

Analysis of Evolutionary Debunking Arguments by Greene and Singer

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ABSTRACT: Both Greene and Singer essentially are advocates of the same idea, the idea that discards deontology using evolutionary debunking arguments. Their argumentation, however, differs. Greene decides to use scientific data and data from psychological experiments and interprets it using explanations that reinforce his hypothesis. Singer, on the other hand, chooses to talk more in principle as to why his hypothesis is a more reasonable one, and only uses scientific evidence at a handful of occasions. I have reconstructed both approaches one by one and then presented an evaluative comparison in the end. Moreover, Joyce and Street put forth the concept of Global Debunking Argument to establish moral skepticism and evaluative nihilism respectively. Kahane however uses the same concept and embeds it in a series of arguments and uses it to argue the incorrectness of EDAs.

KEYWORDS: Kahane's Skepticism, Greene and Singer v Kahane.

1. JOSHUA GREENE'S APPROACH

1.3. Defining Deontology and Consequentialism: Greene, for the purposes this paper, supposes an alternate definition of deontology and consequentialism, as opposed to their generally accepted definition. He defines consequentialist and deontological judgements as judgements in favor of characteristically consequentialist and deontological conclusions respectively. This definition facilitates his further argumentation that explores what makes a judgement characteristically consequentialist or deontological, an argument that was difficult to drive home with the generally accepted notions of these terms.

To be fair to his approach, Greene also provides a justification of why he has a liberty to assume these new definitions as opposed to the classically accepted ones. He uses the example of the 'Holy Dictionary' to explain how certain definitions, despite being correct, might not take into account the bigger picture behind any idea. Thus, a more generic definition, especially if it agrees with empirical data, can be made; as long as it taps into the essence of the idea we are trying to define.

1.2 Scientific Evidence:

a. Evidence from Neuroimaging: Greene uses data obtained from neuroimaging of subjects presented with moral dilemmas (trolley problem, baby dilemma, etc.) to verify predictions of his hypothesis. Following observations were made:

- i) People responded with characteristically deontological judgements in cases that involved "up close and personal" violence to reach the characteristically consequentialist judgements.
- ii) People took some time to respond, in order to override their emotional triggers, in cases where they reached characteristically consequentialist judgements.
- iii) People who responded with characteristically consequentialist answers showed more activity in regions of brain associated with 'cognition'.
- iv) People who responded with characteristically deontological answers showed more activity in regions of brain associated with 'emotion'.

These observations seek to verify the notion that we have a negative emotional response to certain actions by virtue to our evolutionary history. We condemn such actions, even if doing them produces better consequences. We might be willing to make a compromise to produce those better consequences if the negative emotional response is of lesser degree.

b. Emotion and the Sense of Moral Obligation: Greene introduces the idea of how moral duty is something that is governed by emotions, not rationality. As an example, he argues how most people feel a moral obligation to save a drowning child but not many people feel it is their duty to save the starving kids of the world. This argument is supposed to point out the inconsistency in deontological way of thinking, how the obligation to help is extended only to a select few, by virtue of our evolutionary history.

c. Emotion and the Pull of Identifiable Victims: Greene says that people feel a greater emotional pull of moral obligation whenever the victim is an identifiable, determinate individual. He gives the example of the drowning kid, Baby Jessica and many psychological experiments conducted to support his argument. The idea behind this argument is saying that if deontology as a school of thought withholds moral privileges from victims unless they are identifiable individuals, then there is something wrong with that ideology.

d. Anger and Deontological Approaches to Punishment: Greene, using the data from various psychological experiments, argues that the deontological notion of what crimes should be punished (and to what extent), is governed strictly by the extent to which the crime outrages or angers people. Since moral outrage is neither a coherent nor a consistent yardstick of judgement to apply (and is a function of our evolutionary history in most cases), deontological inclinations provide unfair grounds for basing punishments to moral violations.

e. Emotion and Moral Condemnation of Harmless Actions: Greene introduces the idea of how many characteristically deontological judgements condemn actions that produce no harms at all (like incest, etc.). Not only does this point out the futility of deontology in certain cases, Greene also uses this point to introduce a more important concept, that of “moral confabulation”. He says not only we are driven by emotions in condemning harmless actions, but we also go to the extent of justifying it with made up moral reasons. Again, he states examples from various psychological experiments to support his claim.

1.3. Normative Implications

f. Rationalism, Rationalization and Deontological Judgement: Greene completes his argument by drawing all the necessary logical links in this section. He has proved that all characteristically deontological judgements coincide with a negative emotional response in most cases. He has also proved that people have a tendency to explain their emotional inclinations, which are not based on any rational reasoning at all, by coming up with made up explanations for them. He couples these two observations and argues that the entire deontological philosophy could just be a rationalization of our natural human instincts, which we derived from our evolutionary history.

Greene finishes off his argument by discussing how morals developed by virtue of human evolution are ‘blunt biological instruments’ and do not provide a fair means of basing our moral judgements.

2. PETER SINGER’S APPROACH

Evolutionary Theory and Origins of Morality: He talks about evolutionary ideas like reciprocal behavior, etc. which could act as providing the basis and justification behind our present moral intuitions.

How Humans Make Moral Judgements: Singer argues, using some evidence from psychological studies, that most humans make judgments based on reason derived to suit their emotions. His claims and argumentation is very similar to Greene’s.

Normative Implications: This section is aimed at undermining the importance given of natural instincts in defining cases of moral violations throughout the philosophy. He criticizes the widely accepted notion of ‘Reflective Equilibrium’ and it presupposes the correctness of our moral instincts. He argues for a broader definition of the term, wherein all the data points (i.e., our natural moral instincts) are open to be challenged and scrutinized. Such theory, according to Singer, would be more appropriate to normative ethics, since our goal is find out what actions are morally justified and not just develop rationalizations for what we already think are moral acts.

3. LAST THEORY STANDING

Although both Singer and Greene build their arguments on the same premise, I found Singer’s argument to be superior to Greene’s. Greene tries to undermine our beliefs in deontological ideas by trying to target the cause of developing such notions, which he claims to be evolution. He tries to prove that deontology is just an evolutionary leftover by finding strong correlations between our emotions and subsequent judgements. This argumentation has several flaws in itself, some that I talk about in detail in my next assignment.

Singer, on the other hand presents a much better argument. He argues that our current deontological philosophy greatly resembles an act of mere rationalization and we need to broaden its scope to ensure its authenticity. In the process of broadening its scope, we must allow for our moral intuitions to be challenged by reason. Once we agree to this, the debate leans in favor of utilitarianism (and other consequentialist theories) that do a much better job of explaining the reason behind moral judgements. This is why I prefer Singer's argumentation over Greene's.

4. KAHANE'S SKEPTICISM

i) **The Dependence on Objectivism:** Kahane argues that the arguments presented by Singer and Greene presuppose the existence of the truth of objectivism. He says, anyone who buys the idea of Evolutionary Debunking Arguments, essentially also agrees to the idea that there exists a need to evaluate the correctness of the process using which innate moral beliefs were developed – thus also accepting the idea that there exists a moral supreme truth that might not align with our moral reality but is paramount nonetheless. Kahane finds this extremely troublesome that in order to buy EDAs we need to settle the metaethical conflict in favor of objectivism first. This is the first reason he is skeptic about EDAs as an evaluative theory, due to their major dependence in the truth of metaethical theories.

ii) **Departing to the Global Debunking Argument:** Following chart summarizes Street's version of the Global Debunking Argument. Since there is no refuting to the evolutionary origins of innate moral inclinations, objectivists are left with only one option (since it cannot be claimed that natural selection is a truth tracking process) – to admit that evolution is an off track process and our innate evaluative ethics are formed as a result of this distorting influence. This forces us to accept the idea that none of our evaluative beliefs are justified. Street argues, that this result of total evaluative skepticism is implausible and that is one reason to reject our assumption of objectivism. Once objectivism is out of the window, EDAs no longer hold the potential to be right. This is just one form of Global Debunking Argument. Even if it is applied in the form that Joyce buys it, we would end up with believing in moral skepticism and subsequently factionalist understanding of morality. That, again, leaves no scope for application of EDAs.

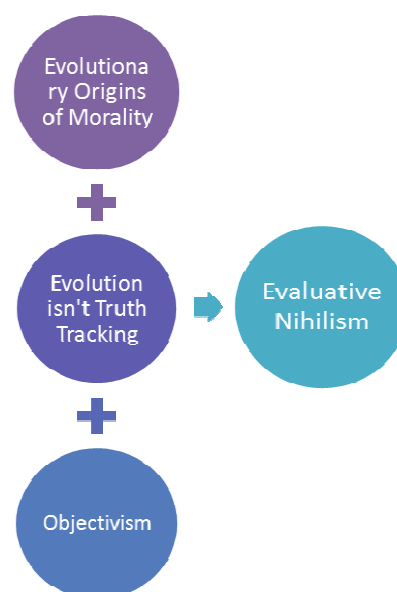


Fig. 1. Argument

iii) **Refuting the Global Debunking Argument:** Even if we have very strong reasons to believe that Global Debunking Argument is not true, we would still need to argue why and give reasons to falsify some component of the argument. If we reject the epistemic premise by rejecting objectivism, there would be no further scope for arguing EDAs. If we hold on to objectivism, it would be our burden to justify why we consider evolutionary processes to be the ones tracking an independent moral truth. This is a fairly large burden and no amount of argumentation can discharge it. If we reject the theory of evolution itself, there would be no premise left to build EDAs on. Lastly, if we reject the causal premise, we would be saying that only some of our evaluative judgements can be attributed to evolution. But, even for the evaluative judgements that don't have a straightforward evolutionary explanation, will have some causal story that explains we are naturally inclined to those stories. And these causal stories can in no way add epistemic credibility to these judgements or somehow prove that they were formed as a result of truth tracking processes. Hence, even an attempt to refute the Global Debunking Argument by refuting the causal premise fails.

So, it turns out that every way out of the evaluative nihilism makes EDAs a casualty. Thus, even if Global Debunking Argument was proven to be wrong, we would still not be able to use EDAs. If it is not proved wrong, then again, there is no scope to use EDAs. This completes Kahane's argument against EDAs.

5. GREENE AND SINGER V KAHANE

There are several ways in which Greene and Singer can try to defend their theories from Kahane's scrutiny:

i) Challenging the Causal Premise: Kahane tries to safeguard his theory from this challenge by tackling it beforehand and saying that such a challenge would yield no conclusion. However, he ends up pointing his critics in that very direction with his loose defense. Kahane makes a huge logical leap when he assumes that we will always be able to come up with some accurate causal story to explain why we have certain evaluative beliefs. This is not necessarily true. There might very well be many such beliefs for which the causal story can only be a vague estimate at best. Thus, Kahane's argument falls short here and there is a way to refute the Global Debunking Argument without compromising the avenues to facilitate use of EDAs.

ii) Interpreting the Global Debunking Argument: There is yet another way out of this fix for the likes of Greene and Singer – to interpret the Global Debunking Argument as only advocating moral skepticism and not the complete evaluative nihilism. This can be done by targeting the factionalist understanding of morality, as argued by Joyce. Once we strip Joyce's interpretation of the fictionalist attribute, what we are left with is a theory that only advocates moral skepticism and also facilitates the use of EDAs.

REFERENCES

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