

Moral Disagreement and Arational Convergence

Patrick Hassan

Forthcoming in the *Journal of Ethics*

Introduction

Many have argued for what I shall call the *Convergence Thesis*:

Convergence Thesis: if there are fundamental or intractable moral disagreements then moral realism is false.¹

Fundamental moral disagreements are those which would persist when all parties to a disagreement are at least rational, willing to adjust their views in light of new evidence, and fully-informed of the relevant non-moral facts. Moral realism is the view that there are objective moral facts. This view has three essential components: (1) *cognitivism*: moral judgments are propositions, and thus, truth-apt; (2) at least some moral judgements are true; (3) the truth or falsity of moral judgements is *objective* (i.e. independent of human perceptions, attitudes or practices). While not an essential feature of the view, most moral realists additionally accept (4) knowledge of at least some of these truths is possible.²

If moral realism is committed to the *Convergence Thesis*, then the realist needs to claim that most cases of *prima facie* moral disagreement are not fundamental, but can in principle be settled via argument between reasonable parties.³ Hence, rational and informed persons would converge in their moral judgements. In defence of this claim, Michael Smith has argued that moral debate has historically tended to result in convergence, and suggests that this is good inductive evidence in favour of the realist's position (Smith 1994, p. 188). In this paper, I shall assess the strength of this argument.

There are three sections. In the first section I outline the argument given by Smith and its more recent defenders, and identify the main points of contention. After presenting this argument, in section two I present some possible explanations for convergence in moral views which do not appeal to the existence of objective moral facts. I argue that such explanations, if plausible, would entail that moral convergence itself does not necessitate or otherwise provide support for moral realism. If Smith and similar moral realists are correct that there has been a historical tendency toward convergence in moral views, they would then need to establish *a posteriori* that this

¹ For instance: Mackie (1977); Williams (1985); Wright (1992); Smith (1994); Sturgeon (1994); Korsgaard (1996); Jackson (1998); Scanlon (1998); Pettit (1999), O'Neill (2000); Lillehammer (2004); Parfit (2011); Rowland (2016). For a denial of the *Convergence Thesis*, see McGrath (2010).

² The sense of 'objectivity' I am using here excludes moral relativism—the view that some moral judgements are true only relative to specific frameworks—from qualifying as a form of realism, since what determines moral frameworks are human perceptions, attitudes or practices.

³ I say 'most cases' of disagreement instead of 'all', because if there was just *one* fundamental disagreement—for instance: whether to give 20% or 30% of one's salary to charity—this would not undermine realism. I am grateful to Richard Rowland for this point.

convergence has occurred for the *right* (i.e. *rational*) reasons. I proceed in the third section to offer a potential refinement of the *type* of convergence to be explained—namely: broad *patterns* of convergence—and attempt to elucidate how this may revitalise the realist’s historical argument. I then argue that this manoeuvre is ultimately unsuccessful. I conclude that in the absence of a supporting *a posteriori* historical argument, simply identifying a general historical tendency towards convergence in moral views is not sufficient to motivate a plausible defence of moral realism from the challenge of moral disagreement. Rather, what this investigation indicates is the paramount importance of a *genuine history* of morality to any appeal to moral convergence as a basis for a meta-ethical position.

1. The Historical Tendency Toward Moral Convergence

Those who endorse the *Convergence Thesis* but maintain that there *are* significant fundamental disagreements deny that moral realism is true. To defend against this position, realists who endorse the *Convergence Thesis* need to show that most cases of fundamental disagreement are merely apparent. To this end, Michael Smith has offered three modes of response to the sceptic:

- A. First, we must remember that alongside such entrenched disagreements as we in fact find we also find areas of entrenched agreement...
- B. Second, when we look at current states of entrenched disagreement, we must remember that in the past similarly entrenched disagreements were removed *inter alia* via a process of moral argument...
- C. [Third], we must remember that where entrenched disagreements currently seem utterly intractable we can often explain why this is the case in ways that make them seem less threatening to the idea of a convergence in the opinions of fully rational creatures. (Smith, 1994, p. 188)

It is the second of these claims—which I shall call the *Historical Thesis*—that I shall focus upon in this paper.⁴ Smith’s suggestion here is that we can be confident that current seemingly intractable disagreements will be dissolved among fully rational agents, since this has been the general historical tendency hitherto. Hence, via induction, the moral realist need not be troubled by the sceptic’s evidence of contemporary disagreement:

...the empirical fact that moral argument tends to elicit the agreement of our fellows gives us reason to believe that there will be a convergence in our desires under conditions of full rationality (Smith, 1994, p. 187).

This is an initial step toward a stronger argument concerning the nature of this historical tendency. Smith continues:

For the best explanation of that tendency is our convergence upon a set of extremely unobvious *a priori* moral truths. And the truth of these unobvious *a priori* moral truths requires, in turn, a convergence in the desires that full rational creatures would have (Smith, 1994, p. 187).

The overall argument thus has two major components. The first is the *Historical Thesis*, an upshot of which, Smith suggests, is that there is a significantly greater degree of convergence across

⁴ Point 1 is a common strategy in defence of realism. Many of the reasons I will discuss shortly in response to point 2 can also be mobilised to respond to this line of argument. Point 3 claims that much disagreement can be explained in terms of irrationality (e.g. poor reasoning, or stubbornness), or reducible to ignorance about non-moral facts which inform moral judgements. For a defence of especially the latter, see Boyd (1988, p. 213); Rachels (1999, p. 23).

moral views now than ever before. This empirical claim is *prima facie* plausible. There does seem to be greater convergence in moral thought on a variety of issues than in previous periods of human history. For instance, slavery has steadily declined as a practice over the last few centuries. Within even the last twenty years, animal rights movements have increasingly gained support; a pattern which appears to be continuing. Similar cases could be made, as Smith writes, concerning “worker’s rights, women’s rights, democracy, and the like” (Smith 1994, p. 188).

From this first component, an abductive inference is then made to establish a second claim: that the *best explanation* for such convergence is that there are objective moral truths to be discovered. This move looks potentially promising for the realist. As Folke Tersman writes: “it does not seem so odd to say that the fact that people manage to agree in an area depends on the existence of truths in that area” (Tersman, 2006, p. 52). An analogy might be made here with natural science. Many physicists, for example, have disagreed about particular hypotheses. However, there tends to be agreement about these hypotheses over time, and the best explanation for this gradual agreement is that there *are* truths to be discovered in the scientific domain. The moral realist, the argument goes, is able to say the same thing about moral truths. Thus, the argument not only purportedly diffuses the problem of moral disagreement, but actually attempts to construct a positive argument for moral realism.

This argument from the *Historical Thesis* to moral realism has been mobilised to varying degrees in the secondary literature. Concerning the nature of moral thinking, Peter Singer writes that...

...the shift from a point of view that is disinterested between individuals within a group, but not between groups, to a point of view that is fully universal, is a tremendous change—so tremendous, in fact, that it is only just beginning to be accepted on the level of ethical reasoning and is still a long way from acceptance on the level of practice. Nevertheless, *it is the direction in which moral thought has been going since ancient times*. Is it an accident of history that this should be so, or is it the *direction in which our capacity to reason leads us?* (Singer, 1981, pp. 112–13, emphasis mine)

Here Singer endorses both (1) the *Historical Thesis*; and, in finding the explanation of convergence as simply an “accident of history” implausible, the realist proposal that (2) convergence is explained by the use of our rational capacities to accurately gain knowledge about a feature of the world. A similar argument is also given by David Brink. Brink agrees that there has been an increase in convergence of moral views, and claims that when people’s moral views “have undergone informed and reflective change” then this is “(defeasible) evidence of moral progress”, and hence evidence for moral realism (Brink, 1989, p. 208).

More recently, Michael Huemer has argued that the extent of the *Historical Thesis* and its direction towards liberalism is “among the most striking and important phenomena in human history” (Huemer, 2016, p. 1994). Huemer understands liberalism here to embody (1) the recognition of the *moral equality* of persons; (2) respect for the *dignity* of the individual; (3) resistance to unwarranted coercion and violence. He writes:

There has been enormous moral progress over human history. This progress is not just a matter of changing practices but of changing moral beliefs. Mainstream illiberal views of earlier centuries are shocking and absurd to modern readers. The trend is consistent across many issues: war, murder, slavery, democracy, women’s suffrage, racial segregation, torture, execution, colonization [...] This trend has been ongoing for millennia, accelerating in the last two centuries, and even the last 50 years, and it affects virtually every country on Earth (Huemer, 2016, pp. 1993-1994)

From this endorsement of the *Historical Thesis*, Huemer then moves to claim—like Smith, Singer and Brink—that moral realism is the best explanation of it:

Why was slavery abolished? Because slavery was unjust. Why have human beings become increasingly reluctant to go to war? Because war is horrible. Why has liberalism in general triumphed in human history? Because liberalism is correct. These, I suggest, are the most simple and natural explanations (Huemer, 2016, p. 2000)

The mechanism by which we discover these facts and make ‘moral progress’, according to Huemer, is a form of rationalist intuitionism familiar from G.E. Moore and W.D. Ross. This view has two components: (1) that humans possess a capacity for *a priori* knowledge derived from the ability to reason; (2) moral beliefs can be reliably formed in the same way we derive *a priori* knowledge in other fields (e.g. mathematics) (Huemer, 2016, p. 2003). This will require overcoming biases and other “non-rational influences on our moral belief-formation” (Huemer, 2016, p. 2004), which is partly achieved through moral argument and debate.

Huemer’s strategy for establishing realism is to first accept the *Convergence Thesis*: “if in fact we see no convergence in ethics, even over the course of centuries or millennia, then we have reason for doubting”, he claims, “that the field of ethics contains objective facts” (Huemer, 2016, p. 2001). The crucial step which aligns him with the likes of Smith, and which is the focus of this paper, is his subsequent claim that “by the same token, if convergence does occur in ethics, then we have reason for believing that ethics does contain objective facts” (Huemer, 2016, p. 2001). Since he emphatically endorses the *Historical Thesis*, he thus concludes that moral realism is true.

It is necessary to briefly clarify the criteria constitutive of good explanations, and identify what would count as the ‘best’ explanation of a given phenomenon. There are at least two virtues a potential explanation can instantiate: *consilience* and *simplicity* (Thagard, 1978, p. 79). A theory is more consilient than another when it not only coheres with other independently known facts, but when it also explains more types of things. A theory is more simple than another if while making fewer assumptions it explains at least as much. An explanation for a given phenomena will be ‘best’ when these two virtues are present and combine in particular ways to defeat competing explanations.⁵ There is, of course, more that could be said here. However, this minimal definition will suffice for my purposes.

2. Convergence for the Right Reasons

For the sake of argument, let us grant that the *Historical Thesis*—which is by no means uncontroversial—is true. In other words, let us agree that historically, there has been a relatively steady increase in moral agreement. In order to harness this empirical thesis in support of moral realism, more needs to be said about the *reason* for such convergence. Recall the analogy between convergence in the natural sciences and convergence in ethics. We tend to think that the best explanation for historical convergence in physics, for example, is that there are truths to be found in that domain. Moral realists like Smith and Huemer appeal to the above model in order to say the same for ethics.

⁵ For example, if A is more consilient *and* simpler than B, then A is clearly a better explanation; If A and B are equal in consilience but A is simpler, then A is a better explanation; If A and B are equal in simplicity but A is more consilient, then A is a better explanation (see Miller, 2017, pp. 176-177) .

Bernard Williams has expressed doubt about the appropriateness of this analogy:

The basic idea behind the distinction between the scientific and the ethical, expressed in terms of convergence, is very simple. In a scientific enquiry there should be convergence on an answer, where the best explanation of the convergence involves the idea that the answer represents how things are; in the area of the ethical [...] there is no such coherent hope. The distinction does not turn on any difference in whether convergence will actually occur, and it is important that this is not what the answer is about. It might well turn out that there is convergence in ethical outlook, at least among human beings. The point of the contrast is that, even if this happens, it will not be correct to think it has come about because convergence has been guided by how things actually are, whereas convergence in the sciences might be explained that way if it does happen. (Williams, 1985, p. 136)

Williams' concern is that convergence in moral views may well occur, but that unlike in the natural sciences, this would not be indicative of a greater comprehension of supposed facts of the matter. At present this is a thesis rather than an argument. In order to press the objection that there is a disanalogy between these domains, plausible reasons must be offered which could explain the *Historical Thesis* without recourse to moral facts.

Smith's argument has come under attack at least partly because it ignores such reasons, and thus too hastily draws the abductive inference from historical convergence in moral views to realism.⁶ Let us now consider some of these possible reasons, which, because they do not stem from rational moral debate, I shall call *arational reasons*. From such reasons, there are two separate challenges pertinent to the realist argument under consideration. Firstly, even if it is true that moral argument has tended to result in convergence between initially disagreeing parties, Smith, Huemer, and the like, need it to be the case that the parties which consequently amended their moral views did not do so for arational reasons. Secondly, it seems—and Smith and Huemer seem to acknowledge—that convergence in moral views can be produced for reasons *other than moral argument*. If such reasons are arational, this undermines their abductive inference. I shall consider each challenge in turn.

2.1. *The Efficacy of Moral Argument in Producing Convergence*

In order to mobilise the claim that “moral argument tends to illicit the agreement of our fellows” in support of moral realism, it needs to be the case that at least one party to a moral dispute is (1) exposed to sound arguments for an opposing thesis; (2) *recognises* the argument(s) as sound, and (3) adopts the new thesis *on those grounds*. But there are good reasons to hold that this is not always—and, importantly, *has* not always been—the case. There are at least three possible circumstances in which moral argument can illicit agreement for arational reasons.

To begin with, as is well known, many speakers can be persuasive irrespective of the plausibility of the position they offer. One way in which this can be the case—as Plato was eager to demonstrate—is via a talent in rhetoric and oration. In skilfully employing certain phrases and emphasis at the right times, one can effectively ‘sell’ an argument which may otherwise be unsound

⁶ I say at least partly, because the argument—in Smith's version and others which appeal to rational reflection and debate more broadly—have also been attacked on the grounds that rational debate and reflection is severely difficult for people to do because of evolutionary and social conditioning which predispose people to make certain moral judgements (Tersman, 2006, p. 28); that humans are susceptible to a host of biases and framing effects (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006); that humans tend to be poor at both noticing and correcting inconsistencies and incoherences in their own beliefs and arguments, and appreciating the strengths of opposing positions (Mercier and Sperber, 2011).

or fallacious. An alternative way in which a speaker may be persuasive without necessarily having plausible arguments may be due to how their particular physical features are perceived by their audience. One of the many cognitive biases that humans are prone to concerns discriminatory treatment of those who are deemed beautiful on the one hand, and average or ugly on the other. This ‘beauty bias’ (Rhode, 2010) can cause audiences to concede more to speakers whom they perceive to be attractive in some capacity.⁷ This bias has recently been investigated in responses to fairness, in which it was found in one study that Chinese men between 18 and 26 are more likely to accept an unfair offer when it is given by an attractive woman (Meng, et. al, 2015). That attractiveness of a speaker can undermine rational responses suggests an additional obstacle to considering moral argument a reliable mechanism for establishing a convergence indicative of truth. In drawing a distinction between persuasiveness and plausibility in these two ways (and no doubt others), one can allow that parties to a moral dispute may, after debate, converge in their views for arational reasons.

A second way in which it might be possible for moral argument to illicit agreement for arational reasons may be due to a fear of otherwise being at odds with the majority, or a “lack of courage to dissent” (Tersman, 2006, p. 52). For example, in a social experiment conducted by M.A. Sherif, a number of individuals initially perceived very different movements when a spot of light was projected in a dark room in such a way that it appeared to move. However, when they had to describe the movements to the rest of the group, their judgments tended to converge (Sherif, 1936). A plausible explanation of this convergence is a fear of standing out—perhaps of appearing stupid in the eyes of peers—if one’s judgements significantly differ from the majority. Like the above case, this mechanism could well partly explain convergence in *moral* views via debate. Indeed, fear of appearing to dissent from whichever established moral norms may justifiably be greater in some respects, given that *moral* evaluation of character is typically accorded tremendous (perhaps paramount) importance.⁸

David Sobel has recently claimed that there is another way in which moral argument has historically led to convergence absent of rational reasons: arguments of one party to a moral dispute have often been “addressed to those poorly positioned to object” (Sobel, 2016, p. 113). Sobel presumably means that many have often lacked access to all the relevant non-moral facts, but does not explore this claim further. Nevertheless, the following may also be an instance of what he has in mind. Parties to a moral dispute often share the same cultural background and normative vocabulary to a significant extent. However, Smith ultimately needs cases of convergence in which parties to a moral dispute have radically different cultural backgrounds and normative vocabulary. But much of the ‘moral argument’ in these cases has historically taken place in a social arena in which speakers are not on an equal footing. For instance, interactions between groups of radically different cultural backgrounds which take place within the same modern state—via either violent or non-violent occupation of lands—can make those who hold certain moral views a minority. In such cases, dissenters from the established norms can be indirectly deprived of the means of the resources which inform and sustain their moral (and non-moral) views. This can be encouraged, for example, by mechanisms of epistemic injustice—i.e. when persons fail to believe speakers due to inappropriate prejudices (Fricker, 2007)—within the majority. Or, perhaps at the institutional level,

⁷ Deborah Rhode has explored this bias in detail and its legal implications. See chapters 1 and 2 especially of Rhode, 2010.

⁸ The implications of this (e.g. one’s status in society which enables opportunities; one’s abiding by the law which may be partly informed by the moral norms of a society) may give one excellent prudential reasons to at least *appear* to agree with the majority in moral matters.

the dynamics of the social and cultural interface are directed in favour of the ruling power's own normative outlook. Subsequently, from the earliest of stages, individuals within such a society have less resources to contest given norms, including moral norms. In this way, moral argument which leads to convergence may be addressed—as Sobel claims—to many persons who are not well-positioned to protest.⁹

From these three examples it is clear that reliance upon an observation that 'moral argument tends to illicit agreement' *alone* cannot support the claim that the best explanation for such agreement is that there are *a priori* moral truths to be discovered. What realists like Smith need would be an additional argument to show that *in actual fact* the agreement that has resulted from moral argument historically has been rational. Moreover, that the mechanisms described above (and no doubt others) were not causally responsible for—or at best were ancillary to—observable convergence in moral views.

This section began by drawing attention to a proposed distinction between convergence in morality and convergence in science (Williams, 1985, p. 136). But couldn't the three factors presented above as possible explanations of the former equally in principle influence or explain the latter? If so, then so long as we retain the view that historical convergence in the sciences allows us to infer the presence of scientific facts, we should be entitled to do the same in the moral domain, even if the three factors mentioned so far are present. However, there are good reasons to believe that these three factors do *not* influence or explain widespread scientific agreement.

J.L. Mackie explains the relevant difference between the two domains in this respect in the following way: in science when there are *disagreements*, this “results from speculative inferences or explanatory hypotheses based on inadequate evidence” (Mackie, 1977, p. 36). But, Mackie claims, this is hardly plausible in cases of fundamental *moral* disagreement. The thought here, I take it, is that in biology, for example, underlying any disagreement is typically a *deeper agreement* about the *method* to resolve that disagreement. The availability of certain data by way of an experiment of kind *X* or *Y*, they agree, would settle the dispute. In virtue of this, disagreements in scientific discourse occur only at a surface level: they are posited only within a context of pre-established agreement about the means of resolving them. But this doesn't appear to be true of cases of *moral* disagreement. There are *some* methods which people often use in moral theorising to convince others they are wrong, for example: thought experiments, conceptual distinctions, empathising, drawing analogies. However, there is no consensus about the status of these proposed methods. While scientific domains enjoy a near-universally accepted and reliable belief-forming mechanism for which to settle disagreements, there is no such deeper mechanism in the moral domain. This disanalogy is what allows for the possibility of *fundamental* moral disagreements, and is what prompts Mackie to claim that moral disagreements are better explained as reflecting “people's adherence to and participation in different ways of life” (Mackie, 1977, p. 36) as opposed to badly mistaken beliefs about objective matters of fact.

Crucial for my purposes here is the claim that, furthermore, we have no reason to suspect that scientists globally have coincidentally or systematically failed to employ this method due to the three arational factors above over vast periods of time. Fear of dissent, for example, while plausible with respect to moral norms (for the reasons already mentioned), is implausible in scientific disciplines

⁹ Examples of this mechanism of implicit coercion are particularly apt in colonial and post-colonial societies. A concrete example can be seen in the Australian Aboriginal context. For an in-depth analysis, see in particular Nakata (2007) and Moreton-Robinson (2015).

which intrinsically seek to make *new* discoveries and break moulds. So while there is good reason to suppose that convergence in scientific views allows us to infer the presence of scientific facts, convergence in moral views does not by itself allow us to infer the presence of moral facts.

2.2. *Non-Argument-Based Arational Convergence*

Moral argument may produce convergence for arational reasons, but there may also be arational reasons for convergence in moral views independently of moral argument. Smith acknowledges this point when he writes that “we must remember that in the past similarly entrenched disagreements were removed *inter alia* via a process of moral argument” (Smith, 1994, p. 188). If things other than moral argument can produce convergence, then this poses a problem for any attempt to directly infer the truth of moral realism from the *Historical Thesis*. Let us consider what some of these arational reasons for convergence might be.

There is undoubtedly a significantly greater degree of convergence in judgements of *taste* of various kinds within various cultures than ever before (e.g. fashion, dining, consumer habits). For example more and more people are using the same kinds of mobile phones and wearing the same brands of sneakers. It is implausible, however, to suppose that this convergence in judgements of taste is due to *rational* reasons in Smith’s sense. Rather, we would appeal to factors such as globalisation, socio-economic climate, needs and desires, advertising, tastes, and so forth, in order to explain this convergence and its causes. But why suppose that *moral* judgements are exempt from these arational forces? That psychological dispositions might play an intimate (or perhaps primary) role in the social viability of particular moral norms is a point to which I shall return in the next section.

A second possible arational reason for convergence in moral views is that convergence can be considered valuable *itself*, with what is *converged upon* not mattering much—within parameters—to the debate participants (Joyce, 2001, p. 89).¹⁰ To give an analogy: when a football team decides on the colour of their home kit, it doesn’t intrinsically matter whether they choose blue or red, as long as all of the team have the *same* colour, so as not to confuse the players in a given match. Rules of grammar and vocabulary function in a similar fashion. It does not matter much whether a community uses the word ‘car’ or ‘flower’ to correspond to a vehicle, only that everyone within that community uses the same word for the same phenomenon. In like manner, it is plausible that a community of persons, each of whom make diverse moral judgements, would at least eventually come to endorse similar *moral* views in the interests of social cohesion.¹¹

Convergence in moral views may also arise not from rational debate, but from sustained political pressures on dissenters. This may take two forms. I have already discussed types of implicit coercion above (i.e. epistemic injustice; biased cultural interface). But political coercion can be, and often has been, explicit. In such cases, individuals and groups are given compelling prudential reasons to adopt the dominant power’s norms. These reasons might manifest in positive incentives—such as monetary advantages or opportunities within a social hierarchy—or negative incentives,

¹⁰ As Joyce notes, there is already a presumption here in that two parties debating are *already* in dialogue with one another, negotiating over an *already* agreed idea that convergence is desirable (Joyce, 2001, p. 90).

¹¹ On this point, one is immediately reminded of Nietzsche’s speculation about the earliest human societies forming for survival, and the compulsion to have a shared custom which commands obedience, whatever it may be: “any custom is better than no custom” (Nietzsche, 1997, §16).

such as threat of punishment or persecution. These manifestations of pressure are historically familiar. For example, from the 7th century onwards, non-muslims living within an Islamic state (*Dhimmis*) were given legal protection of their rights (with some limits) on the condition that they payed the *Jizya* tax. Avoiding economic penalisation (not to mention other social penalisation) by embracing the normative outlook of their Islamic rulers at the very least provided excellent negative reasons for these citizens to endorse it. Gradually, subsequent citizens would internalise such norms, thus encouraging greater convergence in normative views. An example of political pressure for convergence manifesting in positive incentives might be found in the Christianisation of Scandinavia between the 8th and 12th centuries. Not only was adopting Christianity useful geopolitically for the Danes' autonomy in the 10th century—then under threat from the Germans—but the wealth and resources of the Christians they encountered was unparalleled, and provided an impetus for the nobility to convert.

3. Patterns of Convergence: A Realist Reply?

At this point the realist may enjoin a reply that the arational reasons mentioned are not sufficient to explain the specific *type* of historical convergence that proponents of Smith's argument are concerned with. What moral realists like Smith and Huemer are interested in, we might say, is not isolated cases in which individuals or a particular society came to agree that, for example, torture is morally wrong. Rather, what is best explained by the hypothesis that there are moral facts are broad *trends* or *patterns* of convergence, caused by the mechanism of rational and informed debate. It is this phenomenon which Brink alludes to when we writes that:

...with each of these practices, in almost all cases where people's moral attitudes toward the practice have undergone informed and reflective change, they have changed in the same way (with these practices, from approval to disapproval and not the other way around). When changes in moral consciousness exhibit this sort of *pattern*, this is further reason to view the changes as progress. (Brink 1989, pp. 208-209 - emphasis mine)

A merit of moral realism, it is suggested, is that it can account for why moral argument is a mechanism which has tended to produce trends of convergence in the same direction over a very long period of history, and in different places. It would be an extraordinary coincidence, the objection goes, if the significant convergence observable today in different parts of the world—e.g. on the claim that slavery is morally wrong—has been a result of a collection of individual agreements produced by, say, fear of dissent from the majority, or political pressures.

The concern is also expressed by Huemer, who draws attention to how slavery was (supposedly) abolished across the world over a relatively short period, and how, at the same time, women's suffrage was gaining prominence, democracy was spreading, torture was becoming less tolerated, and so forth (Huemer, 2016, p. 1999).¹² His realist view attempts to claim a privileged way of accounting for this pattern: people were increasingly overcoming their biases and rationally considering the morality of various practices. But for the anti-realist, Huemer claims that it is “very difficult to come up with explanations for this broad phenomenon that don't require us to posit large coincidences” (Huemer, 2016, p. 2007).

This potential objection has also been formulated clearly by Shaun Nichols, who writes that:

¹² I shall grant, for the sake of argument, that Huemer is correct about this empirical data.

...the moral progress claim appeals to a broad set of changes in norms, over hundreds of years and in many different arenas. It is this broad trend that needs to be explained. It would indeed be striking if the entire truth were to be told by a series of individual revisionist stories. Then the trend would be chalked up to historical accident after all, and that...seems highly unlikely. No, if we are to successfully challenge the moral progress account, we need an alternative explanation for the broad trend. Merely finding fault with the moral progress proposal will not suffice. One really needs to develop an alternative. (Nichols, 2004, p. 154)

Without a plausible alternative explanation of this pervasive trend, it appears that we would have reason to understand the claim that moral argument tends to illicit the agreement of our fellows as better supported by a realist position as opposed to an anti-realist one. However, augmenting Smith's argument in this way does not ultimately rescue it. While appealing to such patterns of convergence reduces the explanatory potency of some of the arational reasons mentioned, alternative explanations *are* available by way of genealogies of morals.

A genealogy seeks to demonstrate how our current beliefs, attitudes and practices have historically developed and transformed from earlier origins in which they were absent. As such they attempt to identify and understand the complex social processes and sentiments which *explain* them, and what *sustains* them. By means of contrast, a genealogy of morals typically demonstrates via this process of gradual transformation that contemporary values and practices are distinctive and anachronistic, as opposed to unalterable, timeless, and universal.¹³

The method of genealogy has been applied at various times to *moral* values, beliefs, and attitudes. Different genealogists have offered different mechanisms as explanations for moral evaluations. Revisionary genealogies typically seek to expose moral thinking or substantive moral judgements as in some way problematic. For example: that they harbour some form of internal inconsistency; that they are products of, and continue to sustain, a kind of social oppression; or that they are disguised outlets for sentiments and deep-seated psychological dispositions central to the human condition. However, even many vindicatory genealogies of morality have sought to identify moral judgements as dependent upon variously conditioned *sentiments* as opposed to mind-independent truths (particularly in broadly utilitarian traditions, including the likes of Hume, Mill, and Paul Rée).

Crucial for my purposes here is that, typically, genealogies of morals characterise the nature of this historical process of transformation as *arational* as opposed to teleological.¹⁴ This form of explanation is the one preferred by Nichols, who in making use of recent inter-disciplinary empirical evidence argues that “emotional responses constitute one important set of mechanisms that affects the cultural viability of norms. Norms that ‘resonate’ with our emotional repertoire will be more likely to survive than other norms” (Nichols, 2004, p. 118). Of course, there are a wide range of genealogical stories compatible with this account of one's basic non-cognitive affects orientating one's values and normative judgements.

To take one such story, it may be—as Nietzsche postulates in the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*—that particular moral norms which prevail in Europe have evolved as part of a strategy devised by the oppressed and downtrodden in society in order to (1) protect themselves from harm

¹³ See Forster (2011) for a very helpful analysis of the genealogical method.

¹⁴ The paradigmatic exception to this would be Hegel, who views history as broadly revealing and ever perfected self-consciousness. Again see Forster (2011) for how Hegel differs from others in the genealogical tradition.

by the powerful; (2) enact revenge upon the powerful via reconfiguring the social balance of power in their own favour. In Nietzsche's view, this is not a conscious decision based on reflection about the best course of action. Rather, he first makes the plausible psychological claim that various forms of social oppression in a hierarchal society produce a desire for revenge against the culpable cause of suffering (the aristocratic class). He then claims that if this desire for revenge cannot be successfully discharged outwardly against the oppressors (as is the case with the weaker oppressed class), it gradually builds up into a bitter and festering *ressentiment*. This seething hatred and resentment eventually gives birth sub-consciously to a new set of values—those which are a literal *inversion* of the prevailing aristocratic values—that serve to protect the weak and disempower the strong. These values, according to Nietzsche, are those which constitute contemporary European morality: equality, compassion, happiness, altruism, and more.

The propagation of this new system of values is enabled by their ability to tap into the deep-rooted psychological dispositions of those in other hierarchal societies which, Nietzsche thinks, are inevitably infected with the same sentiments. According to this genealogical story—which I have only been able to very briefly canvass here—a pattern or trend of convergence in moral views is possibly and plausibly explained by social dynamics enabled by fundamental features of the human condition. Equality, for example, is so readily endorsed (according to this view) because its widespread acceptance affords a kind of safety and security which at least the majority of humans perceive as in their interests. This 'herd instinct' in humans encourages similarity and passivity, provoking greater convergence in moral views which can *overlap* (e.g. equality manifesting in different social struggles).

A possible reservation one might have about a genealogical mechanism such as Nietzsche's is whether it can satisfactorily explain what appears as moral *progress* over time. Perhaps such a story can account for convergence in moral views, but not what *continues* to move this convergence toward a *particular* direction. It is this which realists might claim to exclusively have the resources to describe as *better* or *worse* states of affairs.¹⁵ Why is it, one might ask, that the value of equality is manifested in persistently wider moral domains (e.g. with respect to suffrage, wages, marriage, and so forth) and concerning a wider moral community (e.g. across gender, sexual orientation, species, ability, and so forth)? Indeed, Huemer has just this concern: "Purely cultural accounts of the source of morals leave us at a loss to explain why the culture itself has moved in a given direction over time" (Huemer, 2016, p. 2007).

However, this reservation seems to me unwarranted. A genealogy of the kind being discussed can (and will) understand what appears as 'moral progress'—i.e. a continual pattern of convergence in a certain direction—as explicable in terms of better serving the social function(s) for which those values were devised.¹⁶ A particular value, *V*, may continue to manifest in wider domains and across a broader category of agents because the social function which gives rise to it, *F*, is more effectively realised. So in the Nietzschean story, equality (*V*), for instance, both is sustained and expands in a particular direction (partly) because more efficient *means* of manifesting its social function of discouraging rarity in the interests of protecting the weak (*F*) are gradually discovered. Moreover, a genealogical understanding of moral beliefs in terms of their function wields *predictive* power. If one identifies that equality is born from and sustained by certain sentiments as a result of particular

¹⁵ This point was suggested to me by an anonymous reviewer, to whom I am grateful.

¹⁶ For attention to a *functional* understanding of moral norms (and its predictive power) as a specific response to Huemer's realism, see Hopster, (2019), especially section 5.2.3.

social power imbalances, for instance, then the anti-realist has the resources to anticipate (within limits): (a) that similar values will emerge in societies with similar social structures, and (b) future mutations of moral norms in light of how social structures might change (e.g. due to increases or decreases in competition for resources).

It is not the task of this paper to defend a specifically Nietzschean genealogy. Nietzsche's story is by no means the only possible genealogical account of the origins and development of our moral judgements.¹⁷ As Nichols claims: "The problem with such origin explanations is not that we don't have any good explanations, but rather that we have too many good explanations, and not enough historical evidence to decide between them" (Nichols, 2004, p. 120). An in-depth analysis of particular genealogies is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, the important point is that such explanations of broad patterns of convergence in moral judgements need not postulate moral facts, and their mere possibility is sufficient to undermine the refined version of Smith-style arguments.

Conclusion

The reasons I have addressed—while certainly not exhaustive—provide possible explanations for the *Historical Thesis* which do not depend on the truth of moral realism. Recall Smith's claim that "we must remember that in the past similarly entrenched disagreements were removed *inter alia* via a process of moral argument" (Smith, 1994, p. 188). Given that the mechanisms outlined above—and no doubt others—might explain the *Historical Thesis* without appeal to moral facts, it is clear that Smith's concession of "*inter alia*" deprives his historical argument of its force.¹⁸ The crucial point here is that convergence *in itself* cannot serve as evidence of the truth of moral realism. Huemer claimed that "Anti-realists can't have it both ways: if divergence would be evidence against realism, then convergence would be evidence for realism" (Huemer, 2016, p. 2001). But attention to the multitude of possible *arational* reasons for patterns of convergence opens the space to deny this proposed symmetry.

I must be clear that my arguments in this paper concern only *folk* moral disagreement and progress, and not that of 'experts' (i.e. moral philosophers). While I maintain a guarded scepticism about whether convergence among moral experts would constitute any evidence in favour of realism, my arguments here do not *obviously* apply to that domain. What I have argued is that in the *folk* domain, what is required for Smith and others to invoke realism as the best explanation of convergence is an additional *a posteriori* argument which provides support for two claims: (1) that moral argument is *in fact* its cause; (2) moral argument encouraged convergence *for the right reasons*. Such an argument, if plausible, will by consequence assign only a peripheral role to the arational explanations mentioned above. As Sobel puts this point:

¹⁷ Nor is this type of genealogy the only method of accounting for patterns of convergence. For an account of norms as evolutionary adaptations see Ruse and Wilson (1986).

¹⁸ Here I concur with Richard Joyce, who writes that the "*inter alia*" is an admission which "effectively dismantles Smith's argument" (Joyce, 2001, p. 88). See also Simon Fitzpatrick who, although sympathetic to realism in the face of moral disagreement, similarly claims that due to the mere possibility of multiple arational explanations, a Smith-style argument from straightforward convergence to moral realism is implausible: "apparent instances of moral agreement may not be the output of a process of moral inquiry either, but rather the product of joint cultural inheritance, or perhaps the constraints imposed by an innate normative grammar. Thus, contrary to realists (e.g. Smith, 1994) that have sought to use arguments from agreement to establish the reliability of moral inquiry, convergence on the truth may not provide the best explanation for the cases of moral agreement that we do find" (Fitzpatrick, 2014, p. 189).

Smith's historical case about a tendency towards convergence will have to be genuinely historical. It will have to persuade us of the crucial role of facts, logic, and reason in explaining the history of convergence and the secondary role of force, guile, and a shared thick moral vocabulary (Sobel, 2016, p. 113)

In the absence of this historical argument, the Smith-style strategy cannot be mobilised in support of moral realism. Rather, what this investigation suggests is that any meta-ethical argument that appeals to moral convergence must be supported by genuine historical enquiry.

Bibliography

- Boyd, Richard, (1988), "How To Be a Moral Realist", in G. Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism*, Cornell University Press.
- Brink, David, (1989), *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Cambridge University Press.
- Enoch, David, (2009), "How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?", *Journal of Ethics*, 15.
- Fitzpatrick, Simon, (2014), "Moral Realism, Moral Disagreement, and Moral Psychology", *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 43, Issue 2, pp. 161-190.
- Forster, Michael, (2011), "Genealogy", *American Dialectic*, Vol. 1, No. 2.
- Fricker, Miranda, (2007), *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford University Press.
- Hopster, Jeroen, (2019), "Explaining Historical Moral Convergence: The Empirical Case Against Realist Intuitionism", *Philosophical Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-019-01251-x>
- Huemer, Michael, (2016), "A Liberal Realist Answer to Debunking Skeptics: The Empirical Case for Realism", *Philosophical Studies*: 173.
- Jackson, Frank., (1998), *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, Oxford University Press.
- Joyce, Richard, (2001), *The Myth of Morality*, Cambridge University Press.
- Korsgaard, Christine, (1996), *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, Cambridge University Press.
- Lillehammer, Hallvard, (2004), "Moral Error Theory", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 104.
- Mackie, John, (1977), *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- McGrath, Sarah, (2010), "Moral Realism Without Convergence", *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 38, 2.
- Mercier, H. and Sperber, D, (2011), "Why Do Humans Reason? Arguments for an Argumentative Theory", *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, 34, 57N111.
- Miller, Alexander, (2017), *Contemporary Metaethics: An Introduction*, Polity.
- Moreton-Robinson, Aileen, (2015), *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, University of Minnesota Press.
- Meng, Liang; Ma, Qingguo; Hu, Yue; Jiang, Shushu, (2010), "The Undermining Effect of Facial Attractiveness on Brain Responses to Fairness in the Ultimatum Game: an ERP Study", *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, 9: 77.
- Nichols, Shaun, (2004), *Sentimental Rules*, Oxford University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, (1997), *Daybreak*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press
- Nakata, Martin, (2007), "The Cultural Interface", *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, Vol. 36, Supplement.
- O'Neill, Onora, (2000), *Bounds of Justice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Parfit, Derek, (2011), *On What Matters Volume 2*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pettit, Phillip, (1999), "A Theory of Normal and Ideal Conditions", *Philosophical Studies*, 96.
- Rachels, James, (1999), *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, (3rd ed.), New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Rhode, Deborah, (2010), *The Beauty Bias*, Oxford University Press.
- Rowland, Richard, (2016), "The Significance of Significant Moral Disagreement", *Noûs*, 50(4).
- Ruse, M., and E. Wilson. (1986), "Moral Philosophy as Applied Science", *Philosophy* 61:173–92.
- Scanlon, T. M., (1998), *What We Owe to Each Other*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Singer, Peter, (1981), *The Expanding Circle*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, W., (2006), "Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology", In M. Timmons and T. Horgan (eds.), *Metaethics After Moore*, Oxford University Press.
- Sobel, David, (2016), *From Valuing to Value: Towards a Defense of Subjectivism*, Oxford University Press.
- Shafer-Landau, Russ, (1994), "Ethical Disagreement, Ethical Objectivism and Moral

- Indeterminacy”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 54.
- Sherif, Muzafer, (1936), *The Psychology of Social Norms*, Harper & Row.
- Smith, Michael, (1994), *The Moral Problem*, Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sturgeon, Nicholas, (1994), “Moral Disagreement and Moral Relativism”, *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 11.
- Tersman, Folke, (2006), *Moral Disagreement*, Cambridge University Press.
- Thagard, Paul, (1978), “The Best Explanation: Criteria for Theory Choice”, *Journal of Philosophy* 75.
- Williams, Bernard, (1985), *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Fontana.
- Wright, Crispin, (1992), *Truth and Objectivity*, Harvard University Press.