics, in some recent and more refined version than classical emotivism, such as projectivism or fictionalism³.

In these pages, I wish to explore the possibility of a theory based on practical reason that takes into account naturalisation but defends a non-naturalistic, moderate and reasonable version of moral realism concerning moral facts, while accepting a constructivist account of moral obligation. Sections 1 to 4 present the basic traits of this account; sections 5 to 7 discuss four objections that can be raised against it.

1.

Moral realism is the view that there are moral facts, which are not constituted by our desires, preferences, approvals or disapprovals, but are independent of any such attitude on our part. In Shafer Landau's words, it is the view according to which moral judgments, "when true, are so independently of what any human being, anywhere, in any circumstance whatever, thinks of them"⁴. Similarly, Enoch defines it as the view that there are irreducibly normative truths and facts, which "are independent of us, our desires and our (or anyone's) will. And our thinking and talking about them amounts not just to an

² See C. Korsgaard, *Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy*, in *Philosophy in America at the Turn of the Century*, The Philosophy Documentation Center, Charlottesville 2003, pp. 99-122; C. Bagnoli, *Il ruolo epistemico delle norme costitutive*, in Ead. (ed.), *Che fare? Nuove prospettive filosofiche sull'azione*, Carocci, Roma 2013, pp. 129-152.

³ On non-cognitivist sentimentalism, see S. Nichols, *Sentimental Rules. On the Natural Foundations of Moral Judgment*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004; on fictionalism, R. Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001. Projectivism is famously defended by J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Penguin Harmondsworth 1977.

⁴ R. Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism. A Defence*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2003, p. 2; cf. Id. *Evolutionary Debunking, Moral Realism and Moral Knowledge*, «Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy», 7, 2012, n. 1, p. 1.

expression of any practical attitude, but to a representation of these normative truths and facts”⁵.

Moral realism is originally a reactive conception, that is, it was born as a reaction to voluntarist views, such as those of Hobbes, Pufendorf and Locke, which conceived of moral properties as the purely artificial (and perhaps arbitrary) product of a will – God’s or a human sovereign’s. As all reactions, it is largely a polemic overstatement that leads to talk of moral rightness and wrongness as if they were real properties in the world, fully similar to the heaviness of physical objects. Such polemical root is evident, for example, in the work of early realists such as Samuel Clarke and Richard Price⁶.

Talk of “realism” in ethics must, however, be understood in an analogical sense. In a way analogous, but not identical, to what happens for physical facts in the world, whose nature does not depend on what we happen to think of them, also for (at least some) moral issues, things are as they are, even though some individuals or communities believe differently. It is the notion of mind-independence that characterises moral realism differentially from other forms of moral objectivism. In fact, one can be an objectivist in ethics by simply believing that there are moral truths, that is, moral conclusions upon which we can reach some agreement, or that necessarily follow from some presuppositions, such as a constructive procedure. This, however, would in no way imply the existence of moral facts, independent of our normative attitudes. Moral realism defends a stronger form of objectivism, that is, the claim that the truth or falsity of some moral propositions is independent from anything that some humans – and perhaps even all humans – happen to think on the matter.

However, what does this mind-independence of moral truths exactly mean? In the account I am willing to defend, it does not mean that moral truths would exist, in heaven or earth, even if there were no human or divine mind to think of them. It does not even mean that the truth of moral propositions depends on some moral ontology that precedes any normative human reflection. Instead, it means that whoever reasons correctly from the available evidence, and is not distracted by self-concern or irrelevant factors, does reach certain conclusions on some issues. Therefore, mind-independence means independence from any particular mental act of approval or disapproval, by single individuals or historically and culturally determined human groups. In other

⁵ D. Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, p. 1.

⁶ S. Clarke, *A Discourse concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation* (1705), in D. D. Raphael (ed.), *British Moralists 1650-1800*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1991, vol. I; R. Price, *A Review of the Principal questions of Morals* (1758), Clarendon Press, Oxford 1974.

words, being moral realists does not imply holding that cruelty and paedophilia would be wrong even if there were no human beings on earth. And this marks a difference between scientific and moral realism, for, if the former is correct, then the earth would be turning around the sun even if everybody considered it still, and even if no human or non-human mind ever existed. On the contrary, if no human being existed, so far as we can tell, no moral facts would exist as well⁷; but moral facts do exist, since humans exist and are endowed with practical reason.

2.

The general account of moral realism that I want to propose is this: it is a *fact* that an individual's desiring another one's suffering, or having racist or paedophilic attitudes, embodies the moral property of depravity, and it is this fact which makes the moral proposition, according to which that individual is depraved, true. It is not, in other words, the attitude that would be taken by an individual in epistemically favourable conditions, or who followed certain procedural rules, that makes the proposition true. On the contrary, the truth of that proposition *requires* an individual who takes an appropriate viewpoint – and thus, has all the available evidence and is not in any way hindered from grasping the morally relevant elements of the situation – to adopt such a judgment. Of course, this adoption is in no way irrelevant: it is only through moral judgment, *i.e.*, through the adoption of morally relevant considerations by the agent, that such considerations are supplied with the authority of reason, and can give rise to moral motivation. And it is only the agent's acknowledgement of such reasons through moral judgment that generates an obligation to perform any action.

This account differs from constructivism, that is, from the view according to which moral facts are constructions from the available evidence. For constructivists, in fact, there are no moral facts prior to the procedures that, as free and rational agents, we adopt to reach intersubjectively-agreed decisions. On this account, “*certain facts count as moral facts because some principles, resulting from an adequately defined construction procedure, make them such*”, so that “*what constitutes a moral fact is the result of some function of our way of reasoning*”⁸. In other words, the constructivist approach has it that we read the

⁷ Shafer-Landau also agrees on this point (*Moral Realism*, p. 15).

⁸ M. Bocchiola, *Il costruttivismo morale e il problema dell'oggettività*, in C. Bagnoli (ed.), *Che fare?*, pp. 153-169, at 153 and 156. There are, of course, many versions of constructivism (as well as of realism); see the useful discussion in C. Bagnoli, *Constructivism in Metaethics*,

non-moral facts in a certain way, in the light of a construction procedure – *e.g.*, that only principles that everyone could prefer or adopt are in fact acceptable – and, in this way, we load them with a moral value that they otherwise would not have. On the contrary, the realist approach suggests that certain facts are morally relevant independently of any attitude on our part. It is not the fact that we consider them, or that we consider them under some specific perspective, which makes them relevant; it is their being relevant that makes them worthy of being considered. What facts are we talking about? I propose to distinguish two morally relevant kinds of facts, corresponding to two fundamental kinds of moral propositions: facts relative to evaluative properties and facts relative to deontic properties.

Evaluative properties are those relative to the character and dispositions of people. To say, for example, that John is a racist, or a paedophile, is to say that he shows certain character traits and psychological dispositions that realise the property of wickedness or cruelty. We can say that this moral property supervenes on certain natural properties, that is, that to hate people with the skin of a specific colour (or of any colour different from ours) is a psychological disposition that *per se* realises the moral property of wickedness; and the same holds for the disposition to harm these people, or rejoice in seeing them suffer. Supervenience implies that such psychological disposition cannot fail without the moral properties failing correspondingly⁹. Of course, the existence of such properties is not mind-independent *simpliciter*, for they would not exist were they not realised in the racist's mind: however, it is independent of the mind of any observer, who can identify them in the racist's character and actions. So, when Peter sees John doing certain acts, and declares that "John is cruel and depraved", this proposition is made true by its appropriately tracking a real feature of John's psychology. Evaluative propositions in third person, and particularly those using "thick" concepts, provide the clearest example of descriptive moral propositions: these are sufficiently analogous to scientific propositions¹⁰. To attribute to an individual a moral characteristic of this kind is to state a fact about him: this description is objective, but necessarily uses evalua-

«Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy» (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/constructivism-metaethics/#ConCon>).

⁹ As noted by Shafer-Landau, this moral ontology is quite respectable from a scientific point of view and does not differ from property-dualistic accounts that have been proposed in the philosophy of mind. Moreover, the difference between non-naturalistic and non-reductive naturalistic accounts is almost trifling (*Moral Realism*, pp. 65-78).

¹⁰ Analogous does not mean identical: for example, whether the properties mentioned in these propositions have original (*i.e.* not inherited) causal powers is a matter of discussion. See Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, pp. 98-114.

tive terms. One can deny that this is a moral fact only by accepting a very narrow conception of “fact”, one conceiving facts only as sensory impressions¹¹; but even scientific facts cannot be considered as mere perceptions, since they involve the application of concepts. However, sentences containing evaluative moral properties are not purely descriptive propositions: rather, they inseparably intertwine description and evaluation, since the moral facts that they report require the adoption of the normative perspective to be properly characterised. These propositions apply to agents and their characters, as revealed by their actions, attitudes and dispositions; they are the kind of moral propositions that are taken as basic by virtue ethicists, and are for the most part uttered in a third-person perspective.

3.

The second kind of moral facts, and of moral propositions, are those relative to normative or deontic properties. These facts are those deserving consideration when we take the first-person perspective, that is, when we have to decide what is the right thing to do: in the previous example, when we take John’s, not Peter’s viewpoint. They are facts providing us with reasons to perform or not to perform certain acts, or to adopt or not to adopt certain principles. Particularly relevant, in this perspective, are those natural facts about human beings that explain and constitute their being moral agents, or beings endowed with moral status. These natural characteristics of human beings account for their rich and profound experience of life and in themselves provide normative reasons for acting. Irreducibly normative truths are those establishing that some natural fact about human beings counts in favour of doing or refraining from some kind of action¹². Central, among these facts are those that, according to evolutionary, psychological and neuro-scientific accounts, are at the basis of the evolution and development of morality. These include the fact that we are social beings; that we are sentient beings with a capacity for physical and psychological suffering; that we possess a syntactically complex language that makes our sufferings communicable; that we have superior cognitive powers that make our sufferings deeper than those of other animals, on account of our capacity to extend ourselves in time, both in the past and in the future; that we are able to reflect on our past and future actions, and therefore

¹¹ For a critique of this conception, see H. Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2002.

¹² T. Scanlon, *Being Realistic About Reasons*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, pp. 30-33.

to make projects and have short- and long-term intentions to act. All these, and many other, facts do not depend on us, on our choices, commitments and ways of thinking: our being reflective and normative animals, and therefore our having moral agency does not depend on our attitudes, desires or preferences, but is a central element that guarantees the individual and collective survival of the members of our species, as well as a central element in all ideals of human flourishing that different cultures have generated in different times.

The listed characteristics contribute to make human beings members of the moral community. They are real properties, inherent in human beings and endowing them with moral status. To take these facts in consideration is not, therefore, optional, or dependent on our attitudes, desires or preferences; whoever shares these capacities, and therefore can ask him/herself what it is right to do on a certain occasion, ought to take these elements into consideration, that is, to treat these characteristics as reasons for acting. Of course, it is also possible to take them into consideration in a negative sense, that is, to consider them only in order to violate them: accordingly, a sadist will consider the capacity to suffer, and the depth of human suffering, as a reason to cause pain. However, the more we find out on the fundamental mechanisms of our moral capacity, the more we realise that some central facts explaining it give rise to reasons for action that are not optional, but ought to be taken into account by anyone asking herself what to do. We can thus say that reasons for action are inscribed in the situation, that is, that any rational agent endowed with normative powers cannot but acknowledge that certain considerations by themselves guide behaviour and require some kind of action.

Biology provides us with ever more detailed evidence on these facts. Since Darwin's work, evolutionary theory has underlined that the moral capacity emerges from human natural sociality (something which is not univocally proper to human beings), coupled with certain high-order cognitive capacities, such as memory and language, and a special reflexive capacity that allows for the internalisation of others' voice: these are the roots of conscience, that is, of the sense of a debt to the social group in which we are members, and particularly to those with whom we maintain close relationships¹³. Moreover, recent research attributes a central role, in the emergence of the moral faculty, to empathy, that is, to the capacity to make others' passion resonate in us: this is, firstly, a sort of emotive contagion – a capacity that is shared by many non-human animals – but then also a more reflexive capacity to imagine the oth-

¹³ The basic scientific hypotheses concerning the moral faculty are discussed in R. Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2006 e P. Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2011.

ers' condition, maintaining the distinction between oneself and the other, and therefore feeling the other's pain as the other's, in a spirit of authentic compassion¹⁴. Empathy is a central element that helps fixing the distinction between oneself and the other, and to give rise to a sense of indebtedness towards others, and of a moral agency that is required on our part.

These natural facts, to which today's naturalised accounts connect moral experience, are not, as such, moral facts. For example, being empathic is not, by itself, a moral fact, and not all kinds of altruistic behaviour constitute moral facts. However, these natural facts predispose human beings to moral behaviour: they constitute enabling – perhaps phylogenetically necessary – conditions for the emergence of moral behaviour. Beyond the pro-social acts that we share with other animals, the reflexive structure of human consciousness drives towards such questions as 'What should I do?', 'What is the best course of action to undertake in my present situation?'. This is equivalent to asking: what reasons do I have to act? The normative properties, such as right, wrong or duty, clearly are not "out there" in the world, but emerge from reflectively considering the circumstances and the morally relevant properties observable in them, that is, from taking into account the objective reasons for action. Adopting a realistic account of deontic properties thus means that the reasons I have for doing x or y in circumstances c , are objectively detectable in the situation: there is some (usually natural) fact p or q that counts in favour of doing x or y , for an agent A , in circumstances c ¹⁵. It means that the characteristics that are morally relevant, in situations where individuals bearing moral status are involved, do not depend on the perspective or the procedure that we decide to adopt, but are part of a complete appropriate description of the situation. Such characteristics constrain the decisions we can take, by providing us with reasons independent of our desires and attitudes.

Although part of the reasons we have depends on facts that are independent of any attitude of ours – facts that are part of the human condition, as it was shaped by evolutionary history – the actual normativity of these facts, that is, the fact that they give rise to moral obligations, is constituted by our reflectively adopting principles that embody them. It is the reflective endorsement of some principle, in the light of an adequate weighing of all the reasons objectively present, as an appropriate principle for ruling our mutual expectations, which confers rational authority upon it: its being right or wrong, dutiful or prohibited, is not, therefore, a natural property of some action x , but a property naturally constructed from the objective reasons that we have, when we

¹⁴ See, for example, E. Lecaldano, *Simpatia*, Cortina, Milan 2013, pp. 96-126.

¹⁵ T. Scanlon, *Being Realistic About Reasons*, p. 31.

adopt the perspective of practical reason. The authority of practical reason is not disconnected from the emotions and sentiments that point out reasons for acting and refraining from action—for example, those emotions through which we empathically feel others' sufferings: practical reason builds on these emotive inputs, acknowledging them and either endorsing or rejecting them as possible principles of behaviour.

4.

The account just sketched for deontic properties can also be conceived of as intermediate between realism and constructivism, and cannot be properly identified with either. It is not realistic, if a realistic account implies that the rightness or wrongness of actions is a property somehow existent in them before any reflection. What I suggested is that there are objective reasons for action that ought to be considered by anyone who takes the normative perspective: these reasons basically stem from natural characteristics, which are independent on our attitudes and desires and which qualify the involved subjects as individuals endowed with moral status. Mind-independence, therefore, does not mean that moral properties would exist even if no human being existed, but that moral properties necessarily exist whenever human beings (and possibly also some non-human animals endowed with moral status) exist and are what they are: whoever has the capacity to adopt the normative perspective must take them into account and therefore cannot but accept certain normative conclusions. This account clearly differs from constructivism in rejecting the view according to which there are no moral facts, properties or reasons before the procedure that constructs them as such; for example, the procedure of maxim universalisation, or of adopting a conception of persons as free and equal citizens in a fair democratic polity. However, we might say that it accepts one element of the constructivist account, namely, the link between obligation and reflective endorsement: in short, reasons for action exist independently of our adopting them, but it is only through our acknowledging them and reflectively endorsing them that they become obligatory for us.

Moreover, it is clear that many moral facts are also the object of a social construction, because morality is for a large part a cultural institution, and, as such, is tied to historical facts and causes. This, of course, accounts for the partial truth of relativism. However, also in the context of socially constructed moral facts, natural facts relative to human beings do guide the construction and necessarily assume some moral relevance for anyone who adopts the normative perspective. Let us take a classic example, *i.e.* the institution of promis-

ing. Hume thought that promises are an artificial construction and that the disposition to keep them is an artificial virtue, whereas Clarke and Price maintained that the rightness of keeping promises is a real property just as much as any other natural property. According to the account I have sketched, both parties were partly right. On the one hand, promising is clearly a socially constructed human institution, one that simply did not exist before the evolution of human society; on the other hand, it is clear – as remarked by Hume himself – that it is quite natural, for human beings, to invent the institution of promising. In fact, there are natural human conditions – such as individual vulnerability, the necessity and utility of cooperation, the need of sociality and of strengthening group ties – that make it rational for them to do so. Of course, we can imagine a human society in which there are no promises, nor any similar, perhaps a bit rougher, social institution: however, it is difficult to do so, and there is no doubt that the lack of the opportunities offered by promising would make it much more difficult to fulfil many basic human needs. This is a clear example of the adaptive value of morality, and of how morality is, on one side, a cultural construction, which is affected by many historical factors that are not reducible to evolutionary pressures, and, on the other side, is constructed from natural elements, that is, from fundamental aspects of the human condition and of the conditions of human flourishing. The obligation to keep promises, therefore, is a socially constructed moral fact: however, it springs from an institution that is naturally created by human being in any society, starting from fundamental elements of the human condition. These elements are not chosen in the light of our desires or cultural attitudes, but are necessarily a part of any moral system, since they are central for human flourishing.

One last clarification may be offered, as far as the difference between the account here defended and so called internal realism is concerned. In a sense, what has been said so far is compatible with the views of people such as McDowell, Putnam and others, according to which moral properties are accessible only from a peculiar perspective, that is, from the normative perspective. The difference lies in the relevance here attributed to the naturalisation, that is, to the fact that the normative perspective is elicited and constrained by the evolutionary conditions that brought us to have the moral concepts that we in fact have. This means that it is not the specific kind of socialisation within some cultural context – that is, the sharing of a certain form of life and of some specific sensibility – that provides us with the perspective from which

moral facts can be grasped¹⁶. Rather, it is the simple fact of being rational individuals that evolution has endowed with normative powers that make them sensible to certain considerations for or against certain kinds of action. In any case, I believe that the difference between internal realism and slightly more robust kinds of moral realism is largely a verbal matter.

5.

The view sketched in the previous paragraphs defends moral realism taking into account recent empirical research on the moral faculty. As other forms of moral realism, it is subject to various standard objections: in the present paragraph I will deal briefly with two traditional objections, in the next two paragraphs (§ 6 and 7) I will discuss a bit more extensively two more recent ones.

The first objection is the one that accuses realist views such as the one here defended of the mistake of conferring moral value to the biological facts of human evolution. This objection can be fairly dismissed by noting that it fails to distinguish the direct identification of natural facts with moral facts and the view that natural facts count as reasons for certain moral judgements and actions; according to the latter view, moral facts spring from considering the natural facts in the light of the normative perspective. No naturalistic fallacy is here implied, nor any unexplained passage from is to ought: it is because we look for human flourishing that we have to take into account certain constraints, which are tied to the natural conditions that are accounted for by evolutionary biology. But to take them into account is to consider them from the deliberative perspective of practical reason. Differently from constructivist accounts, at the basis of normatively relevant reasons there are no abstract constructive procedures, but the survey of the natural conditions of our being normative animals: and these conditions do not depend on our desires and preferences.

According to another traditional objection, sociobiological explanations show that everything can be reduced to our selfish genes, through mechanisms such as kin selection, reciprocal altruism, and the like. Therefore, to ground moral principles on the evolutionary characteristics leading to the moral facul-

¹⁶ This is the view defended by J. McDowell, *Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following*, in S. Holtzman, C. Leich (eds.), *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1981, pp. 141-162; Id., *Values and Secondary Qualities*, in *Mind, Value and Reality*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1998, pp. 131-150.

ty is to accept that altruism is but a pretence¹⁷. This interpretation is by no means inevitable. Many commentators now maintain that psychological altruism does exist, and that it has excellent evolutionary reasons: in fact, the best way for evolution to create a mechanism allowing for the individuals' survival and the reproduction of the group is not to give rise to the mere appearance of altruism, disguising creepy selfishness, but to allow for cultural evolution to progressively generate real psychological altruism. The fact that the first spring of moral sense can be located in our "selfish" genes is irrelevant, as long as it is accepted that the final "product" of evolution is an animal who displays not only a deeply-rooted self-concern, but also authentic altruism. To say that morality has its roots in selfish genes is thus not equivalent to saying that any form of altruism is but the hypocritical masking of egoism and the will to power; the most plausible hypothesis is rather that creating a genuine moral capacity was the optimistic choice, from an evolutionary viewpoint, in order to grant human adaptation and flourishing.

6.

One more recent objection is the one that takes the psychological and neuroscientific evidence on the role of emotions in moral judgment as an argument in favour of expressivist or subjectivist views of ethics. One relevant proposal is the so called "emotionist" hypothesis, according to which moral beliefs depend decisively on emotions, and moral facts are constituted by emotions¹⁸. This hypothesis accepts a response-dependent kind of realism, that is, it does not deny the existence of moral properties, but identifies them with our emotive reactions and therefore does not allow for any kind of moral objectivity. Actually, it explicitly endorses a subjectivist view, that makes moral properties dependent on the emotions that we happen to have; these, in turn, are strongly influenced by historical and cultural factors.

On this, we can observe that acknowledging the role of emotive reactions in accessing and evaluating the reasons that count in favour of some judgement or action is not equivalent to accepting that morality can be reduced to our emotions. Empathic concern, moral emotions and sentiments are certainly at

¹⁷ On sociobiology, see M. Ruse, *Taking Darwin Seriously: A Naturalistic Approach to Philosophy*, Blackwell, Oxford 1986; Id., *Evolution and Ethics: the Sociobiological Approach*, in L.P. Pojman (ed.), *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, Wadsworth, Belmont 1994.

¹⁸ See J.J. Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, pp. 13-24.

the origin of our moral faculty, by contributing to the creation of a conception of the self as embedded in a web of relationships with others, and as a possible recipient of a moral appeal. Emotions and empathic concern are also at the heart of the formation of conscience, as the capacity to account for one's own action, before oneself and before others. However, when I say that I ought to do x , I am not saying that I am presently feeling some emotion relative to x ; what I am actually saying is that, in the light of the reasons that I have, and that are largely shaped by a wide range of emotions and sentiments, x is the best thing for me to do, or is the thing that conscience, as the faculty of ultimate practical judgement, requires me to do. In fact, moral judgements can be formulated also in conditions of scarce or null emotional activation, and sometimes they can even clash with our emotional dispositions. This is because our moral judgments do not depend merely on some kind of affective mechanism, but also on a normative theory that durably associates human behaviour with moral approval and disapproval¹⁹. The affective mechanisms are not sufficient to explain moral judgment, and reflective moral judgment can also dispense with on-line emotive activations. Contrary to what is speculated by emotionism, normative concepts are not in themselves emotive facts, even though they may originally spring from emotive experiences: they have to do with the practical capacity of reason to establish which consideration, stemming from emotion, sentiment or reason, deserves the highest normative authority in the circumstances.

Moral concepts refer to the choice of the best reasons on which to act: this does not exclude the relevance of emotions and sentiments in suggesting the considerations to review. Reason is in fact instructed by sentiments, even though it is not the mere slave of the passions. Reason constantly corrects our sentiments and sympathies in the light of more abstract criteria of equality and impartiality, and also of more theoretical considerations relative to moral rights, special relationships and previous events. Reason and sentiments cooperate in constructing our practical identity: in the light of contemporary scientific research on morality, we can also say that the empathic capacity is standardly at the basis of conscience and of the moral faculty. Moreover, it is not a sort of Wittgenstein's ladder, that one may throw away at a certain point: while it is true, as already noted, that a healthy human adult in normal conditions can make moral judgements in a non-emotive, purely rational fashion, it is also

¹⁹ See S. Nichols, *Sentimental Rules*, pp. 3-29). I discussed the limits of a purely sentimentalistic explanation of this normative theory in *The Neosentimentalist Argument Against Moral Rationalism: Some Critical Observations*, «Phenomenology and Mind», n. 3, 2012, pp. 163-175.

true that, in general, human reason must constantly be fuelled by moral emotions and sentiments in order to retain its decisional and motivational power²⁰.

7.

The objection presently more fashionable to moral realism is the one based on the “evolutionary debunking” of morality. According to this view, evolutionary biology explains our moral beliefs referring them to non-moral adaptive pressures going back to millions of years ago. There is no moral “interest” lying behind these pressures, nor any tracking of a supposed moral truth, for these pressures were guided by our selfish genes, competing for survival and reproduction, and by the goal of enhancing the chances of survival and the reproductive fitness of our ancestors. Whatever the supposed “moral truth” might have been, we would have developed certain moral beliefs, because the belief-formation process was guided by those adaptive pressures. Therefore, the best explanation of why we have the moral beliefs that we have, does not make any reference to their tracking the supposed moral truth. This does not amount to a demonstration that our moral beliefs are certainly false, but, failing other considerations, is sufficient to give us excellent reasons to put those beliefs in the list of the dubious things: it would be a very implausible coincidence, indeed, if they should “casually” turn out to be true. Therefore, we should not accept the perspective of being “epistemic slaves to the baby-bearing capacity of our ancestors”²¹. Richard Joyce illustrates the argument with a nice analogy. It is just as if we had taken a pill that makes us believe that Napoleon lost at Waterloo, irrespectively of any evidence on how things really went; coming to know that it is the pill that makes us believe like we do, should make us lose our faith in that belief. We had better to get the antidote, and

²⁰ On this point, see Nichols, *Sentimental Rules*, pp. 27-29. The experience of moral emotions, sentiments and the capacity for empathy are the standard way in which the moral faculty is acquired and retained. However, it seems that they are not necessary conditions of moral judgement, since some autistic individuals manage to make authentic moral judgements in a purely rational manner; see J. Kennett, *Autism, Empathy and Moral Agency*, «The Philosophical Quarterly», 52, 2002, pp. 340-357.

²¹ Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, p. 219. Similar arguments in M. Ruse, E. O. Wilson, *Moral Philosophy As Applied Science*, «Philosophy», 61, 1986, pp. 173-192; S. Street, *A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value*, *Philosophical Studies* 127, 2006, pp. 109-166; P. Kitcher, *Biology and Ethics*, in D. Copp (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, pp. 163-185; J. Greene, *Beyond Point-and-Shoot Morality: Why Cognitive (Neuro)Science Matters for Ethics*, «Ethics» 124, 2014, pp. 694-726. According to S. Nichols, the best debunking argument is based on the impropriety of the psychological process of belief-formation (*Process Debunking and Ethics*, «Ethics» 124, 2014, pp. 727-794).

start searching all the relevant evidence to believe one way or the other concerning the outcome of the battle²². This argument may sound as a sort of Nietzschean deconstruction of all morality, not only of moral realism; however, Joyce also notes that, as long as we continue to believe in them, our moral beliefs are in fact highly useful; so, we can end up by continuing to accept them, even when we know that they are false (moral fictionalism)²³. Other thinkers, however, believe that the argument requires that we abandon our present moral beliefs and pursue the rational justification of new moral criteria, independent of our flawed moral intuitions²⁴.

Joyce's analogy – as well as the considerations put forward by Street against what she calls the *tracking account*²⁵ – takes too literally the idea of mind-independence that is associated to realism, not considering the analogical character of the notion, when used in the moral field. There are, in fact, entirely objective and mind-independent facts concerning how things went in Waterloo; but the same does not hold for moral facts and beliefs. As already mentioned a couple of times, there is no such thing as a moral truth existing before any experience of the human condition: it is only this experience, shaped by various natural and social forces, that allows to establish moral truths. In other words, it is only because we learn that certain things promote, and certain other destroy, human happiness, human sociality, and the perfection of human faculties, that objective moral truths do exist; for moral truths are truths regarding human happiness, sociality, and the perfection of human faculties. Joyce and Street wrongly assume that, according to the realistic account, moral truths were objectively written somewhere in the world before the human evolution and that we developed our moral faculty in order to track them. As I said, this is not so. Therefore, it is partly true that these truths exist because evolution made us so; and this means that the truth of certain moral propositions depends on the facts of evolution in a way that cannot be said of Napoleon's defeat in Waterloo, which does not depend in any way on our pills. On the other hand, as noted also by Shafer-Landau, the argument from evolutionary debunking is far from conclusively proving that our moral faculties are *in toto* the result of non-moral evolutionary forces and are, therefore, utterly unreliable. It can be fairly suggested that also our mathematical capacities have partly

²² Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, pp. 179-181.

²³ Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*.

²⁴ See, for example, P. Singer, *Ethics and Intuitions*, «The Journal of Ethics», 9, 2005, pp. 331-352; J. Greene, *The Secret Joke of Kant's Soul*, in W. Sinnott-Armstrong (ed.), *Moral Psychology, Vol. 3: The Neuroscience of Morality: Emotion, Disease, and Development*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2007, pp. 35-79.

²⁵ Street, *A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value*, pp. 125-127.

evolutionary reasons, but this does not seem to cast any doubt on their reliability in accessing mathematical truths. In any case, the argument would prove too much: if all human faculties of which evolutionary reasons can be given are therefore unreliable, then the philosophical faculties that the critics use to formulate their argument are highly suspect as well²⁶. In other words, the argument fails to consider that the critical capacities enabled by the normative perspective emerges on the evaluative tendencies which are more directly subject to evolutionary pressures, and allows for a reflective evaluation of them: as noted by Street, “the capacity for full-fledged evaluative judgement was a relatively late evolutionary add-on, superimposed on top of much more basic behavioral and motivational tendencies”²⁷. This capacity allows us, on the one hand, to acknowledge that certain dispositions, caused by evolutionary pressures, are in themselves good, because they promote human happiness and perfection; on the other hand, to correct some other natural disposition in the light of more complex and refined moral ideals that we derive from our cultural development. We can thus maintain that certain evolutionary pressures have brought us to adopt certain adaptive responses, and that the dispositions so developed have had as an indirect effect the development of moral beliefs that approach truth; the rational capacity to continually correct these beliefs helps us to further approach the moral facts²⁸. Lastly, if we accept that not all beliefs are the result of selective pressures, and we also accept that there are good reasons for saying that the belief that the survival of *homo sapiens* and of his moral agency are in themselves good is reliable, then we can use this belief as a basis for the evaluation of other moral beliefs, which we consider dictated by their adaptivity²⁹.

Peter Singer is fully right, of course, when he writes that evolution has no moral goal, and that we should not limit ourselves to believe in what evolution led us to think true³⁰. However, it is one thing to say that we possess a reflective faculty through which we can call into question also our deeply-rooted moral intuitions, it is quite another one to say that we can abandon any moral intui-

²⁶ Shafer-Landau, *Evolutionary Debunking, Moral Realism and Moral Knowledge*, pp. 24-25.

²⁷ Street, *A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value*, p. 118. By “basic evaluative tendency”, Street means “an unreflective, non-linguistic, motivational tendency to experience something as ‘called for’ or ‘demanded’ in itself, or to experience one thing as ‘calling for’ or ‘counting in favor of’ something else” (p. 119).

²⁸ According to D. Copp, we can say that, through this process, the Darwinian forces so affected our psychology that our moral beliefs tend to “quasi-track” the moral facts (*Darwinian Skepticism About Moral Realism*, «Philosophical Issues», 18, 2008, pp. 186-206).

²⁹ For more, partly different, arguments against the evolutionary debunking argument, see the paper by G. Pellegrino in this issue.

³⁰ P. Singer, *Ethics and Intuitions*, pp. 342-343 and 348-349.

tion, and devise a purely theoretical moral framework, based on merely formal principles. We can always correct and modify our moral intuitions in the light of further experience, but we will always have to start from that large storage of human experience that are our intuitions. Our best choice is not to take the antidote and restart from scratch, for we would have nothing on which to build; we should work on the intuitions that we have and exert on them our critical capacities.

In conclusion, a conception of moral realism a) based on a non-Kantian conception of practical reason, b) adopting a non-reductionist view of moral properties and c) taking into account the naturalising explanations offered by evolutionary biology, psychology and neuroscience is a highly plausible thesis on the nature of morality, different from either constructivist or Platonist approaches and not vulnerable to traditional anti-naturalistic and sociobiological objections, nor to more recent sentimentalistic and evolutionary ones.