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The Significance of Genealogy in Moral Epistemology: Moral Realism, Evolutionary Debunking, and Hume

This dissertation considers a challenge against moral realism. Moral realists claim there are moral facts that exist attitude-independently. The challenge, sometimes referred to as the evolutionary debunking argument, says that it's irrational to remain a moral realist after acknowledging the evolutionary origins of our moral belief-forming faculties. In Chapter 1, I clarify the nature of the evolutionary challenge to moral realism by offering two interpretations of a central claim made by debunkers: that acknowledging evolution's influence on our moral beliefs would force the moral realist to claim their beliefs could only be true as a matter of coincidence. Chapter 2 considers the first way of interpreting the debunker's charge of coincidence: that we would hold the same moral beliefs even if there weren't any moral facts. I argue this claim can be resisted by identifying challengeable assumptions about the nature of moral facts that are central to this version of the challenge. Chapter 3 considers the second way of interpreting the debunker's charge of coincidence: that evolution easily could have led us to hold contrary moral beliefs. I resist the skeptical conclusions that are drawn from appeals to evolutionary disagreements: either such an argument will rely on an implausible epistemological premise, or else evolutionary considerations are not apt to undercut our beliefs. Chapter 4 offers a diagnosis of the evolutionary debunking argument's force by claiming that insofar as evolutionary considerations give us reason to become less confident in our moral beliefs, they do so by undercutting a subset of our moral beliefs rather than undercutting moral realism. In Chapter 5, I argue that Hume made a promising suggestion: that reflection on the origins of morality is apt to increase our confidence in our moral beliefs, or in other words, *vindicate* them. Insofar as Hume offers a plausible account of the origins of morality (an account that focuses on sympathy and acknowledged mutual benefits secured through shared rules), we can claim our moral beliefs are held for good epistemic reasons. This approach offers moral realists a way of defending the epistemic credentials of some of their moral beliefs.