

Famine, Affluence and Intuitions: Evolutionary Debunking Proves Too Much

Geoffrey S. Holtzman
Franklin and Marshall College

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Abstract

Moral theorists like Singer (2005) and Greene (2014) argue that we should discount intuitions about ‘up-close-and-personal’ moral dilemmas because they are more likely than intuitions about ‘impersonal’ dilemmas to be artifacts of evolution. But by that reasoning, it seems we should ignore the evolved, ‘up-close-and-personal’ intuition to save a drowning child in light of the too-new-to-be-evolved, ‘impersonal’ intuition that we need not donate to international famine relief (contra Singer 1972; Greene 2008). This conclusion seems mistaken and horrifying, yet it cannot be the case both that ‘up-close-and-personal’ intuitions are more reliable than ‘impersonal’ intuitions, and vice versa. Thus, Singer’s (2005) evolutionary debunking argument proves too much, and should not be taken seriously. However, Singer’s debunking argument is typical of an entire class of arguments that seeks to debunk normative principles by reference to evolution. This entire class of argument, I argue, therefore also proves too much to be taken seriously.

Keywords

Debunking, evolutionary psychology, metaethics, moral psychology, normative ethics.

This essay aims to make two points—one narrow, one broad. First and more narrowly, it aims to show that when taken together, two of Peter Singer’s most famous arguments (1972, 2005) form a destructive dilemma. Each argument implies a principle that contradicts the other, so at least one of these arguments must be mistaken. Second and more broadly, it aims to make a general point about an entire class of evolutionary debunking arguments (EDAs)—namely, normative evolutionary debunking arguments (NEDAs).

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In developing my narrower point, I show that in at least one famous case, the logic of NEDAs can just as easily be exploited to defend absurdly immoral claims as it can to defend plausible moral claims. This alone might be sufficient to show that the general form of such arguments should not be trusted. But in developing my broader point, I draw on other well-known NEDAs to demonstrate how an entire class of EDAs ‘proves too much’ to prove anything at all. I consider this general contention—that NEDAs prove too much to be taken seriously—to be the main point of this essay.

1 Two kinds of evolutionary debunking

The thought that Darwinism might undermine ethics is nearly as old as Darwin’s evolutionary theory itself (Darwin 1871/2009: 70–106, Darwin 1881). But with renewed interest in moral psychology over the past two decades, interest in EDAs has also been renewed. Among critics, there is growing consensus (Wielenberg 2010, Kahane 2011, Vavova 2014) that EDAs attacking broad *metaethical* theses like realism (Street 2006) are less plausible than EDAs targeting specific *normative* theses like deontology (Singer 2005, Greene 2008) and ethical altruism (Joyce 2001: 141–8, cf. Singer 1982). One major strategy for critics of EDAs, then, has been to argue that every NEDA eventually “collapses into the previous, more ambitious argument” against realism (Vavova 2014). And from this, it would follow that not only the *targeted* normative principle, but also all of its alternatives would be debunked, thus defeating the entire purpose of employing a NEDA in the first place. However, some proponents of EDAs have argued that these critics are “paying insufficient attention to the distinction between” *particular* moral judgments on the one hand, and the tendency to make moral judgments *at all* on the other (Fraser 2014).

The analysis I present here is intended to make an end-run around these issues, and to simplify and strengthen the argument against NEDAs in two ways. First, I will focus less on what is wrong with NEDAs in *theory*, and more on developing a concrete example of how a specific evolutionary story can be developed in favor of contradictory conclusions *in practice*. And second, I will not take the usual *indirect* route—i.e., from anti-deontology, to anti-realism, to

anti-utilitarianism—to reveal this contradiction. Instead, I will *directly* apply the same EDA reasoning that has been used to undermine deontology to undermine utilitarianism. I thereby avoid any possibility of conflating normative and metaethical EDAs (Fraser 2014) since I only examine the former. I accomplish this by focusing on two well-known articles by utilitarian Peter Singer, before expanding the scope of my argument to consider other NEDAs as well.

2 Background, purpose, and method

In “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” Singer (1972) claims that most individuals living significantly above the poverty line are morally obliged to donate much of their money to charity. Later, in “Ethics and Intuitions,” Singer (2005) claims that most people are obliged to push a person off a footbridge, to certain death, if doing so will save the lives of five other people.¹ Singer’s argumentative strategies in the two articles are in many ways similar, but they diverge at a critical point. In the later article, Singer (2005) invokes an EDA that, if applied to his earlier (1972) article, would entirely undermine the argument there. Thus, Singer’s arguments cannot both be correct. This illustrates a broader point about so-called evolutionary debunking.

NEDAs, especially as employed by Singer and other utilitarians, are capable of ‘proving too much’ to be taken seriously. For every NEDA that supposedly justifies sacrificing one life to save five, we can construct a NEDA that supposedly justifies letting a child drown to save some clothes. Thus, NEDAs not only ‘prove’ more than the utilitarian is willing to accept, but more than most non-utilitarians are willing to accept as well—or so I argue here.

To illustrate this point, I first reexamine the reasoning in “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (§3), and then that in “Ethics and Intuitions” (§4). After elucidating the principles entailed by each argument, I point out that those essays imply contradictory moral principles, and that therefore the arguments within them cannot both be sound (§5). I then use Singer’s own words from *Ethics and*

¹ Much of Singer’s (2005) discussion focuses on the permissibility of doing so, but he also asserts that it is *right* to do so and that we *should*, thus implying an obligation.

Intuitions to argue against the thesis he defends in “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (§6). Next, I intensify my critique by showing that “Ethics and Intuitions” borders on internal inconsistency, and broaden my view by showing that inconsistencies across and within arguments pervade the NEDA literature (§7). I conclude by pointing out that if evolution cannot justify certain moral intuitions from a normative ethical perspective, then it also cannot explain away those intuitions (§8).

3 *Famine, Affluence, and Morality* assumes proximity as default

Singer (1972: 237) suggests that, in general, people “ought to [...] give everything they do not really need to famine relief.” In fact, he believes that for many of us, it is not merely charitable or generous to give money away, but rather that “it is wrong not to do so” since “the traditional distinction between duty and charity cannot be drawn” (Singer 1972: 235). He attempts to defend these views by arguing that during a famine in East Bengal, Americans living significantly above the poverty line are morally obliged to donate much of their savings and incomes to relief efforts.

In mounting this argument, Singer draws an analogy to our ostensible obligation to save a drowning child, even if saving that child will muddy and presumably ruin the clothes we are wearing. Singer asserts that since we are obliged to sacrifice our clothing to save a child’s life, we must also be obliged to sacrifice its monetary equivalent to save a life in the original case. On Singer’s view, there is a simple reason for this: There are no morally relevant differences between the cases. His argument thus implies the following:

- (1) If we are obliged to sacrifice x dollars to save persons y who are physically near to us, then (all else being equal) we are obliged to sacrifice x dollars to save persons z who are physically distant from us.

But even if we grant (1), it does not follow that we are obliged to donate to famine relief (i.e., save person z), since it is not trivial to assert that we are obliged to save the drowning child (i.e., save person y). Singer himself concedes that his conclusion depends on an assumption that he takes to be uncontroversial: “if it is in our power

to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it” (1972: 235). This assumed fact, in conjunction with (1), is taken to imply that we should save a distant starving child’s life if all it will cost us is something like the monetary equivalent of the clothes we are wearing.

I see no logical inconsistencies in this argument, taken on its own. Before moving on, however, it is worth briefly noting two factual premises of the argument to which one might object. First, (1) overlooks a basic fact of hedonic psychology that utilitarians often miss. It is far more painful for a person to watch a child drown in front of her eyes than it is to possess the abstract awareness that a famine is occurring halfway across the world. If we are to conform to Mill’s utilitarian imperative to be as “impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator” (1863/2001: 17), then it should not matter that the person who would undergo such pain is the person faced with the moral choice. Saving a child who is drowning right in front of us can eliminate certain pain that donating to international charity relief cannot, a fact not insignificant to the Millian utilitarian.

Second, it could be argued that the clothing to be sacrificed in the drowning case actually is morally significant. Had the clothing not been ruined, its monetary equivalent could have been donated to charity relief. For the sake of argument, I will set both of these issues aside and not return to them. My argument will not depend on them.

4 *Ethics and Intuitions* assumes distance as default

Singer (2005) later defends the view that in ‘trolley problems’ (Foot 1967, Thompson 1976), a person should always sacrifice one life to save five. In a typical trolley problem, a trolley is coming down a track and is certain to kill five people unless you intervene. Different trolley problems differ in exactly how you intervene, but all are similar in one respect. Your intervention would spare the lives of five people who are initially in the trolley’s path, but would lead to the death of one person who otherwise would not have been harmed.

Singer deploys an EDA in defense of the claim that if we can save five people specifically by pushing one person off a footbridge and

into the path of the trolley, causing that person's death, we should. Singer again defends his claim by analogy. He asks us to consider the original trolley problem (Foot 1967), in which to save five lives we would have to flip a switch that redirects a trolley toward one person who otherwise would have lived. We have an obligation, Singer asserts, to save the five people in this situation, even though doing so involves indirectly causing the death of one other, distant person. And because we have this obligation, he argues, we must also have an obligation to push the nearby person into the trolley's path in the footbridge case. On Singer's view, there is a simple reason for this: "Very probably, there is no morally relevant distinction between the cases" (2005). Thus, his argument implies the following:

- (2) If we are obliged to sacrifice x lives to save persons y who are physically distant from us, then (all else being equal) we are obliged to sacrifice x lives to save persons z who are physically near to us.

It should now be apparent that considered together, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" and "Ethics and Intuitions" pose a destructive dilemma. Although this is a relatively narrow point, it is related to my broader point about evolutionary debunking. I therefore devote the next (brief) section to its discussion.

5 Singer v. Singer

Principles (1) and (2) conflict with one another. (1) guides us to adapt our judgments about distant persons to conform to those about nearby persons, whereas (2) demands just the opposite. Singer (1972, 2005) cannot have it both ways. The only other difference between the principles is that (1) involves dollars, whereas (2) involves lives. But this difference cannot explain away the conflict. For if we truly "cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away from us" (Singer 1972: 232), then it should not matter whether that discrimination is financial or otherwise. Since "Famine, Affluence and Morality" implies (1), and "Ethics and Intuitions" implies (2), at least one of these essays must contain a mistaken argument.

As noted earlier, this is a narrow point, and not my broader, main

point. However, it is importantly related to my broader point about evolutionary debunking arguments. Since Singer's (2005) EDA is meant to support (2), and (1) is its near-opposite, an EDA parallel to that used in support of (2) can be used to undermine (1). I illustrate this point more fully in the next section.

6 Singer debunks Singer

Singer's (2005) EDA in defense of utilitarianism—like so many NE-DAs—is, unfortunately, a just-so story. While evolutionary debunking can be spuriously deployed *to support* some utilitarian conclusions, it can also be deployed to *undermine* others. In fact, Singer's very own (2005) words seem to suggest a morally repugnant reinterpretation of his 1972 work: because most of us do not feel obliged to donate to international famine relief, we should not feel obliged to save children drowning before us.

“For most of our evolutionary history, human beings have lived in small groups, and the same is almost certainly true of our pre-human primate and social mammal ancestors” (Singer 2005: 347). Thus, Singer argues, many of the reactions that *prima facie* appear to be moral intuitions are, in fact, evolved intuitions that have no particularly reliable relationship with morality. The only reason these reactions have become so engrained in us is that throughout human history, we have encountered situations that demanded these reactions if we were to survive. “To deal with such situations, we have developed immediate, emotionally based responses to questions involving close, personal interactions with others” (Singer 2005: 348). Over many millennia, humans so frequently found themselves in certain situations within their kin groups that people who developed specific automatic reactions to those situations were more likely to pass on their DNA. In other words, certain automatic reactions—such as saving members of our own “isolated breeding groups” (Singer 2005: 335) from drowning—are ‘more evolved’ than others.² Note, however, that “‘more evolved’ does

² I am not sure exactly what Singer (2005) means when he says that some automatic reactions are ‘more evolved.’ He could mean that some automatic reactions are *more evolutionarily adaptive than others*, that is, more likely than others

not mean ‘better’” (Singer 2005: 342).

Unlike saving a drowning child, donating to international charity relief “bears no resemblance to anything likely to have happened in the circumstances in which we and our ancestors lived. Hence the thought of doing it does not elicit the same emotional response” (Singer 2005: 348) as saving a drowning child. A nearby drowning child presents “the kind of situation that was likely to arise during the eons of time over which we were evolving” (Singer 2005: 348). In contrast, donating to distant charity relief efforts has, more-or-less, “only been possible in the past century or two, a time far too short to have any impact on our inherited patterns of emotional response” (Singer 2005: 348).

According to Singer (2005: 349–50), “distinguishing between our immediate emotionally based responses, and our more reasoned conclusions” is “worth attempting, since it is the only way to avoid moral skepticism” (Singer 2005: 351). Thus, it seems that we should distinguish our emotionally based response to the drowning child from the more reasoned conclusion “that a proposal that we all ought to give away half our incomes” is “absurdly unrealistic” (Singer 1972: 237). Of course, one might worry that our decision not to give away half our incomes may itself be based on an intuition. “But if this is an intuition, it is different” and supposedly more trustworthy than the intuition to save a drowning child (Singer 2005: 350). After all, by Singer’s reasoning any decision involving personal finances and international wealth distribution “does not seem to be one that is the product of our evolutionary past” (Singer 2005: 350). Thus, evolutionary psychology can help us ‘prove’ that we need not donate to East Bengalese famine relief, and can thereby ‘debunk’ the notion that we are obliged to save the life of a child drowning right in front of us, if doing so will muddy the clothes we are wearing.

to be selected by evolutionary pressures. Alternatively, he could mean that some automatic reactions are *more likely vestigial than otherwise*, that is, more likely to have been selected for evolutionary rather than other (rational, moral, etc.) reasons. I mention this only because I do not want to put words in Singer’s mouth; I think that his argument fails regardless of how we interpret this phrase.

7 Intensifying and broadening the argument

In “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” Singer suggests that, now that the world is a “global village” (1972: 232), we should bring our newly-available moral decisions (about international charities) in line with the evolved moral decisions we have long made (about nearby drowning children). But against this very sentiment, Singer (2005) inadvertently provides his own strongest critique:

But what is the moral salience of the fact that I have killed someone in a way that was possible a million years ago, rather than in a way that became possible only two hundred years ago? I would answer: none (Singer 2005: 348).

By Singer’s own lights (2005), our evolved responses to drowning members of our in-groups can provide no good reason to accept the radical view that we “ought to give as much as possible” (1972: 234) to international famine relief. Thus, the very same reasoning Singer uses to defend a utilitarian approach to trolley problems seems to undermine a utilitarian defense of famine relief.

Admittedly, it is not especially interesting or unusual that Singer (or anyone else) should express a view that runs counter to a view he had expressed 33 years earlier. Nor is there necessarily anything wrong with contradicting something one has said in the past. But there are several additional facts in this case that allow a study of Singer’s mixed messages to shed significant light on a major debate in contemporary moral philosophy.

First, Singer’s assertions in “Ethics and Intuitions” (2005) are, if not quite internally inconsistent, collectively dubious. In that essay, he avows that “the direction of evolution neither follows, *nor has any necessary connection with*, the path of moral progress” (2005: 342; emphasis added). Yet he goes on to justify his utilitarian intuition about the trolley problem on the grounds that it is ‘more reasoned’ than alternative intuitions precisely because “it does not seem to be one that is the outcome of our evolutionary past” (Singer 2005: 350).³

³ Singer thinks this is significant because he thinks philosophers can and should be “separating those moral judgments that we owe to our evolutionary and cultural history, from those that have a rational basis” (Singer 2005: 351). I have chosen to omit this consideration from the main text because I find it inscrutable.

The latter claim does not imply a *necessary* connection between the direction of evolution and the path of moral progress, but it does imply a presumptive connection between the two, wherein evolution runs in the opposite direction of moral progress.

Thus, in staking this claim, Singer (2005) seems to commit what he himself dubs “the fallacy of reading a moral direction into evolution” (Singer 2005: 342–3). Singer’s problematic assumption, and in fact a major assumption of all NEDAs, is that “evolutionary doxastic influence amounts to taint” (Shafer-Landau 2012: 7; see also Huemer 2008). But in equating evolutionary influence with taint, NEDAs like Singer’s (2005) presume the normative significance of the very kinds of facts that they simultaneously insist can have no normative significance.

Second, and more importantly, the kind of infelicitous reasoning in Singer’s 2005 essay can be seen in all varieties of NEDA. The general form of this reasoning is as follows. First, a theorist asserts that there is *no* reliable relationship between the evolutionary adaptiveness of dispositions (or intuitions) and their moral status⁴. Next, the theorist either assumes or explicitly asserts a reliably *negative* association between the two—thereby contradicting the first assertion. This is the central inconsistency, or near-inconsistency, in NEDAs in general.

For example, Greene (2008, 2014) contradicts himself in this way when developing a NEDA against retributivist theories of punishment. He argues that retributive intuitions were selected by evolutionary pressures, and dismisses retributivism on the grounds that “it is unlikely that inclinations that evolved as evolutionary byproducts correspond to some independent, rationally discovered truth” (2008: 72). This claim about likelihood, of course, attributes major

According to some theorists, the distinguishing feature of our evolutionary and cultural history *is* our uniquely strong capacity for reasoning. Furthermore, I do not see how we can separate moral judgments owing to evolved mechanisms from those with a rational basis any more than we can separate our visual judgments owing to evolved mechanisms from those with a retinal basis. Rationality and retinas both evolved in response to environmental pressures.

⁴ It is worth noting that, insofar as facilitating the survival of human beings is both evolutionarily adaptive and (on balance) morally good, even this premise is subject to doubt (see, e.g., Enoch 2010, Weilenberg 2010).

significance to the direction of evolution, begging the very same question that Singer, Greene, and their ilk ask of their critics.

A related point is that there are many cases in which a NEDA might be deployed against some normative ethical perspective x , yet a reciprocal NEDA could just as plausibly be constructed against competing perspective $\neg x$. For instance, in support of the argument made by Singer (1972) in *Famine, Affluence and Morality*, Greene says that “As a result of understanding the psychological facts, I am less complacent about my all-too human tendency to ignore distant suffering” (2008: 76). This lack of complacency strikes me as justified and even admirable. Yet Greene is unjustifiably selective in his consideration of psychological facts, remaining complacent about his all-too human tendency to *attend* to the proximal suffering of the drowning child in *Famine, Affluence and Morality* (Singer: 1972).⁵

To take another example, consider the argument that ethical egoism is unjustified since selfish intuitions are mere survival instincts. But by that same line of thinking, we should also reject the idea that our altruistic intuitions are truly moral, since they are merely “social instincts” (Darwin 1871/2009: 71) bestowed by evolution (Joyce 2001: 150). In a different kind of NEDA, one might argue that we should dismiss our deontological intuitions because they are merely heuristics (Gigerenzer 2010) that help increase inclusive fitness (Hamilton 1964). Yet one could just as easily argue that utilitarian inclinations should be dismissed as mere fitness-enhancing intuitions, since they are strongest for kin (Kurzman et al. 2012) and are as evolutionarily old as the burying beetle (Mock 2004: 214).

Finally, NEDAs (including Singer’s and Greene’s) tend to rely on a dichotomous understanding of normative ethics. What I mean by this is that NEDAs tend to assume that in any given case, there are just two meaningful kinds of moral judgment one could make. Most often, NEDAs take these to be consequentialist and non-consequentialist judgments. This convenient dichotomization of moral judgment problematizes NEDAs regardless of whether we call it into question.

⁵ It seems especially suspect to me that Greene should suggest that we can learn from psychological facts about one of the infinity of things that we *don’t* tend to do (i.e., attend to distant suffering), rather than from the much smaller and more concrete constellation of things we *actually* tend to do (i.e., attend proximal suffering).

The legitimacy of this sort of dichotomous approach to normative ethics in the context of debunking has been called into question elsewhere, primarily in the literature on the neuroscience of moral judgment, so I will not delve into that issue here (see Kamm 2009, Meyers 2013). But even if we grant that this sort of dichotomization is justified, it would not “be at least a minor miracle” (Shafer-Landau 2012: 2) if evolution and normative ethics were to align regarding any given judgment. Rather, an agnostic, Pascal-style wager (1670/1958) would seem to put the odds of alignment in any given case⁶ at 50/50.

8 Normative evolutionary debunking arguments prove too much

While I myself am a utilitarian, and happen to share Singer’s, Greene’s, and many other NEDA proponents’ intuitions about trolley problems, drowning children, and famine relief, I cannot endorse their EDAs for these views. In the end, Greene comes incredibly close to unveiling the fatal flaw of NEDAs, but fails to recognize this. Greene almost—but does not quite—explain why he and other NEDA proponents have a tendency to make certain claims in favor of a given normative ethical theory (usually consequentialism), but fail to recognize or acknowledge certain other claims of almost identical form against that same theory.

Greene may be right to assert that no internally coherent moral theory can *accommodate* all of our evolved moral dispositions. But a point that Greene, Singer, and all other NEDA proponents fail to recognize is the analogous point about any normative ethical theory’s inability to *selectively explain away* whole classes of moral intuitions. When we apply the NEDA proponent’s line of reasoning to this particular point, we gain valuable insight into why normative evolutionary debunking proves too much:

⁶ Recall that NEDAs seek to adjudicate between moral judgments in *specific* (arguably cherry-picked) cases. The odds of *all* our common moral judgments aligning with some normative ethical theory are of course much lower than the odds of any specific judgment aligning with that theory. But this is the target of metaethical EDAs against realism, not NEDAs, and so these (much lower) odds are not of concern in this essay on NEDAs.

It is exceedingly unlikely that there is any rationally coherent normative moral theory that can [*selectively explain away*] our moral intuitions. Moreover, anyone who claims to have such a theory, or even part of one, almost certainly does not. Instead, what that person probably has is a moral rationalization (Greene 2008: 72).

Geoffrey S. Holtzman
 Department of Psychology
 Franklin and Marshall College
 P.O. Box 3003
 Lancaster, PA 17604
 geoffreyholtzman@gmail.com

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