

Evolutionary skepticism about morality and prudential normativity

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Abstract

Debunking arguments aim at defeating the justification of a belief by revealing the belief to have a dubious genealogy. One prominent example of such a debunking argument is Richard Joyce's evolutionary debunking explanation of morality. Joyce's argument targets only our belief in moral facts, while our belief in prudential facts is exempt from his evolutionary critique. In this paper, I suggest that our belief in prudential facts falls victim to evolutionary debunking, too. Just as our moral sense can be explained in evolutionary terms, so presumably can our tendency to judge our actions in prudential terms. And if the evolutionary explanation of our moral sense has an undermining effect, then so does the evolutionary explanation of our belief in prudential facts. This also undermines moral fictionalism, the view that we have prudential reasons to maintain moral discourse as a fiction. I consider and refute four possible objections to the suggested debunking of our belief in prudential normativity.

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in *Philosophia*. The final authenticated version is available online at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-017-9932-y>

1. Introduction

In a series of important and original studies, Richard Joyce has developed and defended the view that our belief in moral facts is the product of evolution and that this naturalistic genealogy of morality defeats the justification of our belief in such facts.¹ We need not assume the existence of any moral facts in order to explain why we believe in them. As a consequence, our belief in morality is unjustified. In a nutshell, the argument looks as follows:

¹ See in particular Joyce, 2001, ch. 6; 2006; 2016a.

Genealogical premise: There is a plausible evolutionary explanation of why we believe in the existence of moral facts that invokes only natural facts.

Epistemological premise: If the explanation of the belief in moral facts does not invoke any moral facts, the belief is unjustified.

Metaphysical premise: Moral facts are not reducible to natural facts.

Conclusion: The belief in moral facts is unjustified.

The evolutionary explanation of morality suggested by Joyce starts from the premise that evolution has selected helpful behavior, that is, behavior that benefits other individuals. He then hypothesizes that our moral sense, our faculty of making moral judgments, was selected as a means to bring about helpful behavior. Prudential reasoning is too unreliable to be entrusted with this important task. Moral norms, however, possess what Joyce calls practical clout. They exert a specific kind of normative pressure that can be analyzed as being both authoritative and inescapable. Moral norms, unlike for instance rules of etiquette, are authoritative in that they provide a “reason of genuine deliberative weight to comply.”² And they are inescapable, or categorical, in that they apply to all agents irrespective of their contingent pro-attitudes. Belief in norms with moral clout may thus work as a bulwark against the frailty of prudential reason and is likely to have evolved as a means of achieving helpfulness. Since, as Joyce argues, moral facts are not reducible to natural facts, this purely naturalistic explanation of our belief in moral facts does not invoke any such facts. And this in turn defeats the justification of the belief in moral facts. It would be ontologically profligate to posit the existence of moral facts if positing them is not necessary to explain our belief in them.³ Joyce’s

² Joyce, 2006, p. 62.

³ A bit surprisingly, Joyce writes that his argument requires that moral facts cannot be shown to reduce to *or supervene upon* the natural facts that feature in the genealogy (see e.g. Joyce, 2006, p. 184; 2013a, p. 143; 2016b, p. 376; 2016c). But this is too concessive. According to Joyce, we should abandon our belief in moral facts if positing such facts “amount[s] to adding any extra ontological richness to the world” beyond the ontological material that is implied by the naturalistic explanation of our belief in morality (2006, p. 189). However, a moral property that merely supervenes on, while not being identical with, natural properties is certainly such an ‘ontological extra’. Therefore, one cannot resist Joyce’s argument by merely demonstrating that moral facts *supervene* upon natural facts. Also, the supervenience of the moral on the natural is virtually universally

evolutionary argument purports to establish moral skepticism. If sound, the argument shows that, barring independent evidence to the contrary⁴, we are not justified to believe that there are any moral facts at all. The argument yields only partial evaluative skepticism as it targets only morality. Prudential normativity is not affected by this argument.⁵ Joyce's exemption of prudential normativity from his evolutionary critique is in line with his other metaethical writings, in which he has outlined the case for moral fictionalism, the view that we have prudential reasons to retain moral discourse as a fiction.⁶ In what follows, I will suggest that Joyce's partial evaluative skepticism is bound to collapse into a more sweeping sort of evaluative skepticism. It is hard to resist the further conclusion that our prudential normative beliefs lack justification, too. The argument that Joyce employs to undermine our moral beliefs can plausibly be co-opted to also challenge our prudential beliefs. Just as there is a debunking explanation of why we judge our actions in moral terms, so too there is a plausible debunking explanation of why we judge our actions in prudential terms. It is therefore arguable that we should be skeptical about the existence of both moral and prudential facts.⁷

When we talk about a person's prudential good, we mean this person's 'self-interest', 'welfare', 'well-being', or 'advantage'. These terms are typically used interchangeably and denote the idea that a person's life can be evaluated with regard to how it is going for this person, as opposed to, say, from a moral or aesthetic perspective. I will assume that the concept of a person's prudential good (or self-interest, welfare etc.) is normative in that it involves *pro tanto* reasons for the agent to desire or promote it. It would be absurd for someone to understand that something is in her own interest but

accepted. If mere supervenience sufficed to resist his skeptical challenge, Joyce's debunking argument would be a non-starter.

⁴ On the possibility of acquiring such independence evidence, see Joyce, 2006, p. 211; 2013a, p. 143; 2016c, p. 152; 2017, p. 108.

⁵ Joyce, 2006, p. 227-228.

⁶ Joyce, 2001, 2005, 2007. His case for moral fictionalism is only provisional, though. He acknowledges that the usefulness of moral discourse is just a plausible empirical hypothesis rather than an established fact (Joyce, 2001, p. 228).

⁷ Joyce does not seem to have anticipated this possible extension of his line of reasoning. An argument to the same effect has, however, recently been adumbrated by Cline (forthcoming). But just like Kahane, Cline appears to lump together Joyce-style and Street-style debunking. Refer also to Cline's article for insightful discussions of a range of related problems with Joyce's partial evaluative skepticism.

to not actually take any normative interest in it, that is, to not regard it as something worth desiring or pursuing. By contrast, the claim that we ought to promote the welfare of others is, while plausible, best seen as a substantive moral claim.⁸

Prudential facts are thus like moral facts in that they possess practical authority. Prudential considerations involve normative reasons to behave in a certain way. However, prudential normativity differs from morality in that it does not conceptually involve categorical force. As mentioned above, Joyce regards categoricity as a non-negotiable platitude associated with the concept of morality. For a system of norms to be recognizable as a genuinely moral one, it must centrally involve norms that apply to everybody irrespective of their contingent pro-attitudes. The same does not hold true for prudential normativity. The notion that a person's good differs from person to person is certainly not conceptually confused. On the contrary, it is quite natural to think that one's personal good is, precisely, something very personal and that people's personal goods therefore differ. Relatedly, it may be held that prudential normativity is subjective in the sense that it is a function of people's pro-attitudes. Peter Railton, and many following him, have felt that "it capture[s] an important feature of the concept of intrinsic value to say that what is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, at least if he were rational and aware."⁹ I would not go so far as to regard non-categoricity and subjectivity as non-negotiable platitudes associated with the concept of prudential normativity. We should not rule out on conceptual grounds objective list accounts of prudential goodness, which involve categorical and objective normativity. Rather, I will make the weaker assumption that the concept of prudential goodness is at least compatible with non-categoricity and subjectivity.¹⁰

It is worth stressing that the categorical/non-categorical distinction and the objective/subjective distinction, as used in this paper, are not the same. The first distinction concerns the 'escapability' of the normativity in question. A prudential reason is categorical if everyone has this prudential reason, irrespective of their attitudes. The second distinction specifies in virtue of what the normative facts obtain. They are subjective if they depend on the agent's evaluative attitudes and objective if they do

⁸ This analysis is not undisputed (see e.g. Darwall, 2002), but it is arguably the one that comes closest to being the standard view (cf. Darwall, 2002, p. 4; Rodogno, 2016, p. 289).

⁹ Railton, 1986, p. 9.

¹⁰ The argument of this paper does not depend on this weaker assumption. It would work just as well if we assumed that a person's prudential good involves subjective and/or non-categorical normativity as a matter of conceptual necessity.

not. Although distinct, these two distinctions are related. In particular, it is often assumed that categoricity requires objectivity. These issues will become relevant later in our discussion.

This article is structured as follows: In section 2, I begin by further clarifying the nature of the suggested debunking argument and explaining how it relates to similar arguments in the debunking literature. I then suggest the genealogical explanation of our belief in prudential facts, on which the debunking argument rests. In sections 3 to 6, I engage with four possible objections to the suggested debunking of prudential beliefs. In section 3, I respond to the objection that belief in prudential facts cannot be debunked because prudential facts are subjective, that is, attitude-dependent. In section 4, I consider and dismiss the plausibility of a vindictory evolutionary explanation of our prudential beliefs. Section 5 contains a discussion of the relevance of the potential non-categoricity of prudential normativity, and in section 6 I assess the prospects of naturalizing prudential facts. I conclude with some brief remarks on the implications and possible extensions of the argument.

2. The evolutionary debunking of morality and prudential normativity

The argument I will explore in this paper has the form of what one might call a *tu quoque* objection. I argue that the normative beliefs that Joyce exempts from his evolutionary critique, and which are the basis for moral fictionalism, are vulnerable to a similar debunking explanation, too. The scope of his debunking argument cannot be contained in the way Joyce envisages. My argument is akin to other *tu quoque* objections that have been raised against two other prominent evolutionary debunking arguments in moral philosophy, Joshua Greene and Peter Singer's debunking of deontology and Sharon Street's debunking of objectivism.¹¹

Greene and Singer have attempted to debunk specifically deontological intuitions by showing them to be residues of our evolutionary past. The reason why people intuit, for instance, that wrongdoers deserve to suffer or that it is wrong to push one person from a bridge in order to save five from being run over by a trolley is that having deontological intuitions of this sort was evolutionarily adaptive. Through debunking deontological intuitions, Greene and Singer seek to vindicate utilitarianism.¹² Critics of this defense of utilitarianism, however, have been quick to point out that utilitarianism might

¹¹ This has elsewhere been referred to as the containment problem (Millhouse, Bush, & Moss, 2016).

¹² Greene, 2008, 2014; Singer, 2005.

be vulnerable to some such genealogical debunking argument, too. This applies both to the utilitarian principle of impartial benevolence as well as to utilitarian conceptions of welfare or utility.¹³

A *tu quoque* objection has also been levelled against Sharon Street's attempt to vindicate evaluative subjectivism by means of an evolutionary debunking argument.¹⁴ Unlike Greene and Singer, who target only deontological intuitions, Street takes it that virtually *all* of our evaluative beliefs have been shaped by evolutionary forces. If we assume that our evaluative beliefs aspire to capture some attitude-independent evaluative truth, this influence of the whims of evolution on our evaluative beliefs entails radical evaluative skepticism. It would be a huge coincidence if our intuitions turned out to track the attitude-independent evaluative truth, given that they have been selected for being fitness-enhancing rather than for being true. To avoid this radical evaluative skepticism, Street suggests that we should adopt subjectivism. If the evaluative truth is ultimately determined by our evaluative pro-attitudes, the fact that evolutionary forces have shaped these attitudes does not have a debunking effect.¹⁵ However, as Selim Berker has pointed out, subjectivism is vulnerable to debunking arguments, too. For the claim that evaluative facts are grounded in facts about people's pro-attitudes is itself a substantive normative claim. So if appeals to substantive normative truths are objectionable due to the distorting influence of evolutionary forces on our normative judgments, subjectivists are not any better off than objectivists.¹⁶

The *tu quoque* argument developed in this paper is thus in good company. The best way of understanding what it means to extend Joyce's argument from morality to prudential normativity is to contrast it with a different way of debunking our prudential beliefs: One might argue, following Street, that evolutionary forces have had a pervasive distorting influence on the extension of these beliefs and, unlike Street, that it is a conceptual truth that prudential facts are objective. Given the distorting influence of evolutionary forces on our prudential beliefs, these beliefs are bound to be hopelessly mistaken. It would be a huge coincidence if we happened to have evolved to track the objective truth

¹³ Tersman, 2008, p. 401-402; Kahane, 2014, p. 334. Other proponents of such *tu quoque* arguments against utilitarianism include Berker, 2009, p. 321-322; Mason, 2011, p. 452-455. The possibility of providing an evolutionary explanation of utilitarian (and Kantian) moral theory was also anticipated by Ruse, 1986, p. 235-247. For attempts to counter such *tu quoque* arguments, see de Lazari-Radek & Singer, 2012; 2014, p. 174-199; Singer, 2005, p. 350-351; see also Millhouse et al., 2016.

¹⁴ Street uses the terms 'realism' and 'constructivism' for what I refer to as 'objectivism' and 'subjectivism'.

¹⁵ Street, 2006, 2016.

¹⁶ Berker, 2014.

about our prudential good. And this time we cannot, as Street suggests, just switch to subjectivism in order to avoid this radical skepticism. If we accept the semantic claim that *all* – moral as well as prudential – facts are objective, we end up with global evaluative skepticism rather than just moral skepticism. While this global evaluative debunking argument, powerfully explored by Guy Kahane¹⁷, deserves to be taken seriously, it is not the argument I have in mind. The argument I have in mind establishes a different kind of skepticism, and it is not premised on objectivism about prudential facts. In particular, it is more clearly an extension of Joyce's own argument to prudential normativity than is Kahane's. To appreciate the difference, it is important to pay attention to exactly what kind of skepticism Kahane's argument would establish.¹⁸ At bottom, Kahane accepts the cornerstones of Street's challenge for realist theories of value and simply rejects Street's claim that one can escape this challenge by embracing evaluative subjectivism. If switching to subjectivism is ruled out on conceptual grounds, we must accept the radical skepticism that, according to Street, objectivism entails. And this is skepticism about what our reasons are (or about what is valuable), not skepticism about whether there are any reasons (or values) in the first place. Street takes it that objectivism would imply that our normative beliefs are in all likelihood hopelessly mistaken. But it does not follow, according to Street, that there is in all likelihood no normative truth to begin with. By contrast, the kind of skepticism we get by extending Joyce's evolutionary debunking of morality from morality to prudential normativity is different. The focus of Joyce's debunking argument is – unlike Street's – not on the extension of our moral beliefs but on morality as such. It is our tendency to apply moral concepts and make moral judgments as such that Joyce takes to be amenable to an evolutionary explanation.¹⁹ The sort of skepticism his evolutionary debunking argument purports to establish is skepticism about whether there are any moral duties or obligations to begin with: "Were it not for a certain social ancestry affecting our biology, the argument goes, we wouldn't have concepts like *obligation*, *virtue*, *property*, *desert*, and *fairness* at all."²⁰ As a consequence, we should

¹⁷ Kahane, 2011.

¹⁸ I refer to it as 'Kahane's argument', and he credits it with having "considerable force" (Kahane, 2011, p. 117).

I should note, though, that Kahane's presentation of the argument is rather explorative in nature.

¹⁹ See e.g. Joyce, 2001, p. 146; 2006, p. 3-4, 132, 180-181; 2013d, p. 558-561. Kahane is somewhat insensitive to this difference, although he briefly acknowledges in a footnote that Joyce might actually be concerned with moral concepts rather than with the extension of moral beliefs (Kahane, 2011, p. 123 n53).

²⁰ Joyce, 2006, p. 181, original emphasis.

“cultivate agnosticism regarding all positive beliefs involving these concepts until we find some solid evidence either for or against them. Note how radical this conclusion is. It is not a matter of allowing oneself to have an open mind about, say, the wrongness of abortion or the rightness of canceling Third World debt; rather, it is a matter of maintaining an open mind about whether there exists *anything* that is morally right and wrong, of accepting the possibility that describing the world in moral terms is in the same ballpark as taking horoscopes seriously or believing that ancestral spirits move invisibly among us (as John Mackie argued is the case).”²¹

This type of moral skepticism is thus akin to moral error theory, which Joyce has defended elsewhere and which he advocates in addition to his evolutionary skepticism about morality.²² Error theorists assert that all moral judgments are untrue because moral properties are never instantiated to begin with.²³ According to moral error theory, moral rights and duties have the same metaphysical status as, for instance, fairies and unicorns. Joyce’s evolutionary moral skepticism is akin to, but somewhat weaker than, moral error theory in that it states that we are not justified to believe in the existence of moral facts, while it falls short of conclusively ruling out their existence. It establishes only an epistemological conclusion, namely that the belief in moral facts is unjustified. Now, if we extend Joyce’s debunking of morality from morality to prudential normativity, we will not end up with skepticism about exactly what makes one’s life go well but with skepticism about whether there are any prudential normative facts at all. To amend Joyce’s formulation accordingly: Were it not for a certain social ancestry affecting our biology, the argument goes, we wouldn’t have concepts like *prudential reason*, *self-interest* or *personal good* at all. We should therefore cultivate agnosticism regarding all positive beliefs involving these concepts until we find some solid evidence either for or against them. It is not a matter of allowing oneself to have an open mind about, say, the prudential wrongness of living a life in solitude or the prudential rightness of developing one’s talents; rather, it is a matter of maintaining an open mind about whether there exists *anything* that is prudentially right

²¹ Joyce, 2006, p. 181-182, original emphasis.

²² Joyce, 2001, 2005. Indeed, Joyce used to think of his evolutionary moral skepticism as a sort of moral error theory (Joyce, 2006, p. 223). But he has rightly observed that this skepticism does not rule out the existence of moral facts, which is why it should be distinguished from moral error theory (Joyce, 2013c, p. 354-355; 2017, p. 107).

²³ On some of the intricacies of characterizing moral error theory, see Joyce, 2001, p. 6-9; Joyce & Kirchin, 2010, p. xi-xv.

and wrong, of accepting the possibility that describing the world in terms of prudential goodness is in the same ballpark as taking horoscopes seriously or believing that ancestral spirits move invisibly among us.

This is the position that I will explore and defend in this article. The argument for this position, of course, requires a plausible evolutionary story of how we may have evolved to think in terms of ‘good for me’ and ‘bad for me’. But the belief in prudential facts is maybe even more readily amenable to an evolutionary explanation than belief in morality. We need only assume that our brute drives and desires did not work sufficiently well from an evolutionary point of view. Sometimes, acting on whatever craving just happened to be strongest led to suboptimal outcomes for the individual. It was therefore adaptive to have a notion of one’s own prudential good that is distinct from the fulfilment of one’s strongest desires. It was adaptive to think that one’s own life can go better or worse and that this implies that certain actions are normatively called-for. Belief in prudential normative facts provided the necessary fine-tuning of our sometimes detrimental desires or inclinations. Just as it is plausible to assume that moral considerations were a useful complement to our sometimes unreliable prudential deliberations, as Joyce suggests, so it is plausible to assume that belief in prudential normative facts had the function of correcting maladaptive drives and desires. Based on this genealogical hypothesis, we can substitute ‘prudential facts’ for ‘moral facts’ in Joyce’s argument and formulate a parallel debunking argument of prudential beliefs:

Genealogical premise: There is a plausible evolutionary explanation of why we believe in the existence of prudential facts that invokes only natural facts.

Epistemological premise: If the explanation of the belief in prudential facts does not invoke any prudential facts, the belief is unjustified.

Metaphysical premise: Prudential facts are not reducible to natural facts.

Conclusion: The belief in prudential facts is unjustified.

The genealogical premise has just been laid out. The epistemological premise is the same as in Joyce’s argument for moral skepticism and will not be defended here. My argument is in the first instance a conditional one: *if* one accepts Joyce’s approach, one must accept skepticism about prudential facts, too.²⁴ The metaphysical premise is so far unargued-for and will be considered in section 6.

²⁴ For a skeptical take on the epistemological premise, refer e.g. to Clarke-Doane, 2016; White, 2010.

Needless to say that the genealogical hypothesis suggested above is, precisely, a hypothesis, which stands in need of further empirical corroboration. Like other debunkers and proponents of *tu quoque* arguments, I must stress the conditional nature of the argument.²⁵ It rests on a plausible but unproven empirical conjecture. Unfortunately, the question concerning the potential evolutionary source of our thinking in prudential categories has, to my knowledge, received virtually no sustained scholarly attention.²⁶ It may well be that its evolutionary origin has simply been taken for granted, given that the belief in some normative notion of self-interest fits fairly naturally into the evolutionary framework. Whereas belief in moral obligations is at least initially puzzling from an evolutionary point of view, belief in prudential dos and don'ts is rather unsurprising. In any case, while further research is necessary, I take it that the evolutionary hypothesis is plausible enough to warrant taking seriously its metaethical implications. In the remainder of this article, I will engage with the four already mentioned objections to this suggested debunking of prudential normativity.

3. The objection from attitude-dependence

I have suggested that we cannot rule out on conceptual grounds that prudential facts are subjective and/or non-categorical. Given that the subjectivist approach to prudential normativity is a viable option, it may appear fairly straightforward to rebut the suggested debunking of our prudential beliefs. For if prudential facts can plausibly be argued to be a function of our evaluative attitudes, how could these attitudes possibly fail to track them? Evaluative beliefs are only debunkable if they purport to represent some attitude-independent – objective – evaluative reality 'out there', or so one might reason. This would be a decisive reason to be skeptical about the viability of extending Joyce's argument from morality to prudential normativity.²⁷

²⁵ Cf. e.g. Joyce, 2001, p. 135; 2006, p. 2; 2016d, p. 9; Kahane, 2011; Mason, 2011, p. 454; Morton, 2016, p. 240; Street, 2006, p. 112-113.

²⁶ See, however, Machery and Mallon's discussion of evidence to the effect that normative cognition in general rather than specifically *moral* cognition evolved (Machery & Mallon, 2010). Drawing on this evidence, they adumbrate a *tu quoque* argument similar to the one outlined in this paper (cf. also Cline (forthcoming)). Also, it is worth noting that there is evidence that children are able to distinguish between moral and prudential rules at a fairly early age (Tisak & Turiel, 1984). Joyce interprets this as evidence for the innateness of our moral sense, but it can equally be seen as evidence of the innateness of our prudential sense (cf. Joyce, 2006, p. 135).

²⁷ This and the next objection have been suggested by audiences in [deleted for blind review]

Before I respond, let me briefly dwell on why this objection might appear more promising when raised against efforts to debunk prudential beliefs than when raised against Joyce's debunking of morality. Why could one not similarly allege that *moral* facts are a function of people's idealized pro-attitudes? The reason why this move is problematic is *not* that Joyce attaches great significance to the (purported) objectivity of morality. His focus is on the *categoricity* of moral normativity. He does not consider objectivity a platitude associated with the concept of morality, and the (purported) objectivity of morality plays no role in the hypothesized evolutionary genealogy.²⁸ There is, however, a more indirect link between categoricity and objectivism. Joyce believes that categoricity, which *is* essential to morality, cannot be captured by a subjectivism that ties normative facts to people's idealized pro-attitudes.²⁹ If this is true, the prospects of moral subjectivism are dim. By contrast, since it is arguable that prudential normativity, unlike morality, does not conceptually involve categoricity, subjectivism about prudential goodness cannot be ruled out on these grounds.

Let us consider, then, whether the potential subjectivity, or attitude-dependence, of prudential facts undermines the suggested debunking explanation. It is assumed by many that debunking arguments of the sort put forth by Street, Greene and Singer are toothless against subjective value judgments.³⁰ If this is true, it is tempting to reject attempts to debunk prudential beliefs on the grounds that prudential facts are attitude-dependent.³¹ But this objection fails to attend to the above-discussed difference between Kahane's argument and the one I am suggesting. The objection would have force if I were challenging our ability to track what the prudential facts consist in, assuming that such facts exist. That is, it would have force against Kahane's argument, which is indeed premised on the objectivity of prudential facts. One might then reckon that our evaluative attitudes cannot be that far off the mark given that the prudential facts are actually *not* objective but a function of our attitudes. But the argument I am making is not best understood as being about our ability to 'track' the prudential truth. It is analogous to Joyce's argument, and Joyce's worry is not that we might be mistaken about what our moral duties consist in. Rather, he contends that morality as such may be an illusion.

²⁸ Joyce, 2013a, p. 143; 2017, p. 107.

²⁹ Although this might not apply to the divine-command variant of subjectivism, which ties normative facts to God's judgments (Joyce, 2013a, p. 144 n4).

³⁰ Most prominently by Sharon Street (Street, 2006, 2016). But cf. also Gill & Nichols, 2008; Kahane, 2011, p. 112; 2014, p. 339; Levy, 2006; Nichols, 2014, p. 748-749; Timmons, 2008.

³¹ I am myself skeptical that subjectivism provides full immunity to debunking arguments for reasons I cannot explore in detail here. But I am happy to make this assumption for the sake of argument.

Analogously, I am not questioning our ability to correctly track what the prudential facts consist in. Rather, I am alleging that we are not justified to believe in the existence of prudential facts to begin with. An objection to the effect that we are probably good at ‘tracking’ these facts, taking their existence for granted, is therefore a non-starter. It may be true that *if* we assume that there are prudential facts and that they depend on our attitudes, the prospects of correctly identifying them might not be too bleak. For these prudential facts would be constructed by our attitudes. However, what is not constructed by our attitudes is the fact that there are prudential facts that depend on our attitudes in the first place, that is, that certain facts about our attitudes instantiate prudential normative facts at all. It is this fact that is the target of the suggested debunking argument, and whether *this* fact obtains is attitude-independent. Adopting an attitude-dependent framework of prudential normativity is of no avail if there are no prudential facts to be tracked in the first place.

Note that this means that the objection would also fail if raised against Joyce’s debunking of morality. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that a subjectivism that ties reasons to people’s idealized pro-attitudes could yield categorical reasons (contrary to what Joyce is assuming). That is, subjectivism could not be ruled out on the grounds that it fails to account for the categorical normativity that is essential to morality. Could a subjectivist object to Joyce’s debunking of morality by insisting that we cannot be that bad at tracking our moral reasons given that the latter are more or less closely tied to our pro-attitudes? It does not seem so, for Joyce’s argument does not challenge our ability to correctly identify our moral reasons but rather the assumption that there are any moral facts to being with. It purports to establish skepticism about whether moral properties are instantiated at all, no matter whether they are grounded in people’s pro-attitudes or not. As Joyce observes, his “skeptical attack is leveled at moral facts *tout court* – subjective as much as objective.”³²

4. The objection from the analogy with sensory perception

The above discussion also helps us see why another objection fails. One might be tempted to dismiss the suggested debunking explanation of prudential beliefs on the grounds that the evolutionary explanation actually vindicates, rather than undermines, our prudential normative beliefs. The proposed evolutionary explanation of our tendency to think in prudential categories would then be analogous to evolutionary explanations of the emergence of our sensory organs, which are vindicatory rather than debunking explanations. The reason why the correct perception of one’s prudential good may be thought to be analogous to sensory perception is that the correct perception of one’s

³² Joyce, 2013b, p. 467, original emphasis; see also 2013a, p. 143; 2017, p. 107.

prudential good is in one's own interest and therefore presumably conducive to reproduction. It may appear obvious that a properly working capability to detect our prudential reasons is, just like properly working sensory organs, useful from an evolutionary point of view.

One reason why this objection fails is that it rests on an equivocation. It tacitly conflates the normative notion of a person's prudential good with the empirical concept of what is good from an evolutionary point of view, that is, with what enhances our reproductive fitness. But these are of course two different concepts. And once this difference is appreciated, the intuitive plausibility of the analogy with sensory perception vanishes. There is no apparent reason why it should be beneficial from an evolutionary point of view to be right about what one's actual prudential good consists in.³³ More importantly, however, the objection from the analogy with sensory perception fails for the same reason as the previous objection, the one from attitude-dependence. The suggested debunking argument is not meant to cast doubt on our ability to *correctly identify* our prudential reasons for action, that is, it is not meant to entail skepticism about what our reasons for action *consist in*. Rather, the argument is concerned with prudential normativity as such, that is, with our tendency to imbue courses of action with a certain prudential normative valence. Instead of merely desiring certain courses of action, we feel a normative pull towards them, we feel that there is something prudentially speaking in favor of performing them. It is the belief in this kind of normativity that is vulnerable to a debunking explanation. The analogy with our sensory organs is therefore misleading. The ability to make correct judgments about whether there is such a thing as prudential normativity in the first place is *not* relevantly similar to the ability to correctly detect mid-sized physical objects in our environment. Thinking in terms of prudential 'oughts' is adaptive even if no such normative properties are ever instantiated. This contrasts sharply with sensory perception. An evolutionary account of why we believe in the existence of prudential facts does therefore not amount to a vindication of these beliefs. On the contrary.

³³ Third-factor accounts might offer a way around this problem (for a general discussion, refer to Berker, 2014).

Note, though, that this would be to *abandon* the perception analogy. The perception analogy states that we have evolved to reliably track facts about prudential goodness *because* the capacity to track these facts promotes reproductive success. A third-factor account, by contrast, while agreeing that evolutionary forces have pushed us towards the evaluative truth, would not posit this 'because' relation. Instead, it would posit some third factor that guarantees a correlation between what is prudentially good and the evaluative beliefs that enhance reproductive fitness (cf. Copp's distinction between the tracking account and the tracking thesis (Copp, 2008)). The plausibility of such third-factor accounts is disputed (see e.g. Joyce, 2014, 2016b, 2016c; Street, 2008)

5. The objection from non-categoricity

A third objection concerns the potential non-categoricity of prudential normativity. The inescapability of moral norms plays an important role in the genealogical story sketched by Joyce. The evolutionary benefit that morality is supposed to have bestowed on our ancestors is closely tied to the inescapability of its normative force. If, as I have suggested, prudential normativity may well lack this inescapability, it is doubtful whether prudential beliefs can have played a similar motivational role. This objection thus targets the genealogical premise of the argument.

To see whether these doubts are justified, let us look closer at the rationale behind Joyce's suggested genealogy of morality:

"My thinking on this matter is dominated by the natural assumption that an individual sincerely judging some available action in a morally positive light increases the probability that the individual will perform that action [...]. If reproductive fitness will be served by performance or omission of a certain action, then it will be served by any psychological mechanism that ensures or probabilifies this performance or omission [...]. Thus self-directed moral judgment may enhance reproductive fitness so long as it is attached to the appropriate actions. We have already seen that the 'appropriate actions' – that is, the fitness enhancing actions – will in many circumstances include helpful and cooperative behaviors. Therefore it may serve an individual's fitness to judge certain prosocial behaviors – *her own* prosocial behaviors – in moral terms."³⁴

Why must the authority of moral norms be inescapable for morality to serve this function? Joyce's answer is that the inescapability of moral imperatives makes moral behavior more steady and reliable. Prudential reason is just too frail and weak-willed to be entrusted with this task. The inescapability of morality works as a motivational bulwark against this frailty of prudential reason. We are more likely to perform the called-for action if we regard a certain outcome as *desirable* rather than merely as *desired*, if we believe that we *must* perform the action, even if we do not like it. Our moral conscience works as a filter that "eliminates certain practical possibilities from the space of deliberative reasoning

³⁴ Joyce, 2006, p. 109, original emphasis. This is only one of the two ways in which, according to Joyce, having a moral conscience enhances one's reproductive fitness. I omit the other one as it has to do with the communicative function of morality, which is not applicable to prudential normativity (Joyce, 2006, p. 118-123).

in a way that thinking ‘I just don’t like X’ does not.”³⁵ Joyce expressly contrasts moral reasoning with prudential reasoning. He takes belief in moral facts to be more likely to produce the adaptive behavior precisely in virtue of the inescapability that prudential norms arguably lack.³⁶

I do not want to challenge the assumption that the inescapability of morality contributes to morality’s motivational function and that morality has emerged for the reasons suggested by Joyce. Rather, I wish to observe that all this does not prevent prudential beliefs from having a comparable motivational effect, too. Even if our prudential reasons for action are in some way or another linked to our pro-attitudes and non-categorical, awareness of these reasons may motivate us to perform actions that we would not otherwise have performed. *If* some prudential reason for action obtains (or is thought to obtain) – which may well be a contingent attitude-dependent matter – its normative authority is likely to influence the behavior of the person who takes notice of this prudential consideration for action. Note also that many of the features of morality highlighted by Joyce are characteristic of prudential normativity in much the same way, even if prudential normativity should be attitude-dependent and non-categorical. Joyce overlooks these similarities as he conflates prudential normativity with brute desiring, which are two different things. Joyce stresses that morality is about the *desirable* rather than the *desired*, and that we *must* do our moral duty, whether we like it or not.³⁷ But this is also true of prudential normativity. What we intrinsically have reason to do for our own sake is likewise not simply what we desire to do but what is prudentially desirable. To be sure, the prudentially desirable, unlike the morally desirable, may be linked to our desires, and its normative force may be non-categorical. But this does not make the prudentially good any less normative, any less *desirable*. By the same token, we *must* do what we prudentially ought to do. An ‘ought’ is not normatively optional just because it is a prudential rather than a moral ‘ought’. Even if the validity of the prudential norm is contingent upon the agent’s pro-attitudes and non-categorical, this does not mean that it is up to her whether she complies with it. The fact that an agent’s prudential reason to perform some action may somehow be linked to her pro-attitudes – say, because it is what she would desire after ideal deliberation – does not imply that she is not prudentially obliged to perform this action. She cannot shrug off this prudential obligation on the grounds that she *actually* – that is, prior to ideal deliberation – does not desire to perform this action. Therefore, just like moral considerations, prudential considerations can work as a filter that ‘eliminates certain practical possibilities from the space of deliberative reasoning in a way that thinking ‘I just don’t like X’ does not’.

³⁵ Joyce, 2006, p. 111.

³⁶ Joyce, 2006, p. 110-111; see also 2001, p. 139-140; Ruse, 1986, p. 252-253.

³⁷ Joyce, 2006, p. 111.

Put more succinctly, the objection from non-categoricity fails because it ignores that belief in non-categorical reasons can probabilify fitness-enhancing behavior, too.

6. The objection from naturalism

The last objection concerns the metaphysical premise of the argument. The idea underlying Joyce's debunking argument is that the evolutionary story allows us to explain people's belief in moral facts without invoking the existence of such facts. But this requires that moral facts are not reducible to natural facts, which might feature in the naturalistic genealogy. Accordingly, if we wish to extend Joyce's evolutionary debunking argument from morality to prudential normativity, it must be shown that prudential facts cannot be naturalized either. It is at this point that one might think that the potential attitude-dependence of prudential facts is relevant after all, as this seems to render prudential facts readily amenable to naturalistic reduction. So if prudential facts are attitude-dependent and do not involve categorical reasons, the attempted extension of Joyce's debunking argument from morality to prudential normativity might collapse.

While I cannot here hope to provide a conclusive discussion of the possibility of naturalizing prudential facts, I wish to at least cite some reasons to be skeptical about the prospects of this project. In particular, I will explain why Joyce's own reasoning about this question somewhat obscures the difficulty of the challenge naturalists are facing.

Joyce rejects naturalistic accounts of morality on the grounds that the most promising such accounts fail to capture the inescapability of moral normativity. Recall, inescapability – or categoricity – is one of the two constituents of what Joyce calls 'moral clout', which he considers essential to morality. The other constituent is practical authority, that is, the property of being reason-providing, of involving a practical consideration of genuine deliberative force. Joyce argues that naturalistic approaches may well capture this latter property, but they fail to do justice to the inescapability of moral reasons. Joyce takes it that the most promising approach to naturalizing moral or prudential reasons is by tying them to our idealized pro-attitudes, that is, by tying them to some such natural property as "being-such-that-you-would-want-to-do-it-if-you-were-to-reason-correctly"³⁸. And he is happy to grant that this property has practical authority, that is, that it "represent[s] a genuine deliberative consideration" or

³⁸ Joyce, 2006, p. 196.

that it “carr[ies] deliberative weight.”³⁹ But he maintains that this account does not yield inescapable reasons:

“The problem, however, and my main ground for doubting the project, is that in order to naturalize moral clout we cannot be content just to find a property that has practical authority – arguably we have located such a property in *being-such-that-you-would-want-to-do-it-if-you-were-to-reason-correctly*. We must also satisfy *inescapability*; we need a property that has this authority over people *irrespective of their interests*. But it is doubtful that any naturalizable account can deliver this.”⁴⁰

The reason why he thinks that attitude-dependent accounts of normativity cannot capture the inescapability of morality is that there is nothing that *everybody*, no matter what pro-attitudes they happen to start from, would want to do if they were to reason correctly. Given the heterogeneity of people’s contingent pro-attitudes, this idealized reasoning process is unlikely to yield categorical reasons.⁴¹ Now, if prudential normativity does not conceptually imply categorical normativity, this objection cannot be levelled against similar attempts to naturalize prudential normativity. In light of this, the prospects of naturalizing prudential normativity do not appear too bleak.

However, when assessing the prospects of a naturalistic account of prudential normativity, it is critical to be attentive to exactly what naturalizing prudential normativity actually involves. It does not suffice – as Joyce’s formulations might suggest – to provide a naturalistic account of what *are* or *provides* or *grounds* our prudential reasons. Showing that our prudential reasons are determined by what we would desire to do after ideal deliberation does not yet necessarily amount to a naturalistic reduction of prudential normativity, even if the property of being such that we would desire to do it after ideal deliberation is a natural property. It does not suffice to show that some natural property ‘represents’ a genuine deliberative consideration or ‘carries’ normative weight or ‘has’ practical authority. Rather, what has to be naturalized is the property, possessed by this natural property, of providing a reason for action or of carrying genuine deliberative force. What has to be naturalized is the phenomenon of practical authority itself, that is, the ‘to-be-persuadness’ and ‘not-to-be-doneness’ that is characteristic of the normative.⁴² One has to naturalize *normativity* rather than just the facts that are normatively

³⁹ Joyce, 2006, p. 195.

⁴⁰ Joyce, 2006, p. 196, original emphasis.

⁴¹ Joyce, 2006, 194-199; see also Joyce, 2001, 2011.

⁴² These are Mackie’s terms (Mackie, 1977, p. 40).

significant by being the things that are or ground or provide reasons for action. I am here essentially paraphrasing Derek Parfit, who has observed that

“[w]henver some natural fact gives us a reason, there is also the normative fact that this natural fact gives us this reason. It is easy to overlook such normative facts. This mistake is especially likely if, rather than saying that certain natural facts give us reasons, we say that these facts are reasons. These are merely different ways of saying the same things. But if we say that natural facts of certain kinds are reasons to act in certain ways, we may be led to assume that, to defend the view that there are normative reasons, it is enough to defend the claim that there are natural facts of these kinds. That is not so. We must also defend the claim that these natural facts each have the normative property of being a reason. And this second claim, property, and fact might all be irreducibly normative.”⁴³

Of course, bringing out in this way what normativity is does not yet necessarily disprove naturalism. But it gives us an idea of the difficulty of the task the naturalist is facing. Indeed, in light of the above, it is tempting to side with those who have considered it evident that normativity *just cannot* be a natural thing. Michael Huemer calls it the argument from radical dissimilarity:

„[F]rom our grasp of evaluative concepts, we can simply see the falsity of reductionist theories. On the face of it, for example, *wrongness* seems to be a completely different *kind* of property from, say, *weighing 5 pounds*. In brief:

1. Value properties are radically different from natural properties.
2. If two things are radically different, then one is not reducible to the other.
3. So value properties are not reducible to natural properties.”⁴⁴

Similarly, Derek Parfit has argued:

„Many kinds of thing, event, or fact are [...] undeniably in different categories. Rivers could not be sonnets, experiences could not be stones, and justice could not be – as some Pythagoreans were said to have believed – the number 4. [...] It is similarly true, I believe, that when we have decisive reasons to act in some way, or we should or ought to act in

⁴³ Parfit, 2011, p. 280, see also Parfit, 1993. Cf. FitzPatrick, 2008, 2011, 2014; McNaughton & Rawling, 2003, p. 30-31; Olson, 2009.

⁴⁴ Huemer, 2005, p. 94, original emphasis.

this way, this fact could not be the same as, or consist in, some natural fact, such as some psychological or causal fact.”⁴⁵

Of course, these brief remarks do not settle the matter. Whether normativity can be naturalized is still very much an open question, and I do not purport to have provided anything resembling a conclusive answer.⁴⁶ But the above considerations should make clear that naturalizing prudential normativity represents a formidable philosophical challenge, even if prudential normativity may be subjective and non-categorical. For even if one would not have to show that some natural property has practical authority irrespective of people’s contingent interests, one would still have to show that practical authority itself is a natural thing. And whether this can be accomplished is, to say the least, doubtful.

7. Conclusion and outlook

To conclude, there is good reason to think that Joyce’s debunking of morality cannot be prevented from spilling over to prudential normativity. Could we, in response to this skeptical threat, retreat one step further and adopt fictionalism about prudential normativity? Just as Joyce insists that philosophical doubts about the reality of morality do not necessarily warrant abolishing morality as an institution, one might question whether doubts about the reality of prudential normativity really requires abandoning thinking in terms of prudential ‘oughts’. Unfortunately, however, efforts to salvage prudential normativity as a fiction are rather obviously bound to fail, as it is unclear on what grounds we should adopt fictionalism about prudential normativity. Joyce’s moral fictionalism rests on the assumption that we have got prudential reasons to accept morality as a fiction. But we can hardly appeal to such prudential reasons in an attempt to vindicate fictionalism about prudential normativity. We would have to appeal to *independent* reasons to adopt prudential discourse as a fiction, and it is unclear what these reasons might be. The prospects of grounding prudential fictionalism on aesthetic or epistemic reasons appear rather bleak. The more plausible option, or rather prediction, is that we end up as psychological fictionalists, that is, that we just cannot help but think in terms of prudential ‘oughts’. Even if we are aware of philosophical considerations that challenge the reality of prudential normativity, we might be psychologically unable to stop thinking in prudential terms.

It is worth saying a word on the dialectical significance of the finding that belief in prudential facts can be debunked, too. On the one hand, this finding seems to inflict less dialectical damage than the other *tu quoque* arguments mentioned above. Greene and Singer’s as well as Street’s debunking efforts are

⁴⁵ Parfit, 2011, p. 324-325.

⁴⁶ See e.g. Copp, 2012, for a subtle critique of Parfit’s arguments against naturalism.

inspired by their positive commitment to utilitarianism and subjectivism, respectively. They seek to debunk one doctrine in an effort to vindicate a rival doctrine. By contrast, the spirit of Joyce's evolutionary critique of morality is in the first instance negative. Qua moral skeptic, he primarily seeks to defeat the belief in moral facts. To be sure, he emphasizes that we still have prudential reasons for action, among which reasons to buy into morality as a fiction. But he is probably not as strongly committed to the existence of prudential facts as Greene, Singer and Street are to utilitarianism and subjectivism, respectively. Joyce might therefore be slightly less reluctant to bite the *tu quoque* bullet than Greene and Singer or Street. On the other hand, the finding that Joyce's evolutionary moral skepticism threatens to collapse into skepticism about both moral and prudential normativity may be taken to constitute a *reductio* of Joyce's debunking of morality. This even more radical skepticism might strike one as so incredible as to warrant rejecting the epistemological premise that underlies both evolutionary debunking arguments.⁴⁷ I will not here take a stand on how the debunking of prudential beliefs should be responded to, contenting myself with pointing out the instability of Joyce's partial evolutionary skepticism.

I will close instead by suggesting that the argument might in fact be extended even further. The target of the above argument is belief in prudential normativity. It does not challenge other normative realms, such as epistemic or aesthetic normativity. But it is only natural to wonder whether all normative beliefs can eventually be debunked in this way. Given that thinking in normative categories has an impact on people's behavior, it is not far-fetched to surmise that our faculty of thinking in terms of 'oughts' of whatever kind is an adaptive but deceptive invention of evolution.⁴⁸ The appearance that certain responses are normatively required might be but a figment of our minds that served the function of pushing us towards fitness-enhancing behavior. Whether such a global normative debunking argument may succeed depends inter alia on whether these other normative realms can be naturalized and on the plausibility of the genealogical hypothesis. Also, attempts to debunk epistemic normativity are complicated by the fact that they threaten to be self-defeating. An argument that yields the conclusion that we are not epistemically justified to believe in facts about epistemic

⁴⁷ This *reductio* would, however, not refute Joyce's argument for moral error theory, which is independent from his evolutionary debunking of morality.

⁴⁸ Cf. again Machery & Mallon, 2010. See Streumer, 2017, for the similar but even stronger claim that we should become error theorists about all normative judgments. And refer to Cline, forthcoming, for an instructive discussion of some issues related to global normative skepticism.

justification has certainly an air of contradiction about it.⁴⁹ I will not pursue these difficult questions here, but I wish to mention them as a plea for further study.

⁴⁹ Similarly Kahane, 2011, p. 117.

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